### You can't hurry love

**by crazynadine**

**Summary**

It seemed like whenever he let his guard down, started to think that he could make something out of what life was offering him in the moment, fate had to swoop in and smash it all to shit.

**Notes**

See the end of the work for notes.
To New Beginnings

He's standing on the side of the road, surrounded by desert landscape on all sides. In the distance is the road block. He feels like an idiot, standing there in this stupid flowery dress, begging the love of his life not to leave him again. Not again. But he can't make him stay. There's nothing he can do.

Next thing he knows, he's back in the driver's seat, watching his lover get smaller and smaller in the rear-view mirror. He gets through the checkpoint with no trouble. He's not as happy as he'd thought he'd be. He feels nothing at all. Freedom just doesn't feel the same without Ian by his side. Tears fall silently from his eyes, as he continues on, away from Ian, and toward the unknown.

Mickey jerks awake, covered in a thin layer of sweat. The dream was not nearly as bad as some of the nightmares he has, but it leaves him feeling profoundly empty, nonetheless. He hates dreaming of Ian. He especially hates it when he dreams of that day at the border. It's been three years, you would think he'd be over that shit by now.

He gets up from the bed he shares with his two roommates, in the small apartment they rent together, to get himself a drink. Can't drink the water, but there's always tequila in the house. He pours himself a shot, downs it, and immediately pours another.

He's been doing okay for himself, all things considered, since he got to Mexico. At first, it wasn't so good. He had nowhere to go, knew no one, and didn't speak a word of spanish. He had driven his stolen car down to Puerto Vallarta, a seaside town with a booming tourist industry, about as gay friendly as it gets south of the border.

It seemed like as good a place as any. And it was fucking beautiful. Since he didn't know anyone, or have any legal documents, he was stuck for a job. So he reverted back to what he knew. Theft.

He had been stealing purses and bags from restaurants and the beaches for about a month. Barely getting enough cash or pawnable goods to clear his rent at the seedy motel in the shitty part of town. But he was surviving. He kept to himself. At one point he couldn't even remember the last time he'd spoken to another human being. He was starting to wonder if this was how his life was going to be from now on; just him on his own, with no friends or family. No one.

Then one day he was walking through the bar area of a Sheraton right on the water, scanning the area for unattended purses. If he could score one, he could eat and pay his motel bill, and hopefully have enough money left over to get wasted. That would make for a successful day for sure.

He saw what he was looking for at an empty table by the huge glass windows. It was a Louis Vitton, just sitting there, begging to be stolen. He grabbed it and spun around towards the door.

But just as he was walking out of the bar and back onto the sidewalk, someone grabbed his arm.

"Hey, fuck off, don't touch me." he yelped, flailing blindly, getting ready to make a run for it. He turned around to throw a punch, and came face to face with a pixie-looking brunet. She looked like she weighed a hundred pounds soaking wet. She had short hair cut into a bob and eyes so dark they almost looked black. Her skin was dark, but it looked like it was tanned over years in the sun, instead of being naturally dark. Her body was small, but not bony. She could probably hold her own in a fight. Mickey wasn't sure he wanted to find out right now.

She put her hands up in surrender, eyes wide. "Dude, don't freak." she said. "I can't let you steal that purse, you'll get me fired." she reached out one hand and grabbed the purse strap. Mickey didn't make a move to pull it out of her grasp. He looked around, desperate to retreat. But he stood his ground.
"What the fuck do I care?" Mickey barked.

"Well, I'm sure you don't. But I do. And I'm quite positive you don't want to acquaint yourself with the Mexican jails. I already called security," she said.

Mickey looked around wildly, eyes searching for any signs of men in uniform.

"But if you put it back, I'll let it go. Let me buy you a drink, and you can tell me why you need to be stealing at all." she said, pulling Mickey back into the bar by the purse strap he was still clutching. Now, if this had been years ago, back in Chicago, Mickey would have pushed that bitch to the ground, and made a run for it. But Mickey was tired. So very tired. Since he'd come to Mexico, it seemed like all his fight had drained out of him. He didn't want to be that guy anymore. The dirty thief who beat whoever got in his way. So he let go of the purse. He watched the girl put it back on it's seat at the bar, just as the woman came back from the bathroom. Mickey watched as the pixie girl said goodbye to the customer, and his guaranteed money walked out the door and disappeared.

Damn it.

He followed pixie girl back to the bar. He took up an empty seat.

"What are you drinking, friend?" she asked kindly.

"Friend? Really? I was just trying to rob you." Mickey eyed her skeptically.

"I'm a good judge of character. I think you are more than just a thief, friend. I think there is more to your story than just crime."

Well, that certainly hit home. Mickey didn't really know what to do with that.

"Uh, Jack Daniels, straight. I obviously don't have any money, though."

"It's on the house. What's your name?"

"Mickey."

"Well, hello Mickey, I'm Lauren."

"Nice to meet you, I guess."

"Nice to meet you too. So, you wanna tell me why you are stealing purses in my hotel?"

"Not really. I don't even know you."

"Fair enough. Are you hungry?"

"Uh, I guess I could eat," Mickey said. Truth was, he hadn't eaten in at least two days. He hadn't been getting much out of the last few purses he'd stolen, and all that money had gone to his shitty motel room.

"Alright, I'll have Javier make you up something." she smiled.

What was up with this chick? Why the hell was she being so nice to him?

Lauren walked back towards what Mickey assumed was the kitchen. He sat at the bar, sipping on his
drink silently. Wondering idly if this was all a ruse, and security was going to come storming in any minute to arrest him.

But she came back a few minutes later with a plate of steaming hot french fries. Mickey’s mouth was watering before she even set the plate down. He dug in while it was still way too hot, burning the roof of his mouth and his tongue. But he didn't care. He was starving.

He ate in silence, while Lauren went about her business, attending to other patrons.

When he was finished, he stood up. "Hey, I'm gonna go. Thanks for the food, and uh, you know, for not turning me in."

Lauren smiled again, bright and genuine. "You're very welcome. Listen, if you're hungry or whatever, and you don't have money, come on down here. I work most days, and a plate of fries won't bankrupt the hotel. You don't have to steal, okay?"

"Sure, thanks." Mickey mumbled, as he made his way to the door. That was an odd encounter he thought to himself as he made his way back down the street toward his motel.

That's how it started. Mickey would go down to the Sheraton when he was hungry, and Lauren would feed him whatever they had extra of. It saved him from starving on countless days. They started talking to each other. Light conversation at first. She was originally from Vancouver, so they exchanged stories of their hometowns, she talked about her family, her cat. Mickey told her about Chicago, and a little bit about himself. Keeping it all very vague. She didn't seem to notice or care. It was nice.

Then one day she finally asked him.

"So, you are running from something, right?" she asked, pushing another drink in front of him. He threw it back in one gulp and looked at her.

"So what if I am?" he asked cautiously.

"I guess we're all running from something, huh?" she replied, sipping her own drink.

"I suppose." he said.

"Where are you staying?" she asked

"Motel down the road."

"With what money?"

"You said don't steal from your place. There's like a hundred other hotels along this beach." Mickey replied, like it was the obvious answer.

"Jesus, Mickey, you really wanna get a look at the inside of that Mexican jail, don't you?" she asked. She actually looked kinda pissed.

"What do you recommend I do instead?" he huffed, trying to keep his voice down. "I got no other options."

"You got papers? Like a passport or work visa?" she asked, wiping down glasses and placing them back under the bar.

"Not really." he said, purposefully vague again.
"I think I get what you're trying to say." she said, arching her eyebrows at him. "Listen, why don't you come over to my place for dinner tonight? We can talk more privately. I think I have a way to help you."

"You don't have to do that, Lauren, I can take care of myself." Mickey said, getting up to leave. He had to score some cash before sundown if he wanted to keep his room for the night.

"I know I don't have to, but I want to. You don't accept help very well." she said, putting her hands on her hips, staring him down. She reminded him of Mandy when she did that. He never could say no to her, either.

"Jesus, okay. I'll come by. You're not a serial killer, right? Black widow or some shit?" he asked, hoping his joking tone was evident.

"Oh yeah, that's it. I've been nice to you, giving you free shit for the past month, all as an elaborate plan to get you alone and slaughter you." she deadpanned.

"You never know these days....."

"Come or don't come. I won't murder you, for christ's sake." she threw her dishtowel at him, which he dodged at the last minute.

"Okay, okay. Where's your place?" he asked, bending down like a gentleman to pick up her towel, handing it back to her.

"Meet me back her at ten, we can walk there from here." she said, turning her back on him and walking back to the kitchen.

Mickey was back at the hotel at 9:55. Shifting nervously from foot to foot, smoking a cigarette. He was still trying to decide if this was a good idea. He didn't really know Lauren all that well, but what did he really have to lose at this point? It's not like he had to tell her a god damn thing about himself or why he was really in Mexico. He could lie, or just keep his trap shut. But if she was serious about helping him out with money, he couldn't really afford to let that opportunity slide.

Lauren walked out of the hotel about five minutes later. She had a big duffel bag over her shoulder, presumably holding her work clothes, because she was no longer dressed in the black dress pants and white button up he usually saw her in. She was wearing a floral print sundress that flowed all the way down to her ankles. She smiled when she saw him, like she was genuinely happy to see him. Mickey didn't get it.

"This way." she said, pointing down the street. They walked for about ten minutes, talking about all the shitty customers she had that day, and how Mickey spent his day at the beach, feeding the birds with some old bread he found on the ground. Lauren found that hilarious, for whatever reason.

They made it to her place. It was a small, one floor little house. It had a tiny porch, with one chair and a minuscule table right next to the front door. She let him in, and he looked around.

The living space was all one room, like a studio back in the states. Off to the right was a small kitchenette, with a fridge, sink and small stove. It only had three cabinets, and a small wall of little drawers to the side. On the left of the apartment was what Mickey thought constituted the living area. There was a bed up against the far wall, covered in faded sheets and what looked like a homemade quilt, above the bed was a huge window, the moonlight spilling in, illuminating the space. Next to the bed was a coffee table covered with books and a small arm chair. Across from the bed was a small TV on top of a chest of drawers overflowing with clothes. In the back of the small space were two doors.
"Nice place." he said, looking around. It was nice. About a thousand times nicer than his crap motel room.

"Yeah, we do okay." Lauren replied, opening the freezer and taking out a bottle of tequila. She then went to the fridge and took out what looked like left over rice and beans. She busied herself reheating the food. Mickey sat down in the arm chair, watching her work.

"We?" he asked, just realizing what she had said.

"Yeah, Javier and I. You know, from the hotel?" she asked, handing him a plate and a glass of booze.

"You live with Javier?" Mickey asked. He'd never really given much thought to the kid from the kitchen. Didn't know if he'd ever even spoken to him.

"Yep." she replied.

"Huh." he said, taking a sip from his drink and setting it down on the coffee table. "How did that happen? You guys fucking?" he asked, digging into his food. "Jesus, this is delicious. You make this?"

"Ha." she laughed. "That's a no on both of those questions. Javier is the chef of the house, and no we are not fucking, as you so eloquently put it. You sure do have a way with words."

Mickey smiled around a mouthful of rice. "No use in sugar coating shit. I just say what's on my mind. So tell me about you and Javier not fucking."

"Well, I came here to Mexico, running from something. I think you understand what I mean." She took a long sip of her drink and sighed.

"I'm sure we're not running from the same shit."

"Yeah, but running is running, right?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"Okay, let's just be honest with each other, okay? Whatever you tell me stays in this room as well as whatever I tell you. I have to be sure I can trust you if I'm going to ask Javier to help you."

Mickey put his plate down on the table, and finished off his drink. "Okay." was all he said. He didn't know what had gotten into him. What made him want to trust this girl he'd just met two months ago, with all his baggage, but he felt in his gut he could trust her.

So he told her everything. That he was gay, and what it was like for him growing up with Terry as his father. Being in the closet, falling in love with Ian. The wedding to Svetlana, the baby. He even told her all of Ian's shit. The bipolar, the army. By the time he got to his arrest and escape, his eyes were shining with unshed tears.

"And then, oh this is rich, and when we got to the border, just getting ready to cross, he gets out of the car and says he won't go. That is not him anymore, whatever the fuck that means. And he left me there, with my god damn dick in my hand. I had no idea what to do with myself when I got here. I was scared shitless. That's around the time I ran into you. You kinda saved my ass, thanks for that." He had been looking down at his hands while he told the last of the story. He looked up at her and let out a humorless laugh. "Not a pretty story, huh?" He felt lighter than he could ever remember feeling. He'd never told anyone all of his hidden shit before. Bits and pieces maybe, but not the
whole sad, twisted story. Maybe it's because he didn't really know Lauren, or the fact that she had no
ties to his past, or his home. But he felt liberated in that moment, so god damn free.

And she was openly crying. Was she crying for him? It didn't look like pity in her eyes.

It took Mickey a minute to place the look.

Compassion.

"Oh, Mickey, I'm so sorry. That was horrible. I am so sorry you had to go through all that."

"Don't be sorry, Lauren, it is what it is. I'll be okay. Always am. I'm more concerned with the fact
that you don't care that I'm an escaped convict." he chuckled.

"From what you told me, you didn't belong in there to begin with. I'll never understand the American
justice system, if you can even call it that. Well, I'm definitely going to ask Javier to help you now.
Like he helped me."

Mickey perked up at that.

"Helped you how?"

"Well, I told you I'm from Vancouver, right? Well, I lived there with my husband. Jerry was a
terrible man. Beat me all the time. Cheated with countless women. I was trying to leave him, you
know, get out of that nightmare marriage and make a new life for myself. But Jerry didn't want to let
me go. When I finally got the courage to move out, he started stalking me. Trashed my car, sent
nasty letters to my work trying to get me fired. Set the bushes in front of my apartment on fire. Then
one day I was coming home from work...." she stopped abruptly, putting her hand to her face.
"Jesus, I don't even want to say this. He, uh, caught me outside my apartment, and stabbed me. I
almost bled to death. And while I was in the hospital I knew I had to get away. So I packed a single
bag, and got on a bus. Didn't tell anyone where I was going. Even left my cat with my sister, God I
miss that little shit." she sighed, eyes darting away for a moment.
"But anyway, I made it down here,

"I thought Javier was a barback?" Mickey asked.

"Nah, he does whatever his dad asks. But anyway, he gave me the job. But I told him I was afraid to
use my passport or other documents, because Jerry could use them to find me. I don't know if I was
being paranoid or not, but I was so damn scared, you know?"

Mickey nodded again. He knew all too well.

"So Javier, my guardian angel, tells me his uncle does fake papers. Can you believe that shit? He
makes fake papers for people like me, that are hiding from something dangerous. Or people like you,
who are hiding from something different." she smiled.

"You mean criminals?" he laughed.

"Whatever. The point is, you could get your papers, and Javier could get you a job at the hotel. You
could stay here with us. I knew the minute I met you I was meant to help you. Like Javier helped me.
We are all here for a reason, Mickey. I think we were meant to be friends."

Mickey didn't know if he believed that, but he wasn't about to turn down her offer. She was nice.
Really nice. And he was in desperate need of some kindness in his life at the moment.

"Fuck, thank you, Lauren. I would really appreciate that. I really didn't know what the hell I was doing. I hate to say it, but it's fucking scary down here with no one."

"I know, I know." she said, getting up to refill their glasses.

She came back with two full glasses of booze and put hers out to him.

"Well, then, to new beginnings."

"To new beginnings." he mimicked, and they toasted.

"Javier is going to love you." she smirked.

That was about three years ago. Mickey and Javier hit it off immediately. The kid was hilarious, and he was kind. And he was gay, and hot, which was also a plus. Javier had helped Mickey out with the job. Mickey was now a bartender at the Sheraton with Lauren and worked long enough off the books to save up the dough he needed to pay Javier's uncle to fabricate Mickey's passport. That's how he became "Michael Petrov" Because Javier's whole family thought he looked Russian. Whatever. Once he got his papers situated, he got his job switched to on the books. He was officially a functioning member of society for the first time in his life. Well, Michael Popov was, anyway.

Mickey was happy. As happy as he could be. And on nights like tonight, where dreams of Ian leaving him plagued him, he would sit at the table in the living room, in the little chair, smoking, and remind himself that he was doing alright. He had Lauren, probably one of the best friends he'd ever had. He had Javier, a good fuck, and an even better friend if he was being honest. He had a legit job, and he even spoke to his sister occasionally. Life was about as good as it was gonna get for him.

He walked past Lauren, asleep on the mattress on the floor in the living room, and made his way back to the back bedroom. It was small like the rest of the house, but it had a comfortable bed, and a hot latin man sleeping in it, so Mickey took another moment to count his luck. He got back under the covers, and let Javier wrap his strong arms around him, and nuzzle into his neck from behind.

"Bad dream, carino?" Javier asked as Mickey pulled the sheet back over his stomach.

"Nah, don't worry. Everything's fine." Mickey murmured, falling back into the man's arms.

Everything was fine. It was better than Mickey could have ever hoped for. Even if it didn't turn out the way he'd originally wanted. He had to let that shit go.
Unfinished business

Chapter Summary

no matter how much distance you put between yourself and the past, it's always waiting just around the corner to pull you back in.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was a Friday night, and Mickey and his crew were doing their regular thing. Which consisted of going out to one of the many gay bars that Puerto Vallarta had to offer, getting wasted, and competing to see who could score the hottest hook-up. It was more a joke than anything, but sometimes one of two of them got lucky. Lauren liked to joke than living with two hot gay men turned her gay, but if she was anything, it had to be bisexual, because she didn't discriminate by gender when it came to getting off.

Sometimes one of them would hook up with someone at the club, in the bathroom or back room. Or very rarely, take their random back to the house, and take the bedroom, and the other two would sleep in the living room. But more often than not it would be the three of them going home together, Mickey and Javier taking the bedroom like always.

So there they were, at the aptly name "Kinky Bar". The music was pulsing, and the lights were way too bright, but Mickey was on a mission, so he let it slide. He was at the bar, drinking Jack and coke, watching Lauren grinding on some dyke looking girl with combat boots and god damn fatigues.

'GI Jane looking bitch' Mickey laughed to himself. But hey, if that's what Lauren's into tonight, whatever. It's not like Mickey had to fuck the chick.

He looked over to his left and saw Javier flirting with the bartender. He did it every time they came to this bar. And he never got anywhere. Mickey wondered, not for the first time, why Javier even bothered.

Mickey's eyes scanned the dance floor, and locked eyes with a blond surfer looking dude. He was tall and tan, wearing a tight white muscle T and dark jeans. Target acquired.

Mickey got up and walked onto the dance floor. He went straight up to surfer dude. He was a good four inches taller than Mickey, with broad shoulders and muscled arms.

"Hey, I'm Shawn." surfer dude said, pressing his mouth close to Mickey's ear, to be heard over the music. He raked his eyes over Mickey like he was a piece of meat.

"Mike." Mickey lied smoothly. He didn't use his real name with any of his hookups. It's not like they were ever gonna know anyway.

"Well, Mike, you wanna get outta here?" Shawn asked, boldly stepping up to Mickey and running a hand down his arm.

"Nah, can't leave, got friends here, but, uh, I kinda gotta piss, so....." Mickey trailed off, walking toward to bathroom.

Surfer dude---Shawn, apparently followed close behind Mickey, and once they were in the
bathroom, he had Mickey pinned up against the wall, kissing him deeply. Mickey let him, all part of process for him now. Basic steps in the mission to get himself off.

"You're hot." Shawn panted He pulled back to look Mickey over once more, then went in for more attaching his lips to Mickey's neck.

"I know." Mickey replied, smirking. He moved his head to the side, giving the dude better access. It felt pretty good.

"Wanna suck your dick." Shawn murmured into Mickey's neck.

"Have at it, then." Mickey said, making quick work of undoing his belt.

Shawn fell to his knees on the dirty bathroom floor, and took out Mickey's dick. He was hard already from the make-out session, and Shawn let out a low noise as he just stared for a minute.

"Come on dude, I didn't take it out for you to look at." Mickey groused. How drunk was this kid?

"Uh, sorry." Shawn stuttered, and took Mickey's erection in his mouth without hesitation.

Mickey let out a soft sigh and tilted his head back to look at the ceiling. Kid wasn't half bad. The pressure wasn't quite right, and the suction was off. He didn't swirl his tongue the way Mickey liked, and he wasn't even touching his balls. Eh.

It was in that moment that Mickey had to remind himself to stop comparing every blowjob he got to Gallagher's blowjobs. It was a losing battle, and he hated himself for always doing it. No one was ever gonna give a Gallagher-caliber blowjob. It was just a sad fact of life.

Mickey brought himself back into the moment, looking down at the dude on his knees for him. He was sucking him off with vigor, very into it, his own hard cock in his hand, jerking in time with movements of his mouth. It was hot, for sure.

"Uhn, gonna come." Mickey said, dropping his head back again, staring at the ceiling as he spilled his load in the kid's mouth. Shawn swallowed, like a true gentleman, and continued to jerk himself off until he spilled all over his hand and the tiled floor of the bathroom. He was breathing heavy, still on his knees, as Mickey zipped up his jeans and went to walk around him.

"That was great." Shawn said, staring up at Mickey from the floor.

"Yeah, sure." Mickey replied, and left the bathroom without another word. He'd gotten what he'd came for.

He walked back into the bar, searching for his two roommates. He found them both sitting at the bar, finishing their drinks.

"No luck, you two?" he asked, grabbing his jacket from Javier.

"Nah, military barbie wasn't down to fuck, and Javier here is still hung up on his pointless crush." Lauren laughed when Javier shoved her.

"It's not pointless, it's complicated." he huffed.

"What, you and the bartender? That shit ain't complicated. He's just not that into you." Mickey laughed.

Both his roommates gave him a glare that he couldn't place. "What?" he asked
"Let's just go, I'm done with this shit tonight." Javier said, getting up and heading to the door.

"What the fuck's up with him?" Mickey asked, following Lauren.

"You'll have to ask him, Mick." Lauren said

They walked the route back to their house in silence. It was late and they were all a little drunk. Mickey still couldn't figure out what had gotten his roommates all pissy back at the club. By the time they got to the house, Mickey was too tired to care, he was ready to let whatever it was go. He walked into the house behind Lauren and Javier and made a beeline for the bathroom. He pissed and brushed his teeth in quick succession, and made his way to the back bedroom. He stripped off his clothes and got under the sheets in his boxers. A few minutes later he heard Javier saying goodnight to Lauren, and he came into the bedroom. Mickey watched from his spot on the bed as Javier took his clothes off and got into bed with Mickey. He lay down, and turned to face Mickey.

"Did you fuck around with that blond kid?" Javier asked.

"Uh, why?" Mickey asked.

"Just wanna know."

"Well, yeah, he gave me a blowjob. Not the best I've ever gotten, but it got the job done. Why are you asking? Jealous?" Mickey laughed.

"A little." Javier said, looking away.

Ah, so this was the reason Javier was being so cagey. Damn it.

"Hey, what's going on, dude? I thought we had an agreement. This shit between you and I is supposed to be casual. We can fuck other people if we want. No commitment, right? That's what we said." Mickey was genuinely shocked they were even having this conversation. He thought they were on the same page.

"Well, yeah, but I just don't like seeing you hooking up with all these random dudes. It's not safe, you have no idea who any of these guys are."

"You sure it's not more than that, dude?"

"I like you a lot Mickey, have since you first wandered into our lives. Can't help it if I get a little attached." Javier said. He looked over at Mickey, face open and honest.

Mickey was a little too drunk to have this conversation right now, but Javier was giving him that look, so....

"Javier, listen, I like you a lot. You are a cool dude, and you've done a lot for me. I can never repay you for that shit. But I'm fucking damaged goods man. I'm all fucked up in the head, especially about relationships. I don't have a good history with that shit. And I'm just not in a place where I can do that type of thing. And I can't get serious, even if I wanted to, with the shit I have hanging over me. The feds could show up any minute and haul me away, you know? Wouldn't be fair to either of us. I thought you knew that."

"I do. But I can't help the way I feel." Javier muttered, no longer looking at Mickey.

Mickey grabbed Javier by the chin and pulled his face up, so they were eye to eye again.
"Dude, if you don't think you can't handle it, maybe we shouldn't fuck around anymore. I mean, the sex is incredible, but your friendship means way more to me than the fucking." Mickey hoped he was conveying his sincerity.

"No, it's okay, Mick. I think I'm just drunk and emotional. I like you a lot, and sometimes I wish it could be different. But I know it can't. I know that. I'm just being dumb."

"You're not being dumb, this is all on me. I'm sorry I can't be what you want." Mickey said, running his tattooed hand through Javier's dark hair. "So.....you don't want to stop fucking?" Mickey asked, smiling, trying to lighten the mood.

"Nah, why the fuck would I give up on that ass??!!" Javier giggled, pulling Mickey flush to his chest, grabbing a handful of the ass in question and squeezing. They shared a kiss, and Javier snuggled into Mickey's neck. The air in the room felt lighter instantly.

"So, fucking's on the table for sure. But not tonight. Your drunk ass needs sleep." Mickey murmured. He rolled over to turn off the lamp, and settled back down next to Javier, curling his arm around the taller man.

"You're a good guy, Javier. And someday you'll meet a guy that will treat you the way you deserve. Until then, I'll be here to keep the bed warm." Mickey kissed Javier one last time, on his neck, resting his head on his chest, and they both drifted off to sleep.

Mickey didn't wake up until well after noon the next day. He had a slight headache, but nothing he couldn't manage. The three of them didn't need to be to work until 3, so he had time to quell his hangover. He rolled over and found the bed empty. Javier never got hungover, the prick. He'd probably been up for hours. Mickey didn't know how he did it. He threw on a pair of old sweatpants and wandered out of the bedroom. He could hear Javier and Lauren in the kitchen, but made a pit stop in the bathroom first. He pissed and brushed his teeth, to rid himself of the stale booze taste, and went to join his friends in the kitchen.

"Morning, sleepy-head." Lauren smiled. She was lounging on the floor in front of the TV, coffee cup in her hand. She was wearing what looked like a pair of Mickey's boxers, and an old band T shirt.

"Are you wearing my fucking underwear?" Mickey asked, eyes wide.

"Eh, what's yours is mine, friend." she laughed.

Javier walked over and handed Mickey a cup of coffee. "Here, this will make you much more agreeable."

"I'm a fucking pleasant person. Thank you very much, asshole. " Mickey grumbled, taking a sip of the hot beverage. "Mmmm, you make the best coffee." He sighed. Shit was like liquid gold.

"Bitter with just a hint of sweetness, just like our Mickey." Javier said, causing Lauren to bust out laughing while Mickey flipped them both off.

They went about getting ready for work, quietly moving around each other in a well practiced routine that only came with living with someone for years. Mickey dressed himself in his work attire. Button up shirt with a flashy tie, tight black pants. He had a twinge of nostalgia. It reminded him of when they were running the moving truck scam back home. That was a good hustle. He shook the thoughts from his head, no time for that bullshit. He unplugged his burner cell from it's charger, and
noticed he'd missed a call from Mandy earlier in the day. He'd have to call her back later. They spoke frequently, so he was in no real rush. He knew she was having problems with that prick she married, probably just wanted to vent some more.

Mickey wished he could have been there to talk her out of marry that asshole to begin with. Jeff was a dick. Sure he didn't beat her or anything like that. But he was abusive to Mandy in other ways. He was a cheater and a manipulator. Always making his sister question herself, question her value.

Mickey would walk back to Chicago just for the chance to beat the guy's face in. But Mandy insisted that she loved him, and Mickey was all too aware that he could protect Mandy from certain things, but her own bad choices wasn't one of them.

So he put his phone in his pocket, making a mental note to call her later, and listen to every heartbreaking word of her drama. It's all he could do for her from this far away.

It was near the end of his shift that Mickey's phone vibrated in his pocket. He put the glass of scotch in front of his customer, threw his dirty bar towel over his shoulder, and turned to Lauren. "Hey, I'm gonna go for a smoke." He motioned over his shoulder with his thumb and made his way toward the back once he got Lauren's responding nod. He weaved his way through the kitchen, barely missing Paco with a pan full of dirty water and suds.

"Miralo, idiota." Paco yelped.

"You watch it, asshole, you didn't even say you were coming through with that shit." Mickey said over his shoulder, not even bothering to look back.

He made it outside, to a small courtyard for employees only. It had mosaic tiles in an artistic pattern adorning the ground, and a wrought iron table set off in the corner, under a flowering tree. Mickey loved it back here. It was quiet, far away from prying eyes and demanding customers. He took out a cigarette and put it to his lips, bringing his lighter out and sparking it. He took a long drag, savoring the instant relief it brought him. He closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead. He wasn't looking forward to whatever Mandy had to say. He felt so helpless, so far away.

But he couldn't leave her hanging. He'd done that too much in the past. She had been furious with him right after his escape, not taking his phone calls for months when he first got to Mexico. He had never felt more alone in his life. So when Mandy finally forgave him, and they decided to leave the past in the past, he promised himself to never abandon her ever again.

So he took out his phone, and dialed her number.

It only rang twice before she picked up. "Mick, is that you? What the fuck? I've been trying to reach you for hours." Mandy panted. She sounded keyed up, like something big was going down. Mickey felt instantly sick. Did that prick of a husband finally do something Mickey would have to kill him for?

"Mands, what's wrong? I'm at work, I'm sorry. What's going on?"

"No, Mick, it's not like that. Have you seen the news?"

"The fucking news? No, we barely watch TV down here at all. Besides, I don't get American news here, bitch, remember?? Just tell me what the fuck is going on." Mickey was simultaneously losing his patience, and succumbing to massive anxiety.

"The judge from your case is being disbarred. All his cases are being reviewed, a lot of them are being dismissed, or are getting retrials. Something about him having an affair with the prosecutor of your case, and ruling in her favor or some shit. It's a big deal, Mick. Your case could be dismissed." Mandy sounded like she was in tears. "You could come home."

Mickey felt his whole body flush, heat washing over him. All he could hear was the blood rushing
through his ears. Mandy was still talking as the phone fell out of his hand. He cradled his head in his
hands, barely able to breathe.

He could go home.

But did he want to??

Chapter End Notes

the chapter lengths are gonna be all over the place. sometimes it has to end where it
ends, consistency be damned.

Miralo, idiota- "watch it, idiot."

ps: my spanish is straight from google translate. so it's probably totally inaccurate.

also, i'm doing this all on my own, so if it's messed up or grammatically awful, that's all
on me.
Rolling the Dice

Chapter Summary

He felt like all he ever did was say goodbye.
Nothing good ever lasted.

No one ever stayed. Not even him.

Chapter Notes

I was pleasantly surprised to see that I may have found some readers. I'm just happy to be able to get some of this stuff out of my head and into the world. It's not much, and I don't know for sure where it's going, but it's at least going to be a fun ride.

Just a reminder, all my spanish is courtesy of google translate, so it's probably shit. you've been warned.

ps: this story has a fair amount of sex between mickey/omc and ian/omc, which i think is plausible, since they are not together in the beginning of this story, and it takes a while for them to get there. just in case that's not your thing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It seemed like whenever he let his guard down, started to think that he could make something out of what life was offering him in the moment, fate had to swoop in and smash it all to shit.

He had listened to the rest of Mandy's news, vaguely registering what she was trying to convey to him. He promised to call her later, to talk more, and hung up the phone. He sat in the courtyard for god knows how long, chain smoking and ruminating on what his sister had said to him.

He wasn't sure how long he'd been sitting there, when Javier popped his head out of the kitchen, glaring down at Mickey. "Qué diablos, chico lindo, you were still working, you know. You spent the last twenty minutes of your shift on smoke break? Really?"

"Don't call me pretty boy, prick." Mickey mumbled, standing up. He ran his hand over his face, not meeting Javier's eyes. "Are we done for the night? I need a fucking drink." and he walked past him without another word.

Javier stared at the the back of Mickey's head as he made his way back inside, worry settling over him instantly, and followed behind him.

Mickey sat down at the bar, Javier sitting next to him. Lauren looked up when they came in the room, taking in Mickey's ghost-white face and Javier's worried expression.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Whiskey." was Mickey's reply.
Lauren picked up a glass and poured Mickey a shot.

"Keep going."

Lauren eyed Javier again, and he just shrugged, so she filled the glass to the brim. Mickey took the glass in hand and downed the harsh liquid in one gulp. "Again." he said. Lauren refilled the glass without a word, and the two of them watched their friend down his second drink just as quick. It was silent for a moment, then Lauren couldn't take it anymore.

"Okay, Mick, spit it the fuck out." she said, her tone kind but commanding.

Mickey sighed. Feeling slightly more calm due to the alcohol coursing through his veins, he looked up, meeting Lauren's earnest eyes.

"My sister called. The judge from my case is being disbarred. I don't know the whole story yet, but it looks like I may have a chance at a retrial, or an overturned conviction. I guess he had some kind of inappropriate relationship with the DA, gave her preferential treatment."


"I know." Mickey replied. "But I don't know if I even wanna go back. What if it doesn't work, and I get locked up again? With even more time tacked on for my escape? I can't risk it, right?"

"I don't know, Mick, I think you should find out more about it, and make an informed decision. If your case is overturned, you wouldn't have to be a fugitive anymore. You'd be free, for real. Forever." Javier said tentatively, putting his hand over Mickey's on the bar top.

"I know, I know. It would be nice to ditch all the fake documents, be myself again. Not having to look over my shoulder all the time, always waiting for them to bust our door down and haul me away. But I'm worried. I've never had the best luck. And I can't go back to jail for 20 more years."

"Listen, Mickey. It's up to you, obviously, but wouldn't you like to be free of all that worry? You sleep with a gun under your pillow for fuck's sake. Always worrying about what documents you have, never being able to visit your sister? You could come and go as you please. I mean, after you clear all this up, you can come back to us, and we can go on with our lives. You just won't have to live in fear anymore." Javier explained. He made it sound so simple, so obvious. But Mickey wasn't so sure he'd make it back to Mexico if he went home. Even if he did get off and not go back to jail, Chicago would suck him back in, and he'd never get out.

"At least think about it, Mickey. You owe it to yourself to really consider this. We will support you no matter what you decide, you know that. We love you." Lauren smiled, leaning over the bar to plant a kiss on his head.

"I love you guys too. I really do." Mickey said, releasing a long slow breath. "Okay, I think about it. But let's get outta here, I just wanna go home." He stood up.

"Sure think Mick, I'll make enchiladas." Javier said, getting up to follow.

Later that night, Mickey was laying in bed. Lauren and Javier had decided to sleep together in the living room. They said it was to binge watch The Sopranos on DVD, but Mickey knew they wanted to give him time alone to think.
And thinking was all he was doing. Did he really wanna go back to Chicago? Even if he could clear his name? What difference did it make anyway? He was happy in Mexico. He had friends, a home, a life free of poverty and the constant struggle he was accustomed to back home. He didn't have much there to go back to if he did return. Yes, his sister was there, and he would love to be in her life again....but was that one reason enough to pull him back there? What would he do for work, with his record? Where would he live? Jesus, there was so much to think about. What about Yev? Where was he? He hadn't heard a word about his son since he'd broken out of prison. Mandy said she didn't know where Svet and Yev were, but Mickey didn't know if he believed her. And lastly, if he went back to Chicago to live, he'd surely run into Ian at some point. And that was the last thing Mickey wanted. The distance was the only thing that dulled the ache Mickey still had in his chest thanks to the redheaded asshole. Mickey held no animosity towards Ian anymore. He understood why he did what he did, why he left him, again. But that didn't mean he wanted to reopen the wound. It had taken three years for the faintest scab to form, and seeing Ian in the flesh would tear him open all over again.

He squeezed his hands into fists and rested them against his head, as if that would stave off the inevitable headache he felt coming on.

Godfuckingdamnit

He picked up his phone of the bedside table. It wasn't too late, he could call if he really wanted to. He didn't call often, but sometimes it was nice to hear a friendly voice from home. Remind himself that there were people back there that cared about him too.

So he dialed.

It rang about a half dozen times before the line connected.

"Mick??"

"Hey Jack, how are you?" Mickey smiled to himself.

"Better now, asshole. Haven't heard from you in forever. What have you been up to?"

"You know, living the dream by the sea."

"Trying to make me jealous, you prick?" Jack laughed.

"Nah, just stating the facts." Mickey laughed. "And I talked to you like two weeks ago, don't make it out like I never call, asshole."

"Bimonthly is not enough for me, you know that Mick."

"Yeah, yeah, listen, I wanted to run something by you..." And Mickey told Jack everything, About the call from Mandy, the situation with his court case, what his roommates said. He even spilled his guts about his fears about coming home and running into Ian. If this had been sixteen year old Mickey, he'd have never breathed a word of any of this shit. He took a moment to really consider how much he'd grown in the past three years. He smiled.

"Well, fuck." Jack said. "Are you asking me what I think you should do?"

"Uh, I guess I just wanted an outside opinion, you know, cuz you're not really invested in the outcome."

"Fuck off I'm not invested. If it affects you, it matters to me. You're my friend, Mick. Anything that
happens in your life I'm gonna be invested in." Jack scoffed. "You'd think you'd know that by now."

Jack had been the one constant in his life since he escaped to Mexico. Even Mandy was on and off with him. With her asshole husband in the picture, she wasn't always "allowed" to be in contact with Mickey. (which made him livid, his damn sister should be able to do whatever the hell she wanted.) But Jack had been there. He was the only person Mickey talked to for the first few months after his escape, before he met Lauren and Javier. After Ian had left him broken and alone. Mickey had gotten himself a burner phone with some of his stolen purse money, and Jack's contact info was one of the only things he had on him. Jack had been sympathetic as always, listening like he did when they shared a cell back at MCC. He was probably one of the best friends Mickey ever had, and Mickey was grateful one good thing came out of his prison sentence.

"I just don't know if it's worth the risk, man. I hate to say this out loud, but I'm fucking scared." Mickey rubbed his hand over his face. He hated talking about his feelings, still to this day. It just went against everything he'd ever been taught. But he was trying really hard to let that toxic shit go, and opening up to the people he cared about was part of that.

"Oh Mick, I know. It must be terrifying. But you've got your sister, and me. You've got Javier and Lauren. You are surrounded by people who love you, and I'm sure I speak for everybody when I say we will support you no matter what you decide. And if you end up having to do a little bit more time, I'll be there for you. I'd never leave you hanging."

"Thanks, man. That really means a lot. I'll, uh, I'll let you know when I find out more." Mickey felt better, Jack always made him feel better. He was a good friend to Mickey. Something he'd never take for granted ever again.

"Sure thing, Mick. On a personal noted, I'd die to see your sexy ass in person again." Jack laughed.

"Okay, asshole." Mickey huffed. "I'll call you when I know more. Bye."

"Bye Mick." Jack sighed, and he was gone.

Mickey rolled over and turned off the bedside light. He plugged his phone in and laid out on his back, stretching wide, enjoying having the space to himself for the night. His thoughts were no calmer after talking to Jack, but at least he knew he was surrounded by support, no matter what he ended up doing. He closed his eyes and willed himself to sleep. As he started to drift, his last thoughts were of Chicago, and all the dreams and nightmares he'd left there.

The next morning, Mickey wakes up alone, disoriented for a second until he remember Javier is sleeping in the other room with Lauren. Then, the events of the previous day come crashing down on him. He'd managed to forget for a second that his whole life was in turmoil again. The weight of it was suddenly suffocating. He was just starting to get comfortable. It took him three years to put himself back together, really start to function as a whole person for the first time. And now everything was up in the air again. He sighed.

He swung himself off the bed and headed for the kitchen. Lauren and Javier were already there, sipping coffee and eating toast.

"Hey," Lauren smiled. "Coffee?"

"Fuck yes. Thanks." Mickey said, taking a seat on the counter. Javier lingered by the door, cup in hand.
"What are your plans for the day?" Javier asked, chomping on his dry toast.

"Not much, I have the day off, so I figured I'd lounge around the house. Maybe take a walk on the beach. I'm gonna have to call Mandy later, though. I gotta figure this court shit out, or else I'm gonna lose my mind wondering about it. Was up half the night thinking about the shit. Driving me crazy already." Mickey took the mug of coffee Lauren offered, drinking from it greedily. Coffee made everything better.

"Well, I have the day off too. You wanna hang out? Maybe not be alone when you call your sister, that might be a heavy conversation." Javier offered.

"Sure, sounds good. Thanks man." And with that Mickey took his coffee and walked toward the bathroom. He needed a shower.

Later in the day, when Lauren had gone to work, Mickey and Javier decided to head down to the beach. It was a quiet spot, not popular with the tourists like the other seaside places in town. The waves were breaking by their feet as they walked along the wet sand. The sun was low in the sky, afternoon settling in. Mickey closed his eyes and tilted his head up to the sky, soaking in the rays of the sun, smelling the salty, earthy smell that only came from the ocean side. He'd miss this, if he went home.

Javier took his hand, and Mickey opened his eyes, looking over at him. "What?"
Javier motioned for Mickey to sit with him in the sand, so he did. He flopped down on the damp sand, looking up at Javier expectantly.

Javier lowered himself down next to Mickey, and took his hand again. He laid his head on Mickey's shoulder, both of them looking out at the ocean, the sun slowly descending toward the horizon. They were silent for a long time.

Finally, Javier looked over at Mickey "You going to call your sister?"

"In a minute, I just wanna sit here for a bit." Mickey replied, running his thumb over the back of Javier's hand. It hit him in that moment, not for the first time, how much he'd grown since he was a closeted kid back in Chicago. Letting a man hold his hand on a public beach. It felt fucking good.

"Okay." Javier replied, focusing on the ocean once more.

They sat there silently, Mickey's mind going over the same things again and again. But it didn't matter how many times he rehashed it all, he knew the answer all along. He took out his burner cell and dialed his sister's number. Still holding Javier's hand, he put the phone to his ear.

"Mick?" Mandy picked up instantly.

"Hey Mands, tell me about this shit with the lawyer."

"Really? Oh my god, Mick, you don't know how happy that makes me." Mandy gushed.

"Alright, alright, no need to get all emotional. Just tell me what I have to do. What actually happened?" Mickey asked. He can tell Javier is listening intently, but they don't really have secrets, so he's not bothered.

What's one more roll of the dice, when your whole life has been risk after risk?

"Really? Oh my god, Mick, you don't know how happy that makes me." Mandy gushed.

"Alright, alright, no need to get all emotional. Just tell me what I have to do. What actually happened?" Mickey asked. He can tell Javier is listening intently, but they don't really have secrets, so he's not bothered.
"So, from what the new DA told me, the judge in your case was having an affair with the old DA, that crusty bitch that had it in for you since day one. You remember her, Cynthia Whatevertethefuck.... the blond." Mandy said.

"Yeah, Cynthia Richardson. What a utter and total cunt she was. She had such a hard on for me, just cuz I was Terry's son. Like, she couldn't get him, so she was gonna make an example of me. Get a Milkovich head to mount on her wall." Mickey grumbled. Javier squeezed his hand, a silent reminder of his support. "I can't believe that frigid bitch fucks anyone." Mickey added, laughing.

"Well, come to find out, the judge wasn't only fucking her. He was doing her favors in the courtroom too!! Like always ruling in her favor, helping her pad her conviction rate. Ridiculous, right?"

"I believe it, that judge was a prick too. Banks was his name, right?"

"Yeah, Robert Banks. So get this...he's not only fucking the DA, he's fucking his assistant too, some sweet young thing. And he married."

"Where the hell did he find all the time to fuck three bitches consistently?" Mickey wonders.

"So not the point of this story, Mick." Mandy sighs.

"Sorry, go on." he stood up from the ground and started pacing in the sand, Javier watching on curiously.

"Like I was saying, the whole thing blew up like a week ago, when the assistant did a TV interview. She was all heartbroken cuz Judge Banks wouldn't leave his wife like he promised, so she went all fatal attraction, tore his whole world down. On TV. Blew up his affair with Richardson, his favoritism to her in court, and all the cases they colluded on. It was insane. So this new DA calls me and asks me if I know where you are." She paused.

"And what the fuck did you say?" Mickey asked warily.

"I told him to go fuck himself. Duh." Mandy said, "But he said he didn't want to bust you or whatever, that the state is mortified by this scandal, and they want to make it right. He looked over the evidence in your case, and with what they have he said you never should have even been charged. He also said that cunt Sammi has fallen off the face of the earth since she was released from jail, so even if they did want to retry you, it would be damn near impossible without her testimony. How fucking cool is that?" Mandy was breathless by the end of her monologue. Clearly elated.

"Jesus Christ." Mickey replied. Could this be really happening?

"I know Mick. I know." Mandy sounded like she was on the verge of tears. "Let me give you his number, okay. Just call the dude and hear him out."

"Alright." Mickey answered without a thought. He was moving on autopilot. He repeated the number to Javier, said goodbye to Mandy, and hung up. Javier repeated the number back to Mickey and he saved it in his phone, for later.

He looked at Javier, and laid down in the sand. He didn't give a fuck if this shit got everywhere, he was feeling lightheaded and a little panicky. He needed to lay down for a second.

Javier laid down next to him, pulling Mickey to his chest. Mickey melted into him, wrapping his arm around Javier's stomach, laying his head on his chest. He was going to have to say goodbye to all this. Javier, Lauren, their little home by the sea in Mexico.
He felt like all he ever did was say goodbye.

Nothing good ever lasted.

No one ever stayed. Not even him.

But he just couldn't shake the feeling that this was what he had to do. What he was supposed to do. He always trusted his gut, and he didn't see why he should deviate from that shit now.

"Te voy a extrañar". Javier said lowly. Mickey hadn't said a word about what his sister had said, hadn't mentioned that he decided, in that moment to go home. Javier just knew Mickey, knew what he would do.

"I'm going to miss you too." Mickey replied simply. There wasn't much else to say.

They made their way home silently. Shoulders bumping into each other as they ambled down the dirt road that lead from the waterfront to their small home. Lauren would still be at work for a few hours, so it would be just the two of them. Mickey wanted to take advantage of any alone time he'd get with Javier, since he had a feeling now their time was limited.

Mickey wished he'd been more open to Javier in the years he'd been in Mexico, but he wasn't it the right head space for a relationship. He just didn't have it in him to give Javier, or any man, really, the type of devotion he wanted to. He wanted to be good, to give his whole self to someone. Not just bit and pieces he could string together. He'd been doing that forever. Even Ian never really had all of him, because he didn't even know what that meant back then. And now that he does know, and he feels capable for the first time ever, he can't. Because he's a fugitive. And it's unfair to fall in love with someone, let them love you back, when there is always the chance of you leaving lingering in the background. He just couldn't do it.

It felt like he missed a really good opportunity with Javier. He was great. So kind, funny and smart. Sexy as hell, with his shaggy dark brown hair, deep ebony eyes, and his cut dark-skinned body. He was the total package. And he liked Mickey, a lot. But Mickey couldn't go there with him, because there was always a chance that Mickey would get ripped from this new life. Like he was being right now.

They walked into the apartment, and Javier was on Mickey before he could even put his keys down. "Te quiero." He muttered, kissing Mickey passionately.

"Then take me." Mickey replied, smiling. They fell to the mattress that took up most of the sitting room.

Javier started tugging at Mickey tank top, pulling it over his head easily. He ran his hand over Mickey's tattoo. It was a nice cover-up. Really well done. It was a simple black and white anatomical heart, over the botch job he'd had there before. Javier had gone with Mickey to get it done, telling him he was helping him put the mistakes of his past to rest. Mickey wasn't so sure about that. He had Ian inside his heart, how was that any different than before?

"Here, with me, carino, get out of your head." Javier murmured. He knew Mickey too well.

"Sorry, I'm here." Mickey sighed, lifting his hips, as Javier rid him of his shorts. There Mickey lay, flat on his back, naked in front of Javier. He felt vulnerable, but not in the scary way he used to. "Come here." he said, pulling Javier down to him.

Javier caged him in, a hand on either side of his head, and kissed him deeply. They made out sloppily for a few moments, until Javier pulled back to pull his own shirt over his head. He shed his
shorts quickly, and was back in position above Mickey. He ran a hand down Mickey's chest, swiping at one of his nipples, gliding down his side. He rested a hand on his hip and looked him in the eyes.

"I will miss you." he repeated his earlier sentiment.

"I'm here now." Mickey said, pulling the other man down to him. He took Javier's erection in his hand and started pumping it slowly. "I'm right here, don't waste it."

Javier stuttered out a breath, rocking into Mickey's hand. Mickey realized he had a habit of conveying his emotions physically. Whether with his fists or his dick, he always had an easier time getting his point across this way, rather than with his words. He wanted Javier to know. He wanted him to feel how much Mickey cared about him. So he showed him.

"I want you to fuck me." Mickey breathed, looking up at Javier, writhing above him. He looked fucked out already. Mickey smirked. "I want you to give it to me good, I know you love that."

"I do. Me encanta. Hermoso hombre..." he muttered. He kissed Mickey hard, then broke away to rummage through the side table. Javier lived by the motto "lube in every room." Mickey could appreciate that.

Javier fished out a half used bottle of lube, and set it on the bed next to Mickey's hip. He ground his hips down into Mickey's, their straining erections rubbing against each other. Mickey let out a stuttered breath, dropping his hands to rest above his head. He leaned his head back and closed his eyes as he heard the unmistakable click of the lube bottle being opened. That noise alone gave Mickey a visceral reaction, his body trembled slightly in anticipation.

Then he felt the cold sensation of Javier's lubed up fingers ghosting around his entrance. He rocked his hips down into Mickey's, a silent invitation. He drew in a sharp breath as he felt Javier push his way in. Slowly, always so slowly. He pushed his finger in and out of Mickey, muttering lowly in spanish. He added a second finger, and Mickey took it. He knew Javier wasn't one to be rushed on prep. And Mickey could admit to himself, he didn't hate the languid pace the other man set most of the time.

Javier twisted his wrist, adding the third finger, pumping more forcefully now, his hooded eyes never leaving Mickey's. Mickey was grunting, fisting the sheets on their makeshift bed.

"Okay, okay, I'm good, come on." Mickey had hit his limit. He needed it, now.

Javier seemed to agree, nodding dumbly instead of replying. He maneuvered Mickey on to his side, wrapping one arm around his shoulders, and used his other to line up his hard cock with Mickey's ready hole. He pushed in slower than Mickey would have liked, but the stretch was good nonetheless.

"Te sientes muy bien. So good."Javier muttered, biting gently at Mickey's shoulder, rocking slowly into him. It was a bit intimate for what Mickey was looking for tonight, so he put his hand on Javier's arm that was draped over his chest, and squeezed. "Come on man, fucking fuck me." He grunted, pushing his ass backwards.

Javier huffed out a laugh, picking up the pace.
"Ah, that's it." Mickey sighed.

They were silent after that, the only sounds in the room being their quiet grunting and the wet slapping of their skin coming together. Mickey closed his eyes and lost himself in the sensation of being full. He was close already, so he moved his hand down to wrap around his own throbbing
erection. "M'close, man." He muttered, turning his face into the pillow, his hand speeding up on his hard on.

"Yeah, yeah." Javier agreed, pounding into Mickey from behind. He stuttered a few times, and stil led, buried deep inside him. Mickey let out a muffled groan into the pillow as he shot his load all over the sheets.

They lay like that for a few minutes, catching their breath, and then Javier got up and walked to the kitchen. Mickey rolled onto his back, reaching for his cigarettes off the floor. He put one between his lips and lit it, blowing out smoke into the small space.

Javier returned a minute later with a wet washcloth and two glasses of whiskey. He handed everything but his own glass to Mickey, and sat down next to him on the bed. Mickey took a sip of his drink, handed Javier the cigarette, and cleaned himself up with the washcloth. He dropped it on the floor with a wet plop, and sat up against the wall. He took a sip of his drink, relishing in the burn of the alcohol, and made a gesture for Javier to return his cigarette to him. They drank in silence, passing the cigarette back and forth. Javier got up and turned the lamp off, and they got under the covers together, setting their glasses on the floor to deal with later.

"That was nice." Javier murmured, pulling Mickey close to him.

"Always is." Mickey replied, settling his head on Javier's chest.

He was going to miss all this. It was simple, there was no stress or drama. But he had been running for so long now. And no matter how quiet his life was at the moment, there was no guarantee it would stay that way.

"Are you going to come back? When you figure out all your shit?" Javier asked, running his hand over Mickey's bare shoulder.

"I really don't know." Mickey replied honestly. "I don't know how I'd ever make it back."

"Well, you keep in touch with me, and we'll figure it out, no matter what you want to do, Mick, Eres familia ahora. Lauren, you, and me. We're here for you."

Eres familia ahora. You're family now.

Mickey smiled as he closed his eyes. He felt safe in his decision, knowing that for once in his life, he didn't have to do it all alone.

Chapter End Notes

"Que diablos, chico lindo?" - what the hell, pretty boy?

"Te sientes muy bien." - you feel so good.


"Te quiero." - i love you.

"Te voy extranar." - i will miss you
"Eres familia ahora." - you are family now
At a Crossroads

Chapter Summary

Ian is fidgety. He usually has better control of himself. He usually isn't like this anymore. He feels like he's been slipping lately, but he doesn't want to admit that. To himself or anyone else.

Chapter Notes

Here's a little change of pace. Let's get into Ian's head a bit. I'm going to be alternating POVs, cuz I just have to see it all from both sides.

Just a head's up: coercive sex and verbal abuse

Ian is fidgety. He usually has better control of himself. He usually isn't like this anymore. He feels like he's been slipping lately, but he doesn't want to admit that. To himself or anyone else. Especially not Caroline.

Even if Caroline is supposed to be the one person he can open up to about anything. He's been seeing her for years, they have a good rapport. Usually. But Ian doesn't really know how to explain this strange suffocating feeling he's been having lately. Doesn't want to admit it. Face the fact that he may have made another mistake.

Things had been good. Or so he thought. He just didn't know anymore. "So Ian, how have things been over the past two weeks?"

"Oh you know, Caroline, good." he tried to smile. It probably came out a little strained. She knew he was lying. She always did. Caroline was a good person. Witty, no-nonsense. She was much shorter than Ian, a bit overweight, but not fat. Long brown hair always braided down her back. Always dressed sharp in designer clothes, shoes that looked ridiculously uncomfortable. But what would Ian know about that?

"Okay, Ian." she said, writing something down on her pad of paper. "How's work?"

"Okay, you know. Haven't lost a patient in a few months, haven't had any episodes, my meds haven't messed with my ability to work. This most recent cocktail seems to be working well."

"And how are you getting along with your co-workers? They still good, after that one slip not too long ago?" Caroline worded her question carefully.

Ian sighed. He'd had a run in with a prick from another unit. Some homophobic ass that just couldn't keep his mouth shut. It didn't even come to blows, just some shoving and name calling. But everyone thought Ian was so fragile now, because of his diagnosis. He could handle his shit just fine, thank you very much.
"It's a non-issue, Caroline, really. It didn't even bother me, so the dude hates fags, not like I'm not used to that shit." Ian ran a hand through his hair, silently reminding himself to get it cut later this week. It was getting shaggy again.

"Okay, Ian, that's good. How about personal connections? Your family, friends?" Caroline paused her writing to look up into Ian's eyes. He looked away.

"Well, you know, Brian and I have been so busy, with work and all. I don't really have a lot of time for socializing." he muttered, picking imaginary lint off his uniform pants, not looking up.

"Ian, I thought we talked about this. It's important for you to have strong relationships with people who love you, and can support you through any possible crises. Your brother and sister used to be very active in your treatment, and you had a wide circle of friends. Since you started this new relationship, I can't help but notice you've been isolating yourself. I have also tried several times to get in contact with Brian, and have him come down for a session with you so we can discuss your emergency plan, but he won't return my calls. I am fearful that this situation isn't healthy." She said, looking up at him.

"Listen, Caroline, you're right, I know. Brian's just super busy. We both are. And I'm sure he'd be happy to come down and talk to you. I'll ask him myself, alright?" Ian knew he was lying. Brian would want nothing to do with this shit. But he didn't want to tell his therapist that. It would just trigger more questions he didn't want to answer.

So he changed the subject, and they talked for another half an hour about random incidents at work that bothered him for one reason or another.

"Okay, Ian, that's good. I think that's enough for today. Make an appointment with Megan on your way out, I'll see you in two weeks." she stood up and shook his hand, and he made his way out of the office.

Ian made a follow up appointment for two weeks later and made his way out of the building. He wrapped his uniform coat around him a little tighter, the April air still not quite warm enough for his taste. He took a corner and made his way toward the L. He didn't have a car, didn't see the point, he lived in the city. And Brian had a car if he ever really needed to use one. Not that Brian would let him drive it, but still.

Ian ran up the steps to try and catch the next train, but just missed it. He sighed, lightly smacking his forehead with his open palm. "Fuck." he muttered. He backed away and sat down on a bench by the wall and took out his phone to wait out the next train.

He had a missed call from Brian, speak of the devil.
And a text from Fiona.

Fi: hey kid, call me. i've been trying to get you to dinner for weeks xoxo

Ian sighed again. He knew Brian wouldn't want to go to Fiona's. But he also wouldn't want Ian to go without him. It was a no-win situation. Ian hated it.
Ian decided to bite the bullet and call his boyfriend. Just then the train pulled up, and Ian hopped on, surrounded by people on all sides. He grabbed a support pole.
He dialed Brian's number, and waited.
"Hello."

"Hey, Bri."

"Ian, what the hell are you? You got off work over an hour ago." Brian sounded pissed.

"I told you, I had therapy this afternoon. Remember?"

"No, you never told me that shit. Where are you really?"

"I'm on the L, Bri. I wouldn't lie to you. I hate it when you accuse me like that. Please just check the calendar by the fridge, you'll see the appointment." Ian said, hating that this was always how it was with Brian. He didn't trust him at all. It was very discouraging.

Brian was silent for a moment, and Ian heard him moving around the apartment. Finally he said "Oh, yeah, it says it right here..... Well, you should have texted me. You know I worry about you doing something crazy."

Ian cringed. Brian always did this.

"Please, Bri, don't call me crazy." Ian ground out, rubbing his forehead, gripping onto the support pole of the train harder.

"Oh Ian, don't be so sensitive. Besides, you know what I mean. I worry about you."

And Ian knew. He knew he was a lot to handle sometimes. But he didn't like people using that shit against him. Brian was supposed to be his boyfriend, supposed to be supportive. Not use his insecurities and shortcomings against him.

"Ian, baby, I'm sorry. I love you so much. I just want to protect you. You didn't tell me you were going to be late, I was scared." Brian cooed.

Ian closed his eyes. Maybe he did forget to tell Brian. Maybe this was his fault. Maybe Brian had a right to be mad. Ian was flighty, he was forgetful. Brian had a reason to worry.

"I'm sorry, babe, this was all my fault." Ian mumbled.

"It's okay, honey. I know how you can be. You coming home now? You can make it up to me." Ian could hear Brian's smile through the phone.

Ian wasn't smiling.

"Sure, babe, I'll be home in 20."

"No, stop and get dinner first. Love you, bye." and Brian was gone.

Ian looked at his phone in disbelief. 'What the fuck?'

Ian shuffled off the train, feeling dejected now. He liked Brian a lot. They had met at the gym. He was tall, a little taller than Ian, blond and super built. Like borderline steroids big. He was an investment banker, and had huge, posh loft on the Northside. Ian had nothing in common with him. But that was probably what drew Ian to him in the first place. He was nothing like Ian, or the Southside. Ian thought that maybe if he went for something totally opposite of what he'd once wanted, he may get a different outcome. He was trying to exorcise his demons, left behind when he lost Mickey. And he thought finding an anti-Mickey would be the easiest way to do that. Brian was
about as far from Mickey as you could get. Suit and tie guy, never been arrested, gym rat, theater
goer. None of that was Ian either, if he was being honest with himself.

Brian was nothing like Mickey. But that wasn't really as good a thing as Ian first thought. Brian
didn't have Mickey's compassion. He had no patience for Ian when he was in a depressive episode,
or when he needed a med change. Always telling Ian his disorder was bullshit, and he was just
"feeling low" and telling him to "suck it up, be a man", telling him his mania was just a cry for
attention, or constantly asking him if he was back on drugs. Brian had none of Mickey's forgiveness,
as proven by the dressing down Ian just got on the phone for "forgetting" to tell Brian he was going
to be late coming home. And Brian had none of Mickey's kindness. Always forcing Ian to do things
he didn't want to do, like pulling away from his family and friends, or doing things in the bedroom he
wasn't comfortable with.

No, Brian was nothing like Mickey. But that's why Ian chose him. He didn't deserve Mickey
anymore, he made his choice. He probably didn't even deserve to be happy. He threw that shit away
for good, left it on the side of the road. But he kept having to tell himself it was for the best. He
couldn't go on the run, live that chaotic, unsure life. He loved Mickey, but he knew it was unhealthy
for him to run like that. He needed stability, for his own sanity and safety.

Being with Brian made sense. It was predictable, there was no chaos, no storm, no fire. It was safe.
So, Brian is what he gets. And he has to be okay with that. It's for the best.

About twenty minutes later, Ian walked into the Northside loft he shared with Brian (Brian called it
his loft, always saying he 'let Ian stay there' when anyone asked), take away Thai food in his hands.
He put his keys on the kitchen island, and kicked his shoes off and back towards the door. "Bri? You
around?" he called out.

Brian came around the corner, draped in a towel, just out of the shower, he smiled at Ian. "Hey babe,
what took you so long?" he asked, walking over to the far side of the loft, where the bed was hidden
behind a room divider.

"Ugh, that Thai place you love was mobbed, just that time of day, I guess." Ian replied, taking the
food container out of the paper bag and setting them on the granite counter top. "I got you the Gai
Med Ma Moung, that okay?"

Brian walked back out into the living area, wearing a pair of yellow Gucci sweatpants and no shirt.
Ian couldn't wrap his head around spending $900 on a pair of sweats, but Brian always did tell him
he had no taste...

"Eh, what did you get?" Brian asked, coming up behind Ian and wrapping his arms around his
middle.

Ian looked back at him, taking the lid off one of the containers. "Vegan pad thai." he replied slowly,
having an idea where this was going.

"Oh, that sounds good. You take the chicken, I want the pad thai." Brian said, grabbing for Ian's
dinner.

"No, Brian, I don't like that spicy chicken shit. It's too hot. YOU like it, that's why I got it for you.
You don't even like vegan." Ian said, exasperated.

"Ian, I want the noodles. Don't be a dick. Trade with me." Brian looked pissed. More pissed than
someone should be about food. "Besides, you were the one who was late, you are the reason we had
to order out at all. We could have made dinner, but you fucked it up. So give me the damn pad thai,
and shut the fuck up." Brain grabbed the box out of Ian's hand and stormed over to the couch.
Ian shook his head, how the hell did this turn into an argument? He took the shitty spicy chicken and two beers from the fridge. He wasn't supposed to drink, but he needed it once in a while to deal with Brian's shit. He followed Brian to the couch, sitting on the far end, and started eating. It was disgusting, too hot, too spicy. But if he didn't eat it, it would only prolong the argument. So he sucked it up.

Brian turned on the business news, and they sat silently, watching stocks going up and down on the television. Ian didn't understand any of it, didn't care to, really. But Brian loved the shit, really got his blood pumping, so Ian let it be. He poked around the chicken for a few more minutes, making a show of eating as much as he could stomach.

"So, uh, Fiona texted me." He said, not looking up from his meal.

"Oh really? What did she want?" Brian asked, stuffing some of Ian's noodles in his mouth.

"She wants us to come over for dinner, with the family. It's been a while."

"Oh Ian, you know how I feel about going down to that shitty neighborhood." Brian started. He put his fork down in his container, giving Ian all his attention. "Not to mention, the don't respect you. They don't like the fact that you got out. You are better than them now, Ian, don't let them suck you back in. They always do, with their petty drama and family bullshit. You know it makes you unstable, baby."

Ian had to try really hard not to react to that statement. His family was crazy, yes, but they would never hold him back or keep him down. But he needed to control his temper, or Brian would win. He took a deep breath before replying. "Bri, it's not like that, they just miss me."

"They miss having a crazy brother to look down on and control is more like it." Brian spat. "You do whatever you want, but I am not going to that shit hole neighborhood to sit with your white trash family and listen to them question the way you choose to live your life." Brian stood up, tossed his food on the floor, grabbed his beer and walked back toward the bedroom. "Go or don't go, but you may as well stay the night if you do, cuz I won't want to see you when you get back."

Ian sighed, looking up at the ceiling. He should have expected this outburst. This is how it always went. Brian hated his family. And his family hated Brian. Fiona and Lip thought Brian was controlling and manipulative, but Brian said the same thing about them. It was tearing Ian apart, having the people he cared about hating each other. But he didn't know how to fix it. He felt like he'd have to leave one or the other behind, and he didn't want to do that.

He'd tell Fiona they'd come another time. He could change Brian's mind. He just had to keep trying, show him that he wasn't the only Gallagher worth something. If Brian thought he was worth something to begin with. Sometimes he wasn't so sure.

He got up off the couch, and went about cleaning up the mess Brian had made when he tossed his food all over the floor. There were noodles spread all over the hardwood floor. Splattered sauce on the leg of the coffee table and up the far wall. Ian grabbed a towel and a bottle of cleaner, got onto his knees and started wiping up the mess. He was quiet as he did it, not wanting to draw too much attention to himself. He washed the floor, put the rest of the leftovers in the fridge, and mixed Brian a whiskey sour, hoping to calm him down.

He walked into the bedroom, Brian sitting on the bed, reading his kindle. He didn't even look up when Ian set the drink down on the bedside table next to his empty beer. Didn't say 'thank you' either, just took the drink and sipped it, continuing his reading.

Ian sighed again, taking off his uniform and tossing it in the hamper in the adjoined bathroom. He took a shower, letting the hot water wash his stress away. He washed his body slowly, taking
advantage of the moment alone. He got out, wrapping a towel around his waist. He brushed his teeth and took his meds. He made his way over to the bed, tossing the towel in the hamper, and slipped in between the sheets, not bothering with pajamas. He grabbed a book he'd been reading, deciding talking to Brian was probably not in his best interest for a while.

A long stretch of silence later, Brian put his kindle down, and turned to Ian. "You know I love you, Ian." He started.

"Yeah, I do. Love you too." Ian replied, putting his book down on his nightstand. He looked over at Brian.

"I just don't like the way they treat you. Like you're a child. And I think you are better than that Southside shit you refuse to leave behind. You are not that guy anymore, Ian. You're with me now. You need to let that shit go." Brian started running his hand along Ian's chest and stomach.

Ian closed his eyes, trying his best not to respond to that. He didn't know what he believed, if he was better than his past, grown out of his roots. Was he so different now he had nothing in common with his family anymore? It was hard to think when he was around Brian, he always got Ian so mixed up, he didn't know what was true or not anymore.

"Okay, Bri, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have even brought it up. Seriously, I'll just tell her we can't make it." Ian said, closing his eyes again as Brian attached his mouth to Ian's neck. Ian wasn't really in the mood for sex, but that was a whole other argument he didn't want to have. He'd do just about anything to not fight right now.

Brian knew that.

"Good boy, Ian." Brian muttered against his skin. "Now let's talk about how you were late today. You owe me, for being so flighty." Brian said, pushing Ian onto his side. Ian could feel Brian's hard on against his back.

Ian did NOT want to bottom tonight. He didn't want to fuck at all. But he especially didn't want Brian inside him.

"Brian, come on, not this, not tonight." Ian said, trying to roll away. But Brian was much stronger than Ian, with all the working out he did. He just wrapped an arm around Ian, trapping him against his chest.

Brian had told Ian he was versatile when they'd met. Ian had said the same, but made it clear since the beginning that he preferred to top. Brian had told him that was no problem. Only months into their relationship, when Ian noticed he was bottoming more and more, did Brian tell him the truth, that he was 90% top. Ian didn't mind, not so much. But it felt like a bit of a betrayal, being lied to like that. Like he'd been duped. But Ian was in it already at that point. Willing to try, not ready to admit he'd failed at another relationship.

Giving more and more of himself. Compromise after compromise. This was no different.

"Ian." Brian's voice was authoritative, dominant even. Ian knew he'd already lost. Brian tightened his grip around Ian's waist.

"Alright, Bri. I'm sorry." Ian said, resigned. He felt Brian's hand release from around his stomach, and he heard him spit in his hand. "Being disrespectful to me all night, Ian. Making things difficult for me. Arguing with me, when we both know I'm right. Why do you DO that?"

He punctuated his last question with a hard thrust of his hand into Ian. Burying two fingers inside
him without preamble. Ian cried out, jerking forward. He couldn't help it. It was a shock, and it hurt. Brian prepped Ian roughly, quickly. No lube, just spit. Then he was buried inside him. Ian screwed his eyes shut, pain rippling through him. He wasn't even close to hard, not that Brian would notice or care. Ian just had to hold on until it was over. Brian tightened his hold around Ian's chest, slamming into him from behind. His grunting and labored breathing being the only sounds in the room. Ian wasn't gonna cry. He was in control. He could handle this. It was okay. He was okay.

Brian finished quickly. He usually did. Ian was grateful for that, at least. He released Ian and rolled onto his back. "Go clean yourself up, I don't want that shit getting all over my sheets." Brian said, picking his kindle back up.

Ian walked to the bathroom quietly. He took a washcloth from the closet, wet it, and started cleaning the come off his ass and thighs. He caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror. He looked awful. Thin, pale, and he had tears welling up in his eyes.

'How the hell did I get here?'

He was starting to realize he was really unhappy with Brian. Even if he was scared to be alone. Even if he didn't want to have to admit to another failed relationship. If things with Brian didn't change soon, he'd have to wave the white flag, slink home with his tail between his legs.

But he wasn't ready to do that just yet. He wasn't sure there was better out there for him anyway. The things Brian said to him, some of them were true. He was flighty, he was crazy. His family was trashy, he was trashy. He had a sordid past, full of mistakes and things he wished he could take back. Brian was right.

So maybe he had to learn to be better, learn to be different, try to improve on all the things Brian said he was shit at. Let go of the security blanket of his family and friends, as Brian called them. Learn to stand on his own two feet, like a man. Then maybe Brian would be better to him, if he gave Brian something to be proud of. Then he'd have what he'd always wanted. A happy, healthy, stable relationship.

'Bullshit'. Ian thought. He's been bullshitting himself so long, he can't even tell what the truth is anymore.

He made his way back into the bedroom, got back under the covers, and picked his book back up. Just then his phone lit up with a call. Ian grabbed it off the nightstand.

"Who the hell is calling you at this time of night? If it's that sister of yours, I swear. She knows I don't like you getting these phone calls in the middle of the night." Brian looked at Ian like he wanted to slap him. That hadn't happened, yet. Ian clung to that one fact more than he probably should have.

"Uh, it's Mandy." Ian said. He was surprised to see Mandy calling him. He'd been avoiding her for months. Brian didn't want him being friends with his ex's sister. Even if he was friends with Mandy before he started up with Mickey. Brian said it wasn't good for him to be friends with people like Mandy, said it tied him to his past, said he was better than her now. Ian didn't agree. But it wasn't worth the argument. And it's not like Mandy was blowing up his phone, either. This was the first he'd heard from her in months.

"Don't you dare answer that shit. I thought that gutter rat got the message when I talked to her last time. I swear, Ian, you had the worst taste in people before me, you are so lucky you got out of that neighborhood. You would have been trash your whole life. Jesus. Turn the light off and go to sleep."
And Brian plugged his kindle in and rolled over.

When Ian didn't immediately move, Brian barked "Now, Ian, fuck."

Ian scrambled off the bed and turned the light off.
Maybe he'd call Mandy when he was alone.
Maybe.

Then next morning, Ian wakes up alone. He's a bit disturbed by how much that puts him at ease. Things with Brian are taking a turn into dangerous territory as far as Ian can see. It's gone beyond just putting Ian down now and then, making him question himself. It's gone beyond Brian trying to broaden Ian's horizons, introduce him to new people and things, into Brian disparaging everything Ian likes, and everyone he loves. Driving a wedge between Ian and his own life. It's painfully obvious to Ian now that Brian is isolating him.

But then again, maybe Ian's making too big a deal out of all of this. Brian didn't want Ian hanging out with Mandy, Ian could understand that. All Brian knew of Mandy was what Ian had told them of their shared past. An edited version, sure, but it was still enough to have a spoiled northside guy freaked out. He probably thought Mandy would drag Ian back to his past, as a manic stripper. Drugs and violence. Guns and fighting. Milkovich, after all. But Mandy would never do that. Mandy loved Ian, wanted what was best for him. Just like he wanted for her.

After Ian came back from his failed attempt at running away with Mickey, he and Mandy had gotten close again. Just like old times. Ian had met her husband, Jeff. He wasn't impressed, but he didn't say anything, because Mandy had seemed happy. Ian and Mandy had started hanging out again. Getting coffee, going out to dinner, shopping. Just the little shit they used to do as teenagers to pass the time. It was nice. Ian didn't really have friends like that. He never had. It had always been boyfriends, coworkers, his brothers, or Mandy. He loved her. And he was elated when they started hanging out again.

They didn't talk about the past. They didn't talk about Lip, and they certainly didn't talk about Mickey. Ian wanted to ask, but he didn't think he really deserved to know. He was sure Mandy would tell him if it was serious news, like Mick getting sick, or caught. Or god forbid, if he died. So, when she never told Ian any of those things, he was fairly certain Mickey was at least alive and free still. It made him happy, to have Mandy in his life, as well as having that one small connection to Mickey remaining. He liked that very much indeed.

But about six months ago, when Ian had met Brian at the gym, and they had started dating, talking to Mandy fell by the wayside. Like almost everything else that mattered to Ian. He got swept up in that brand new romance bliss, and let everything else sort of fall through the cracks for a while. He was so blinded by that rush of a new relationship, he didn't notice he was giving up pieces of his life that made him who he was.

He didn't want to do that anymore. He wanted to be free to see whomever he wanted. To go where he pleased, when he felt like it. Do whatever he wanted to, because he was a grown ass man, and he deserved to live his own life.

He just needed to man up and tell Brian to back off. He could do that. He could make Brian understand. It wasn't anything against him, he just wanted to be his own person.

Yeah, he'd tell Brian all that shit. As soon as he got home from work today.
He'd do it then.
Yep.
Ian got out of bed, and started moving around the bed, picking up the shit Brian had left all over the floor in his rush to get to the gym that morning before work. Brian never missed a day at the gym, and was always on Ian's ass about not going enough. Telling him he's getting soft around the middle, or getting love handles. That he wouldn't be sexy anymore, and his personality wasn't enough to sustain him. Ian huffed out a bitter laugh at the memory of that conversation, and made a plan to hit the gym after work.

He went out into the living area, crossing by the couch and into the kitchen. His uniform for the day was hanging over the bar stool, where he had left it the day before. He started up the keurig, not wanting to waste time with a whole pot of coffee, and made his way to the bathroom. He took a piss, brushed his teeth, and took his meds.

Back in the kitchen, he poured some coffee, and started dressing. He was buttoning up his shirt when he realized he left his phone in the bedroom. He sighed as he made his way back across the loft to grab it.

Phone in hand, he added milk to his coffee, and sat down at the island to check his email before work.

He saw he had a missed call and a voicemail.

Mandy.

All this thinking about her this morning, and he'd managed to forget she'd called. Idiot.

He pressed the voicemail button, and put the phone to his ear. He sipped his coffee. Too hot.

"You have one new message:
Hey Ian, it's Mandy. I know, it's been a minute. I know we don't really talk too much, and I don't know who's fault that is, but I didn't know who else to call. There is so much shit going on in my life right now. I can't talk to anyone. I can't even tell you everything. But I just need a friend right now. If you can't or don't want to, I understand. But you and me always had each other's backs. And I need you now. Call me if you can. Love you."

Ian looked at his phone, stunned. Mandy never asked for help. Never. This must be some serious shit to have her reaching out to Ian like this. He knew she never really had friends either. But she was married now, why couldn't she talk to Jeff about whatever was bothering her? Unless it was Jeff that was the problem.

Ian felt an all too familiar wave of protectiveness crash over him. Mandy was his best friend. And he wouldn't let anything happen to her. He'd forgotten that fact for a minute. But it was still the truth.

Fuck Brian and his holier than thou bullshit.
Mandy needed him.
He dialed her number.

"Ian?" Mandy picked up immediately.

"Hey Mands, sorry I've been MIA. Brian..."

"I don't want to hear word one about that prick, Ian. Don't test me." Mandy spat.

"Whoah, okay. Sorry." Ian muttered, his face going hot instantly.

"Don't apologize to me, Ian, you did nothing wrong. That's the problem." she sighed. "That's not
why I called, anyway. I need your help."

"Anything, Mands, you know that. Always." Ian said without hesitation. He knew he missed her, but he didn't really understand how much until he could hear her voice on the other end of the line. His heart ached with how much he missed his friend.

"I'm leaving Jeff. We're separating." she started. Ian gasped. He knew the dude was a dumb ass, but he seemed harmless, and Mandy had seemed so happy the last time he saw her. When was that? Five months ago? Just after he started seeing Brian. How could it have all gone to shit so fast?

Well, Ian knew the answer to that, didn't he? His own relationship wasn't winning any awards, either.

"What happened?" because what else was there to ask?

"He's been cheating. I won't do that again, Ian, I just won't. I'm better than that now. I don't have to settle for that shit. I deserve better."

Ian smiled. He was so happy to hear Mandy talk about herself that way. He always knew she deserved the world, but she had never agreed. He was angry at Jeff for screwing her over, but he was pleased to see her standing up for herself.

"How long has the affair been going on? Do you know who he's cheating with? Where are you gonna go?" Ian rattled off questions in rapid succession.

Mandy met Jeff while she was still escorting. Ian told her that it was probably not a good idea to get involved with a client like that. But Jeff seemed like a good enough guy. He was a union plumber, made good money. He was good looking, smart, had no real vices, besides call girls, obviously. He didn't raise his voice or get violent. He was a catch, as far as both Mandy and Ian could see.

Except he couldn't keep it in his pants to save his life. He was always cheating. Girls on tinder, hookers, chicks from bars, the grocery store, anywhere really.

Mandy always tells Ian she should have known, meeting him through the service, he'd be a pussy hound. But she thought if he bothered to propose, he was done with that part of his life. Not so much.

But besides that one glaring flaw, he was perfect. So good to Mandy, that she overlooked it for years.

Looks like this time is different.

Mandy sighed, her breath catching. Ian wondered if she was going to cry. She huffed out a rough breath. "It's a girl he works with. An apprentice plumber. She's fucking twenty years old. And she's pregnant. Says it's his, I really don't know."

"Are you fucking kidding me? Pregnant?" Ian was floored. He didn't think Jeff would be so stupid.

"Yeah, three months along. He denies it's his, of course. Can you believe that shit?" Mandy sniffed. She was close to tears now.

"Fuck."

"Yeah, fuck is right." she laughed, humorless. Bleak.
"So, you're going to leave him? How can I help?" Ian found himself offering without hesitation. He would do anything for Mandy, even after all this time.

"I'm not sure what I'm going to do yet, I need to talk to my lawyer, and ... uh, my family." Mandy hedged.

"Have you talked to him?" Ian asked. He never asked, but it seemed like Mandy could use her brother right now. Mickey and Mandy had been the closest out of all the Milkovich siblings. Ian knew it would kill Mickey that he couldn't be there to kick Jeff's ass himself.

"Uh, no, not lately." Mandy answered, too vague for Ian's liking.

"Is he okay?" Ian couldn't help but ask.

"Yes, Ian. He's fine god damn it. Can we talk about my damn marriage now, please?" Mandy barked. Ian could hear the desperation in her voice.

And just like that the subject was dropped.

"Tell me what I can do." Ian said. He looked at the clock. He was going to be late for work. He grabbed his coat and wallet, and opened the front door. Out in the hallway, he locked the loft and headed for the elevator.

"Can you meet me for coffee this afternoon? I want to go over my options."

"Of course, name the place."

Just like that, he was pulled back into the madness of the Milkovichs.

He had to admit, it felt oddly like home.

It was a rough day for Ian, to say the least. He had a domestic in which a woman stabbed her girlfriend in the calf, an toddler that ate some of those laundry pods, an elderly man who had a heart attack, and two twelve year olds with alcohol poisoning. And to top it all off, Brian kept texting him stupid shit. Telling him to pick up his dry cleaning, and to swing by GNC and get him some supplements, like Ian was his god damn personal assistant and not his boyfriend.

Ian was wiped out. Standing in front of his locker, changing out of his uniform into his street clothes. He was going straight to the coffee shop to meet Mandy, and he didn't want to go covered in puke and blood.

"Gallagher, you don't look so hot, you sleeping enough?" Sue, his supervisor asked, sliding up next to his locker.

"Yeah, Sue, I'm good. I, uh, got some issues at home." no use lying, Sue was like a damn detective. She'd beat it out of him if she had to.

"Things not going well with Brian?" She asked, folding her arms across her chest.

"I actually don't know. It's been a little tense at home lately, but that's not what has me stressed. My friend called me last night and told me she's separating from her husband. I feel like I haven't been there for her lately, and now I'm feeling shitty." He said, pulling his t shirt over his head.

"Ian, you're a good guy, and just the fact that you're worried about being a good friend makes you a good friend." Sue smiled. Ian didn't know if he agreed with her. He felt like a pretty shitty friend.
Ian sighed. He knew it wasn't him. He just didn't know how to fix it.

"I'm working on it, Sue. He's not a bad guy, he's just not super social." Ian lied. Brian went out all the time. Just with his own friends, doing what he liked to do. He never made an effort to meet any of Ian's friends or coworkers.

"It's fine, Gallagher, we just miss you at the Friday night poker game is all. We miss raking your Irish ass over the coals, taking all your money." she laughed, and ruffled his red hair.

Ian swatted her hand away, making his way toward the door. "I'll see if I can make it this week." he called over his shoulder.

"Sure thing, Gallagher, I'll just hold my breath." Sue called back as he walked out onto the street.

He missed hanging out with Sue and the guys. Maybe he'd make an appearance Friday night.

Probably not.

The coffee shop was only a few blocks from the station house, and Ian made it there in about fifteen minutes. The spring air felt good on his face, after such a chaotic day in the back of an ambulance. He looks into the window and sees Mandy sitting in a table near the front.

She looks beautiful. Ian's whole face lights up just seeing her.

He makes his way inside, going up to the counter to order a latte. The server takes his money as another worker makes his coffee. He thanks them and walks over to Mandy.

She stands up and he wraps her in his arms, crushing her to his chest.

"I missed you, you fucking prick." her words are muffled by his body. He can feel her relax under his touch. He drops a kiss on the top of her head and lets her go. They sit opposite each other at the small table.

She looked just like Mandy has always looked, except more grow up, more polished. He black hair pulled into a messy bun on the top of her head, minimal make up. She was dressed in a loose grey top over dark skinny jeans. Her strappy heels had her almost eye to eye with Ian.

"I missed you too, Mands, so much. I'm so sorry I wasn't there for you through all this shit." Ian said sincerely.

"I wasn't there for you either, Ian. I know things with your boyfriend aren't all hunky dory. I can tell. You forget how well I know you."

"We're not here to talk about Brian, Mands. What are you going to do about Jeff?" Ian asked, blowing on his latte to cool it down.

"I'm moving back to Trumbull." she said, sipping her own coffee.

"You're going home? I didn't expect that." Ian said. Honestly, that's the last thing he thought she'd do.

"Yeah, well, Terry's dead, that fucker. And it's just Iggy there now, with his girlfriend Tess. I like
her. And since I've got that new job, I don't need to worry about money anymore. I can help them with utilities, but the house is paid off. I can save money and get my own place later." she reasoned.

Ian could admit, it made sense.
Ian remembered the day Mandy called him to say that Terry had died. Heart attack. Ian wasn't so sure the prick had a heart at all. But he had to admit, he was relieved when he heard he bit it, knowing that Mandy and especially Mickey were finally safe. For the first time in their lives, they didn't have to be afraid of him.

"How's work?" he asked. He knew Mandy got a new job shortly after marrying Jeff, but he didn't know much about it.

"Work's good. If you had told me when we were in high school I'd be working in an office, I would have punched you. But I like it."

Mandy had been talked into taking some office assistance courses at night school by the manager of her escort service. He had had this bright idea to have his call girls do his books. It had actually backfired when Mandy and three other girls left the service to get office jobs after they had gotten their certificates.

Ian had to admit, he was happy when he heard she had gotten out of that shit. He never liked the idea of Mandy selling her body.

He was proud of her.

"I know it seems fucked up right now, Mands, but you're going to get through this, and shit is going to get better. Fuck that asshole." Ian reached over and put his hand over hers. She grasped his hand over hers, their fingers locked together.

"I missed you, dickhead, don't leave me again, okay? We need each other." she smiled.

"Promise, Mands, never again." and he really felt like he meant it for once.

"So, you're going to help me move out of the apartment this weekend." she decided, letting go of his hands to pick up her coffee.

"You know I wouldn't want to be anywhere else."

And he meant it. He felt more at home in Mandy's company than he had in a very long time.
Loose ends need tying up

Chapter Summary

Mickey gets his affairs in order, and prepares himself to face his past.

Chapter Notes

this one's shorter, just a way station between plot points

ps: mick & ian may both be a bit ooc in this fic. they've both been through a lot, and that changes a person.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Mickey got in contact with the new DA, Marcus Davis, a few days after he talked to Mandy. He was apologetic and seemed genuine. He wanted Mickey to return to the US in Texas, turn himself in to the Marshalls there, who would transport him back up to Illinois, where he would unfortunately have to go back to jail while the court issues were worked out. But he assured Mickey that is was just a formality, seeing how his entire case had been corrupted, based on Sammi’s perjured testimony, and the inappropriate behavior between the DA and the judge. He advised Mickey to get his own lawyer, and gave him the names of some attorneys he knew that were willing to take the case pro bono. Mickey had a feeling he was being so nice, doing all this, to stave off Mickey's potential lawsuit over his wrongful conviction.

Mickey didn't know if he even wanted to bother with suing. He just wanted to put all this bullshit behind him, and go back to living his life, whatever that meant anymore.

So he went down to the bus station with Lauren and got a ticket for that Saturday. It was all happening so fast. This time next week, he'd be back in Chicago, back in prison.

He sighed.

He was now sitting at the dinner table with Javier, Lauren, and Javier's family. His mother, Maria, insisted on one last dinner together, the whole family, as she put it. Mickey looked around, wondering how the hell he got so lucky here. He had come to Mexico broken and destitute, and by sheer luck ran into all this.

Lauren was one of the best people he'd ever met.

Javier was kind and genuine, and so good to Mickey. And his family, well, his uncle had helped Mickey immensely when he first arrive in Puerta Vallarta. He had gotten Mickey's new identity for him, and didn't even charge him. Let him work it off at the bar. No one had ever done anything like that for him before, he had been floored. Good things just didn't happen to Mickey.

But Javier's family had shown Mickey that selfless, genuine people exist in the world, doing good just because it's the right thing to do. It made Mickey want to be a better person.

Maria had taken Mickey under her wing right away, cooking him elaborate meals, knitting him damn sweaters, she even came by the bungalow when he'd caught the flu, and nursed him for days on end.
Mickey had never felt so cared for in all his life.

He was going to miss these people.
Mexico had turned out a lot different that Mickey had anticipated, but he wouldn't change it for anything for the world.

The table was spread out with a huge array of dishes. Maria had gone all out for Mickey's farewell dinner. He was stuffing his face, engaging in light conversation, when Javier's uncle Mateo clinked his wine glass with his fork, grabbing everyone's attention.

"Well, we all know why we are gathered here tonight, to bid farewell to nuestro querido amigo, Mikhalio." he nodded in Mickey's direction, causing him a blush to break out across his face. "We wish you la mejor de las suertes back in the states, may all your troubles be sorted. And we all sincerely hope you come back to see us from time to time. Familia por siempre. Salud!"

"Salud!" echoed around the table. Mickey flushed even hotter. He was still uncomfortable with all this kindness.

They finished their dinner and Mickey said his thanks and farewells to Javier's family, promising to keep in touch once he was free of all his legal bullshit.

Once they got back to their bungalow, Lauren and Javier helped Mickey pack the last of his belongings in cardboard boxes, which Lauren would ship to Chicago under Mandy's name, for when Mickey was released from custody.

With the last of the packing done, the three friends sat around the living room, reminiscing about their time together.

Lauren in Mickey's boxers again, and a barely there tank top, her short hair pushed behind her ears. Javier and Mickey sat on the floor by the mattress, in only their boxers, as it was way too hot for any kind of shirt. It was like any other night they shared together. It was bittersweet, but Mickey was excited to get back to the states and finally put all this running behind him.

"Do you remember the first time we all got drunk together?" Lauren asked, sipping on her rum and coke.

"Of course I do." Mickey laughed, sipping on his own drink, working on a good buzz already from all the wine at dinner. "We were at that bar, right after I moved in. You and Javier were doing karaoke, Meatloaf if I remember correctly, and I was like 'what the fuck have I gotten myself into with these two?" Mickey laughed as Javier swatted at him halfheartedly.

"You knew you were one lucky motherfucker to land two amazing friends like us, prick." he laughed.

"You're damn right. Lucky fucker indeed." Mickey said, smiling. He never had an easy time making friends. He felt like he hit the jackpot stumbling across these two. "Gonna miss you guys."

Lauren leaned over and put her head on Mickey's shoulder, sighing. "Miss you already, and you're sitting right here." she whispered.

"Come on, I'm not dying." he put his arm around her shoulder, pulling her close.

They stayed up for a few more hours, just soaking each other up, until Lauren stood up, stretching. "Okay guys, we gotta get some sleep if we're gonna get to the bus station by 9." she leaned down and planted a soft kiss on both their heads before turning around and going into the bedroom. "Good night, love you." she called over her shoulder.
"Love you." the men called back in unison.

Silence fell on them as Javier got up to turn the light off. The both got under the sheet of the mattress, falling together out of habit.

Javier pulled Mickey closer to him, pressing soft kisses to his neck and face. "Want you to be gentle with me tonight. Give me something sweet to remember you by until we meet again."

If this was Mickey back in his teen years, he probably would have popped Javier in the mouth for talking to him like that. But Mickey had seen and done a lot since he was that scared little boy back in Chicago, and one thing he learned over the years was that a little tenderness every once in a while could be a good thing.

Mickey and Javier had an easy, casual sexual relationship. No real commitment, no real stress. They just did whatever felt right in the moment, and tonight, on their last night together, Javier wanted to get fucked. Mickey was cool with that.

Javier continued to pepper Mickey's exposed skin with kisses, gentle and soft. Mickey found the lube bottle where they had left it the last time, next to the mattress, under an end table cluttered with random things. Mickey reached out for it blindly, wrapping his fingers around the bottle while Javier continued to lick and kiss at his neck.

Mickey rolled them over, so he was hovering over Javier spread out beneath him.

'Gorgeous' Mickey thinks to himself as he runs a tattooed hand down Javier's chest, along his hip, to grab at his thigh. Javier moaned quietly, moving up to beg for a kiss. Mickey obliges. The kiss is passionate and needy, Javier making small pained noises in the back of his throat as Mickey sits back a bit to coat some fingers on his left hand with lube. He drops the bottle back to the floor and returns to his position above Javier. He smiles down at him, softly. Mickey wonders when he got so damn soft, but he doesn't care in this moment.

He circles a finger around Javier's opening, earning himself a breathy sigh from the other man. Mickey smirks, he knows how to get Javier going.

"You like that, when I tease you, Javi?" Mickey laughs. His own erection was pulsating, begging for attention, but he let it be for the moment, intent on only giving his partner pleasure.

"Sabes que lo hago, nena. mucho calor." Javier bit out, arching his back as Mickey slipped a slicked up digit into his waiting hole.

"So tight. Fuck." Mickey mumbled, pumping his finger in and out. He began a steady pace, fingering him open in anticipation for his cock. He rocked his hand back and forth, feeling the tight muscle clench around his fingers.

"Ah, Mickey." Javier screamed out as Mickey brushed against his prostate. Mickey added a second finger, twisting his wrist back and forth, trying to replicate that reaction. Javier shuddered under Mickey's skilled hand, his erection standing proud against his tanned stomach. "Por favor, mi querida." he moaned out.

"Shh." Mickey hushed him "I got you, I got you." He prepped him for a few more minutes then he pulled his fingers out and settled above him properly. He took his own hard cock in his hand, jerking it a few times before lining it up with Javier's waiting hole. He pushed forward in one fluid motion, filling Javier to the hilt instantly. Javier let out a huffed breath, going rigid below Mickey.

"You good?" Mickey asked, stilling his motion immediately.
"Sí, nena, sigue así..." Javier said, pulling Mickey down to kiss him passionately.

Mickey took that as his cue to start rocking into Javier's tight heat. Mickey felt like his skin was on fire. Javier was radiating heat, everywhere Mickey touched was burning him. His hip, his chest, his spread thighs. He was like a supernova, burning bright just before imploding.

Mickey curled his hands around the top of the mattress, elbows on either side of Javier's face, as his bed mate wrapped his legs around his lower back, urging him deeper with every thrust.

"Oh Dios mío, Mickey, Mickey..." Javier cried out, his back arching on a particularly deep thrust.

Mickey laughed a little, burying his face in Javier's neck as he pulsed inside him, one hand coming down to rest on his burning hot hip. His thrusts were shallow. He could feel Javier's body reacting to every slight roll of his hips.

After a few moments the passion between them became too much for Mickey to bear, and he started picking up his pace. Pulling almost all the way out and slamming back in with all the force he could muster. He was sweating and his hair was sticking to his forehead but he didn't fucking care. All he cared about was the hot stretch around his cock and the sweet sting of nails scraping down his back.

They weren't quiet this time, no need to be, and the bungalow was filled with the wet sounds of sex and Javier's pleasured cries, punctuated occasionally by Mickey's harsh grunts and breathy sighs.

"Estoy cerca, tan cerca." Javier grunted, reaching down between them to grab at his neglected cock. Mickey chuckled, batting his hand away to wrap his own fist around it instead.

"Well go on then, ven por mí..." Mickey whispered, mouth pressed against Javier's ear. He pumped his dick in time with his own thrusts until Javier cried out, clawing at Mickey's back and spilling into the small space between their bodies. Mickey removed his hand, putting it back up by Javier's head, and resumed his hard pace, slamming into him a few more times before coming hard, stifling his own moans in the soft skin of Javier's neck.

He pulled out and rolled over, resting his head on his bent arm, looking over at Javier's blissed out, sweaty face. "What?" he laughed, as Javier just stared at him with open adoration.

"You know how much it turns me on when you speak spanish to me, Mick. Always gets me." Javier laughed, rolling on his side to rest his head on Mickey's chest. Mickey reciprocated immediately, putting his arm around the other man's shoulder, letting him curl up into his side.

They didn't talk after that, didn't really need to. There was nothing to say that hadn't already been said. They fell asleep like that. Like they had done countless times over the past few years. Mickey was hit with the sickening feeling, just as unconsciousness claimed him...

This was the last of his life here. Everything he had built was disappearing. He was going out into the unknown again. Alone again.

He really didn't think he'd ever have this chance. He was going to take it, no question there. The only real question was would it be worth it? All the things he was giving up. All the work he had done, with his life, with himself. Was it all for nothing? To go back to Chicago and try to start over, yet again? Be pulled back to that place that had suffocated him for so long? Would he go back to being that guy again? Closed off and guarded?

No fucking way. That shit was done.

Maybe he'd come back to Mexico, after all his shit was sorted, and maybe he could finally put all that
old shit behind him, and really, really make a life. A life for himself and no one else. A slow lazy smile spread across his face as he finally succumbed to sleep. Fuck being scared, he wasn't that guy anymore. He'd face whatever was coming, and he'd make a life for himself, no matter what. He didn't come this far to give up now.

Early the next morning, after Lauren had borrowed a jeep from a guy they worked with, the three of them had driven down to the bus station, so Mickey could make the 18 hour bus ride to San Antonio, where was being met by federal marshals to take him back to Chicago. He was really starting to feel the gravity of the situation, standing outside the jeep, watching people board the bus in front of him. He was going home, going back to jail, for however long, and he was going back to a life he had tried to leave behind. People he didn't know anymore. Hell, even Mandy was more or less a stranger now. He didn't know how he was going to do this.

"You're going to be fine, hun." Lauren said, like she was reading his damn mind. "You're going to sort your shit out, and you are going to be free for the first time in forever, am I right?"

Mickey nodded dumbly, looking down at his tattooed hands, gripping his duffel bag.

"And no matter what, we are here for you, always will be." Javier added, draping his arm around Lauren's shoulder. She leaned into him, her eyes welling up with unshed tears.

"Hey, hey, none of that bullshit. I told you already, I'm not dying. I'll call you all the time. And after this is all over, I'll come back and see you guys. I may not even stay in Chicago. Place don't have nothing for me anymore." Mickey said, dropping his bag to the ground and pulling them both into a tight embrace, wrapping an arm around each of them. The three friends stood there holding each other, trying to soak up the feeling for as long as possible.

All too soon Mickey had to pull away. He picked his bag up off the ground, pulled Lauren into a quick hug as she planted a wet kiss on his cheek. He the turned to Javier. Javier pulled him into a bone crushing hug.

"Te veo pronto, cariño." Javier whispered against his cheek.

"Lo prometo." Mickey replied, pulling Javier down into a kiss. Javier sighed into his open mouth, as Mickey ran his tongue over his bottom lip. Javier wrapped his arms tighter around Mickey's waist, carding a hand through his dark hair. The kissed passionately for a short moment, tongues dancing together lazily, in an old practiced rhythm they had mastered long ago. Mickey finally pulled away, albeit reluctantly. He planted one last quick kiss to Javier's frowning mouth, and took a step back.

"Os quiero a ambos." Mickey called, walking backwards toward the waiting bus.

The both just nodded and waved, too overcome by emotion to reply. Javier and Lauren were holding onto each other so tight. It was like they were watching Mickey ship off to war instead of going home.

Mickey could understand that. He felt a little like he was going into battle himself.

He boarded the bus, making his way to the back. There were only a handful of other people on the bus, so Mickey had his choice of seats. He settled in the second to back row, by a window. Close to the bathroom, but not too close. He could do this for 17 hours. He took out the ipod Javier had gotten him for his birthday, and a copy of a Jason Bourne book Lauren had turned him onto (sick ass assassin motherfucker, Mickey couldn't get enough) and settled in for the long ride.
Just as the bus roared to life, and started making it's way back to the states, Mickey took out his phone to shoot off a text.

me: on my way back now. i'll call you when i know what's up. remember, don't tell anyone. seriously.

The reply came almost instantly.

miss bitch: i won't tell anyone. can't wait to see your stupid ass. i owe you a beating for skipping out on me xoxo

Mickey smiled. If nothing else, he was looking forward to seeing his sister. He was a little bit frustrated that he hadn't been there for her when shit hit the fan with her asshat of a husband. Mickey had warned her when she told him about her impending nuptials, that a guy like Jeff will never settle down with one woman. He was a straight up pussy hound, no girl to ugly or unavailable. He was a total an utter man-whore, and the first thing Mickey was going to do when he was clear of his case, was kick the ever loving fuck out of that douche. He smiled to himself, burrowing down into his seat and picking up his book.

Maybe there were some good points of going back to Chicago.....

Chapter End Notes

thank you so much to everyone reading, commenting & leaving kudos. i always say i write for myself, but it feels good to share it with you all.

my spanish is courtesy of google, so don't believe everything you read....

"nuestro querido amigo" - our dear friend

"la mejor de las suertes" - best of luck

"Familia por siempre. Salud!" - family forever,cheers

"Sabes que lo hago, nena. mucho calor." - you know i do, baby. so hot.

"Por favor, mi querida." - please, my darling.

"Sí, nena, sigue así." - yes, baby, keep going.

"Estoy cerca, tan cerca." - i'm close, so close.

"ven por mí." - come for me.

"Te veo pronto, cariño." - see you soon, baby.
"Lo prometo." - i promise

"Os quiero a ambos." - i love you both
Drunken epiphanies and other hard life lessons

Chapter Summary

Mickey reminisces about his time in Mexico, while making the long trip home alone.

Chapter Notes

just a peak into Mick's life in Mexico. i think it's important to see how he became the man he is now.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Watching the world pass him by out the window of the bus, in some strange head space, stuck between sleep and wakefulness, Mickey finds himself adrift in a sea of memories. The past three years of his life flashing before his eyes like in the movies when someone is dying.

He remembers the first time he knows for sure he's not alone anymore...

*********************************************************

Micky’s only been in Mexico for a handful of months when his 23rd birthday rolls around. He is getting to know his unlikely roommates, which is harder than it probably should be. Mickey's never had an real friends, and he has a hard time believing anyone would willingly be nice to him. He still can't really wrap his head around how Lauren and Javier just invited him into their lives, like he belonged there all along. He was wary, and his go-to belligerence kept wanting to creep up and tell them to fuck off already, he wasn't worth the trouble.

But he was trying desperately to shed his old skin, that rude, brash, violent man he was back in Chicago. Being that way suited him for a time, but it stopped working long before he got locked up. He didn't want to be that guy anymore. So he was slowly teaching himself to let people in, let them do nice things for him, do nice things in return. It was a work in progress, but he was fucking trying.

And that is how he found himself in a karaoke bar of all places, with his new roommates (friends?) two days after his birthday. Lauren's birthday happens to be six days after his, although she's a few years older than him, Iggy's age. He'd probably love her, Mickey muses to himself as he sips his beer.

Javier takes a seat next to Mickey and they both watch Lauren dancing in the center of the room with a British tourist she met on the beach earlier in the day.

"Birthday sex?" Javier asks.

"You offering? Or are you talking about Lauren and that brit over there?" Mickey laughs.

Javier has been flirting with Mickey for the past week or so. Mickey didn't see it, but Lauren pointed it out one day at work, now it's all Mickey sees. Javier is hot. Tall, muscular, with caramel colored
skin and eyes that look almost black. Mickey would be interested if he weren't still all fucked up over Ian. Maybe it's time to let that shit go, he's never going to see Gallagher ever again. What the fuck is he holding on to??

"I was talking about our girl, but you've got me intrigued now." Javier smirks, pushing on Mickey's shoulder. Mickey knows he won't sleep with Javier tonight, but there's no pressure from the other man, and the idea of doing it someday doesn't make Mickey sick like it did when he first got to Mexico. Moving on doesn't scare him so much now.

"One of you get up here and do karaoke with me? I already signed up for a duet."

Mickey groans and guzzles the rest of his beer. "No fucking way, L. You are out of your god damned lesbo mind if you think I'm getting up there and singing with you. Javier, you do it." Mickey goes around the table to head for the bar. He needs to be drunker.

"Come on Mick," Lauren grabs his elbow. "It's our birthday, not Javier's."

"I don't sing, L, and certainly not in front of a bunch of assholes I don't know." Mickey goes to move again, but she steps in front of him.

"Mickey," she puts a hand on his chest. "I have never had a happy birthday. Ever. It's always been shit. But we're here now, and I stumbled upon this beautiful place, and ran into these beautiful people, and I want to fucking celebrate. Please."

And she's so sincere it actually makes Mickey's heart ache a bit. He understands what she means. He's never had a good birthday either. No one had ever done shit for him. Not even his sister. Not even Ian. Last year, when he was in jail was probably the closest thing to a good one. With Jack, and his cornbread cake. It's pretty sad actually.

"Fuck it." he decides suddenly. "Pick a song, L, whatever you want."

She beams at him. Looks at him like he's done something wonderful. It feels nice, even if he doesn't want to admit it. She runs back up to the stage to whisper in the DJ's ear.

"You are a good guy, Mick." Javier says, sidling up next to him and draping an arm over his shoulder. Mickey tenses for a fraction of a second, before relaxing into the contact. He's got nothing to be scared of out here.

If Javier notices, he doesn't mention it. Mickey's grateful for that.

That's how Mickey ends up singing "Paradise by the Dashboard Lights." with Lauren in a shitty dive bar in Mexico. How he knows the lyrics he'll never tell a soul. (he used to listen to his mom sing it while she would cook him dinner, just him and his mother. Mandy was a baby, and his older brothers were never home. Terry most likely in jail.) How Lauren ended up choosing such a nostalgic song for them had to be the craziest case of serendipity.

The disco lights are spinning around them, Mickey on one knee, holding Lauren's hand, belting out meatloaf off key and too loud. "Let me sleep on it, baby baby, let me sleep on it. Let me sleep on it, I'll give you an answer in the morning." he's drunker than he thought he was....

Lauren rips her hand away, and spins on the spot "I gotta know RIGHT NOW!!" and she goes on and on. All Mickey's nerves from being on stage disappear watching Lauren face split into a smile so wide it looks painful. He did that for her. He feels amazing. They dance together singing the rest of the song, and at the end they take an exaggerated stage bow. The room erupts into chaotic cheers and screaming. Mickey can't deny the fact that he feels a little extra gay in the moment.
But he doesn't fucking care.

He actually had a lot of fun. His definition of fun had changed a lot since he got to Mexico.

Later that night was the first night of many the three of them passed out on the mattress in the living room together. Mickey in the middle of a strange lump of people. Lauren's head on his shoulder, and Javier's arm secured around his middle. He was a little tense at first, not use to so much human contact. But he settled into it, because it felt nice. It felt good to be cocooned in this warm bubble, surrounded by people that really seemed to care for him.

And he cared for them. He believed them when they said they wouldn't bail on him. And he wanted to be that for them too. Someone to count on. He didn't want to lose this feeling of belonging. Not this time. Not again. His breathing evened out as he fell into unconsciousness. A floaty feeling he wasn't used to swirling in his gut.

Safety.

Kinship.

Happiness.

That was a good night. Mickey was lost in his memories so long, he almost missed the bus's break for lunch. He scrambled off the bus and into a road side cantina with the other passengers. As he's wolfing down his burrito, a Federale drives by in his souped up jeep, another memory accosts him. The first time he really felt safe after his escape.....

Mickey didn't want to drive the damn car in the first place. But he was soft now, and he couldn't stand the look in Lauren's eyes when he said no to her, so he had to go.

Javier had gone out of town for the weekend with some dude he met at the hotel they all worked at. Some rich prick from Germany who spoke broken english, and not a word of spanish. He was backpacking through South America when Javier came across him drinking a Tom Collins alone. Javier had told Mickey and Lauren it was love at first sight. Soulmates.

Mickey tried very hard not to scoff in his face. He almost succeeded. But Javier had taken off with him anyway.

It had inevitably ended badly, when Mr. Right turned a complete asshole. Drugs and threesomes with other men, stealing Javier's credit card and racking up five grand in champagne alone.

Javier had begged Lauren to come get him, tearfully reprimanding himself for being an idiot.

But Lauren had to work, so the task fell to Mickey. He didn't want to drive 3 hours to San Blas to pick up his friend. But there was no way in hell he would leave him hanging. Mickey wasn't that guy anymore.

He saw him standing on the side of the road, his backpack slung over his shoulder, a hand up to shield the setting sun from his eyes. He smiled when he saw Lauren's jeep pull up, but his smile faltered for a second when he saw Mickey was driving.
"Hey Mick, where's Lauren?" he asked, pulling open the passenger side door and sliding in.

"Work, you're stuck with me." Mickey replied, turning the radio down.

"Stuck nothing, I'm glad to see you. Just feel like an idiot, don't want you to think I'm stupid."

"Don't think that."

"You told me not to go. You could see right through David. I was too stupid to see it, to stubborn to listen."

"Shut it." Mickey snapped, though he wasn't mad. "You can't help the way you act when that feeling comes over you. And sometimes you just have to take the chance. Sometimes it works out, sometimes your heart gets stomped on. You just have to ask yourself if love is worth the risk. Kiss a few frogs, and all that horseshit."

"Well, I'll be damned, Michael Popov, secret romantic." Javier mused, using Mickey's alias always makes him smile.

Mickey laughs at that too. It's a bit ridiculous. He's not had a real reason to use it yet, but it was a running joke between the two.

They were zipping down the highway as night fell, getting closer to home with each passing moment. The air was cool, and the company was nice.

Mickey couldn't complain.

That is until flashing lights suddenly appear in the rear-view mirror.

"Shit, shit, fuck." Mickey stutters. He considers making a run for it for a minute. He could outrun the cops, he was sure of it.

But he didn't want to be that guy anymore. That's what it kept coming back to. He never should have run in the first place. He should have stayed and fought. So, if he got caught now, maybe he deserved it.

So, he pulled over. Guess it was time to put his new ID to the test.

Javier was silent in the passenger seat. Mickey shut the radio off, and rolled his window all the way down. He wasn't sweaty or panicking, like he thought he would be. He was calm, resigned. If this was it, he wasn't going to make it harder. Especially with Javier sitting there. He didn't want to get him in trouble. He cared about him.

That was a new feeling. He didn't hate it.

The cop walked up to the window.

"Good evening, gentlemen." he said in accented english. Maybe because Mickey was white, he wasn't sure.

"Good evening, officer." Mickey replied, handing him his fake documents. "Did I do something wrong?"

"You have a tail light out, Mr. Popov." the cop said. Mickey nodded mutely. Damn it, Lauren.

"Sorry about that officer. We'll get it fixed right away." Mickey replied, wondering if he should try
bribing him. This is the first time his fake ID is being put to the test, and he's suddenly sweating bullets.

"It happens, as long as you get it fixed as soon as possible. Tell me, Mr. Popov, how long have you been in country?" the cop asks, handing Mickey his documents back.

"Six months, sir. I am glad I came, beautiful country, if I may say." he was laying it on thick.

"Indeed it is. You plan on staying? Your visa is only for a year." the cop asks, settling his hand on the door frame, peering into the car at Javier.

"I know sir, I'm staying with my friend here, may try for permanent citizenship." Mickey was rambling now, trying to appease the cop, answering his inane questions as vaguely as possible, without sounding too evasive.

"Sounds good, son." the cop said, handing Mickey a citation. "Get this paid as soon as possible. And don't overstay your visa. We don't like that down here any more than your people like it up north, you hear me?"

"Yes sir." Mickey replied, taking the ticket and handing it to Javier.

"Okay then, have a good evening, Mr. Popov." and the cop walked away.

Mickey let out a breath he'd been holding for the duration of the incident. He felt dizzy, tingly all over.

His ID worked. His documents passed the test. He was well and truly Michael Popov now. No one was looking for him. He was safe.

"You did amazing, Mickey." Javier spoke for the first time since they'd been pulled over.

"All I did was not mouth off." Mickey laughed.

"Well, for you....."

"Don't finish that shit." Mickey interjected. "Or I'll leave your ass on the side of the road."

Javier laughed, and Mickey joined him.

They made it home an hour later, obeying the speed limit the whole way.

******************************************************************************

The federale passed where Mickey was sitting at a picnic table, drinking a beer. He wasn't even scared of the cops anymore. It took a long time to get used to the feeling of not being afraid of arrest. It was still in there somewhere, but with his new ID and his law abiding lifestyle, his anxiety had waned over the past few years. It was a relief to not always be looking over his shoulder.

Of course, once he got home, and wasn't a fugitive anymore, Michael Popov would cease to exist. He'd just be Mickey again. Whatever that meant.

Mickey took out a cigarette and put it to his lips. He lit it, breathing in deeply. Tipping his head back to stare at the puffy clouds above his head, he let out the smoke slowly, watching it dissipate into the air above him. He was tired again. Maybe he'd catch a nap on the bus. He heaves himself off the bench and makes his way back to the bus. Settling in his seat he lays his head on the window, content to wait out the rest of the pit stop right here.
He's feeling groggy, just on the cusp of falling asleep, feeling weightless and far away, when he's jolted back to reality by screaming outside the still parked bus. A Mexican man is yelling at a small child, his son, most likely. He's red faced and screaming at the boy, grabbing his arm roughly and shaking him about. The child, no more than eight years old, has tears streaming down his dirty face. Mickey winces, looks away quickly. He knows what that kid's going through. He feels his pain as he felt his own.

That's another thing that has drastically changed for Mickey in the past three years.

Fucking Terry. Fucking dead. The prick.

Mickey had never been so ecstatic about a death in all his life. He buzzed with happiness over it. Mickey was sure that shit wasn't healthy, but he gave no fucks at all. It had felt like a thousand pound stone had been lifted off his chest. He remembers the day in vivid detail, like a dream you just can't shake....
He's been storming around the living room buck-ass naked.

He feels a hot blush creep across his chest as he bends down and scoops up his underwear, cradling the phone between his head and shoulder while he throws them on.

Javier sits up and wraps the bed sheet around his naked body, curious as to what's happening with Mickey's sister. Mickey eyes him for a moment, before turning his attention back to his sister.

"Spit it out, Mands, you're freaking me the fuck out." Mickey puffs on his cigarette, making his way over to the fridge for a beer. He raises a questioning eyebrow at Javier, motioning with his head toward the fridge. Javier gives him a thumbs up. Mickey grabs two beers and makes his way back to the bed, waiting Mandy out. He hears her let out a harsh sigh.

"It's Terry." she says. She says his name like it's poison. Like it hurts her just to utter the word.

"What about him?" Mickey asks. He couldn't give less of a fuck about anything Terry's gotten himself into. Unless he somehow hurt Mandy again, nothing he could do could get to Mickey anymore. He was immune to that prick now. Inoculated in the worst way. Nothing he could ever do could be worse than the shit he pulled that day.....

'NONONONO, do not go there.' Mickey shakes his head to rid himself of the memory. Not today.

"He's fucking dead, Mick." she says, sounding tired.

Mickey almost drops the beers. Javier jumps over to him at the last minute and grabs them both from him before they go crashing to the floor. Mickey stumbles to the bed, collapsing on it, grabbing the phone in one hand and running the other through his hair. He feels anxious all of the sudden. Blood rushing in his ears, his heart banging against his rib cage.

"W-what?" Mickey stutters.

"You fucking heard me, Mickey. He's dead. He had a fucking heart attack. Smoking crack. Kind of poetic, him going out like that. Alone in some rent-by-the-hour hotel, whoever he was getting high with robbed his damn corpse, Mick. Took everything. It's pretty hilarious." she let out a bitter laugh.

A wave of heat ran through Mickey's body, followed immediately by a full body shiver. He was tingling all over, and his ears were ringing. He put his hand up to his mouth, just holding it there like he may throw up.

"Holy shit." Mickey whispered. He looked over at Javier, who looked concerned.

"Terry's dead." he mumbled. Javier's face went stony instantly.

"Good." he said in a venomous voice Mickey had never heard before.

"Good." Mickey repeated numbly.

"Fucking fantastic." Mandy muttered on the line.

She gave him some more details he didn't really care about. It's not like he could do anything about it anyway, from Mexico. There would be no funeral. Terry had no friends, and he had alienated all his children.

He had ruined them, in truth.

"Donate his body to science." Mickey suggested. "I think they still pay for corpses."
"Huh, that's a good idea, Mick. I'll run it by Iggy." she says.

Mickey doesn't say anything.

"Can't believe the prick's really gone." Mandy says after a beat of silence.

"I thought that fucker was never gonna die. Thought he was gonna haunt me my whole life. Thought I'd never really get away." Mickey said lowly. Surprising Mandy and himself with his open honesty. He blames it on the surreal emotions swirling in his head.

His father was dead.

The monster of all his nightmares was no more.

The one thing he had always been terrified of was gone forever.

He was safe. Mandy was safe. Hell, even Ian was safer with Terry gone.

'Nope, don't go there. Don't you dare think about that day... don't do it.'

Mickey talks to Mandy for a few more minutes, random things going on back home, telling him a bit about what's going on in her own life at the moment. After a while, Mickey says good bye to his sister, promising to call her soon, and went back to Javier. He grabbed him around the middle and buried his head in his chest. Javier put a gentle hand up to cup the back of his head.

"Estás bien?" he muttered into Mickey's hair.

Mickey let out a breath of a laugh, squeezing tighter around Javier, pulling him down to the mattress. He kissed him softly, and gave him a wide, manic smile, before busting out laughing.

"Yeah, man." he giggled, fucking giddy on the idea of Terry being dead. "Never fucking better."

Mickey rarely ever bothered to think of Terry. He was glad the fucker was dead, and to be honest, it made going back to Chicago a little easier for him, not having to worry about running into the prick on the street. He wouldn't back down from a fight, even if he'd always lose with Terry. He just wouldn't give the asshole the satisfaction of breaking him.

But none of that shit mattered now. Fuck that dead asshole. Nobody was invincible. Terry's death proved that.

Mickey smiled.

Hours later he was settled in his seat, as comfortable as he could be on a bus at 11pm. He had a blanket spread out over his lap, his book open in the empty seat next to him. He was just staring out the window for the moment, watching the world whip by, moon shining in the distance. There wasn't much to look at, the landscape barren, cold. No trees or grass or animals. It was a wasteland. Mickey liked it.

His phone lit up with a text message.

miss bitch: how's your odyssey?

Mickey laughed. That vocabulary calendar he'd gotten her as a gag gift for Christmas was really paying off. He grabbed the phone and started typing out his reply.

me: it's arduous (look it up)
miss bitch: fuck u asswipe
miss bitch: send me your court date info. gonna b there 4 u
me: don't gotta
miss bitch: i wanna. dont b a prick
me: k i'll send it
me: only if you let me fuck up jeff
miss bitch: :('( don't mick
miss bitch: plz
me: fine. just wanna look out 4 u
miss bitch: imma big girl send the info xo
me: whatever

Mickey fired off his last text and threw the phone into the empty seat next to him. That shit with Mandy and her douche bag husband made Mickey's blood boil. He knew the minute she told him, years ago, that she was getting married that it was a bad idea.....

******************************************************************************

Mickey was laying in the sand on a blanket, listening to his ipod. System of a Down may not be everyone's choice of music to chill out to, but the grinding guitars and screaming vocals always soothed Mickey in a way nothing else could.

Lauren was laying beside him, reading as usual. Javier knee deep in the ocean, kicking up water and swinging his arms. They did this on their days off, the three of them. It was one of their favorite things to do together. Just relax on the beach. Mickey never got tired of it, never got sick of their company. This was a life he had never dreamed of, and yet it felt completely natural.

His phone vibrated on his stomach. He pushed his sunglasses up on his nose and picked up the phone, seeing his sister is calling. Hmm. She doesn't call often, something must be up. He plucks his earbuds out and puts the phone to his ear.

"Hello?"

"Hey Mick, how's life south of the border?" she asks, smile evident in her voice.

"Same as the last time you called." he replies, watching Javier dive into the ocean, and pop up a moment later shaking his wet hair out and smiling brightly. Mickey smiles back, throwing a little wave at him for the hell of it. Javier waves back, blows him a kiss. Idiot.

"Well, things are not the same for me..." she replies ambiguously.

"What? You finally got hemmed up? Arrested? You need money for a lawyer? I can Western Union you some cash."

"What? No, fuck Mick, that's an asshole thing to say." she balks.

"What? Hookers get arrested, it's a fact of life." he says back. He's not trying to be an dick, even if he wishes Mandy would get the fuck out of the shit she's in. He knows she's better than that. He just wishes she did.

"No, Mick, I didn't get arrested. I'm actually getting outta the life." she says.

That peaks his interest.
"Really? That's great Mands. What made you change your mind? I've been trying to get you to see reason for years."

"Yeah, you're the king of reason, Mick." she laughs. He chooses to ignore that.

"So tell me, what changed?"

"I met someone." she replies.

Ah, so this is where this is going....

"Oh really?"

"Yeah, I uh, met him through work....." she mumbles.

"Like a john? You have got to be kidding me. This ain't Pretty Woman, Mands, what the fuck?"

Lauren looks over at Mickey, eyebrows raised. He waves her off.

"Remenber that one guy I told you about? Jeff, the plumber?" she sounds happy. But Mickey is wary.

This Jeff dude, from what Mickey's heard form Mandy, is more than your basic john. He pays for sex, but he also pays for Mandy's time. Takes her away for weekends in New York, buys her anything she wants. He listens to her, really listens. (or so she says, Mickey wouldn't know.) She's likes him better than any of her other customers. He knows about her past, their family, and how she got into hooking to begin with. And he's cool with all of it, so there's that.

But Mickey's just not sure. He's not there to check this dude out, put the fear of god in him. He's not there to protect her like he should be.

"Uh, yeah, I remember. You guys seeing each other outside of work, and now he wants to put a ring on it?" he asks, not knowing if that's the best way to put it.

She laughs, so he guesses he didn't offend her.

"Yeah, Mick, for over a year. He's doing really well with his work, has a beautiful apartment, wants to take care of me. And I wanna let him. Is that bad?"

"Nah, Mands, if he's as good as you say he is, no red flags or whatever, I don't see why you can't have something good." Mickey wants her to be happy, he just wishes he was there to make sure she's not seeing this dude through rose colored glasses.

But he's not, so he has to trust her judgement, and hope for the best.

At least she's getting out of hooking. Look on the bright side and all that shit.

"Tell me all about this wedding I'm gonna miss...."

And she goes on for over an hour, telling her fairy tale story of love and redemption.

Looking back on it now, Mickey should have listened to his gut. Jeff was a pussy hound, always cheating. Leaving Mandy alone for weeks at a time while he was out partying with women he's not married to.

Mickey sighs, looking out the window. He's gotta get some sleep, or he'll be grumpy all day tomorrow. He closes his eyes, and thinks about all the ways he's gonna fuck up Jeff when he gets
Mickey stirs well before sunrise. The rest of the passengers are still asleep, the driver of the bus humming off key, loudly if Mickey can hear it from his seat. He shuffles around, trying to get comfortable again, pins and needles burning through his legs. He picks up his phone, seeing no missed calls from his sister, he relaxes. He knows something's going on with her, he'll just have to wait for her to tell him when he sees her.

She'll tell him. She always does.

He shuffles through some apps on his phone, bored and looking for something to do to pass the time until he's tired enough to pass back out, hopefully soon. He lands on his photo gallery. Pictures of a beautiful altar, full of marigolds in full bloom. Pictures of his life in Mexico, the one he left behind to go back to a life that gave him nothing but grief. But if he learned anything in Mexico, it's that if you let people in, they don't always disappoint you. Sometimes you get something beautiful. You let someone in, and they remind you you're not alone..

"I don't know what any of this shit means, man...." Mickey says, unsure. "Maybe I should just head back to the house and you and L can do this dead stuff. I don't really fit in."

"Fuck no, Mick, you are part of this family now. This is a tradition, and you have to be part of it." Javier is having none of it, grabbing Mickey's hand and dragging him up the front step of his parents house.

It's October 30th, day before Halloween in America. He's sure his sister is out at some bar with her shitty husband. (Mickey was right about him, go figure.) dressed up as a slutty nurse or something. But down here it's different. It's the Day of the Dead. Mickey's not really sure what all that means, except it's a day to remember people you loved that are no longer alive. Mickey can see how that would be appealing to some people. He'd rather be at home getting drunk.

"Mickey!!" Javier's mother Maria greets him warmly, wrapping his arms around him and pulling him into a tight embrace. Mickey's used to this by now, doesn't even flinch anymore.

She pulls back and smiles at him. "We have a huge feast prepared, all of your favorites."

Mickey nods his head, following her through the house, into the back yard, which is lit up with fairy lights, a huge bonfire raging in the fire pit. In the corner of the yard is a giant altar, set up on a folding table he would have used for beer pong in a past life. It is decorated with flowers. Yellow marigolds, mostly, and picture of people he doesn't know. The Dead, he supposes.

The night goes by beautifully. He's surrounded by people he's grown to love. People that love him in return. They spend the night drinking and talking about people they love that they've lost. Mickey doesn't share anything. It's too personal, even for his closest friends down here.

But he hears them talking about the altar, and he has an idea. He walks down there towards the end of the night. It's set up beautifully, like the rest of the yard. A bright orange table cloth covers it, as well as all kinds of fresh flowers. There are framed photos of all the 'beloved dead' as they are called. Open beers and sugar skulls left as offerings. Mickey thinks it's a really cool idea. He's never really mourned a loss like that. It was a sign of weakness in his family. They never even spoke about it back to Chicago.
when his mom OD'd. He had to deal with that on his own.

So he grabs one of the pieces of paper that was left out to write messages to the dead, to be burned in the fire later. He grabs a pen and writes his message down.

Later in the evening, when everyone is good and drunk, Javier's father picks up all the slips of paper, and the whole party converges around the fire. Mickey stands off to the side, his arm slung over Javier's shoulder, his hand entwined with Lauren's.

Mateo picked up all the papers and started reading the messages one by one, throwing them into the fire after they were read. Everyone toasting the memory before it was burned to ash and released to the universe.

Mickey was nervous as he waited for Mateo to get to his notes. He'd never done anything like this before, and he was starting to think it was a bad idea. He was feeling more and more stupid by the second. He had decided to ask Mateo for his notes back, it was too personal. He didn't belong here. Then Mateo spoke.

"In rememberance of Natalia Milkovich and Monica Gallagher. They weren't perfect mothers, but loved and were loved." Mateo looked at Mickey, and soon everyone in the yard was staring at him. His face flushed hot, and he hid behind his beer bottle, gulping down the liquid so fast it started dribbling down his chin.

Mateo raised his glass, "To Natalia and Monica, may their spirits dance tonight with us, and find eternal rest in heaven tomorrow. Salud!!" "Salud!!" echoes around the yard. Mickey feels Lauren squeeze his hand. Yeah, these people were good. Mickey was lucky to have found them. He was grateful. No one judged him here. He wasn't weak for missing his mother. He wasn't sick for loving another man. He was just Mickey. If he had to move to another country to find that, so be it.

Mickey smiles at the memory, remembering how it felt to really be welcomed into a family like that. He'd never had that at home. Certainly not with his family. Even Ian's family hated him. Thought he was toxic for Ian, when all he wanted to do was take care of him, love him. But it's not like he gave that impression. Didn't know how to do it. Show people his real self, soft and vulnerable, underneath that hard, dirty exterior. It was scary. He was a fucked up kid back then, and even when he tried to do right, he failed. But Mexico had made him a better man. He was going to take that shit home with him, take the best parts of them with him.

He had changed a lot while he was away. And he's certain everyone back home has changed too. But he's in a better place to accept that now. He can survive what ever comes next. He's not a scared, lonely, closeted kid anymore. He's a strong, brave, compassionate caring gay man. And he has himself, and his family down in Mexico to thank for that.

He drops his phone into his bag, fluffs his pillow and buries his head in it. He can sit here for hours and stroll down memory lane. Or not. The sun's not even up yet.
He's going back to sleep for fuck's sake.

The next morning he's a lot closer to his destination than he was when he went to sleep. He's starting to get nervous, being this close to Chicago, this close to facing the shit he left behind. The shit he ran away from.
He grabs his phone as the bus comes to a stop at a truck stop somewhere in Texas. This is it, the home stretch.

"Where are we?" he asks a lady sitting across the isle, knitting a sweater or some shit. She looks up from her work and smiles at him.

"Laredo, darling. We'll be in San Antonio in about four hours."

"Uh, thanks." he replies.

He can feel the noose tightening around his neck. Too late to turn back now. 'Man up.' he chides himself silently.

He decides to forego the truck stop. He doesn't need to piss and he has no desire for shitty food or any of the beat up hookers he can see wandering around the parking lot. Gross.

He looks at his phone instead, seeing he's missed a text from his sister.

miss bitch: ran into ian. don't worry, didn't tell him anything.

He scoffs. Knitting lady gives him the side eye over her work. He ignores her.

me: if you didn't say anything, why r u telling me u saw him?

He didn't have to wait long for the reply

miss bitch: don't u think he dsrvs to no? ur gonna c him soonr or l8r...

Mickey runs a hand through his hair. He can't wait for a fucking shower. He sighs again.

me: let's just let the chips fall where they may, k? i don't want to disrupt his life.
miss bitch: ok mick. srry, didn't mean 2 get in ur shit. i just don't think he's doing too well. thought it may cheer him up 2 no.

Mickey stifles a laugh at that. Ian is doing better without him. He doesn't want to fuck up his life again.

me: me in his life is the last thing he needs. leave it.
miss bitch: k. c u soon.
Mickey tosses his phone down again, watching the goings on around the parked bus. He lets himself think of Ian for a moment. It doesn't hurt as much as it used to. He's over him, for the most part. Mickey can remember vividly the moment he realized he'd actually let Ian go....

******************************************************************************************************************************************************************************

It was Ian's birthday. And for the first time since Mickey has gotten to Mexico, two years ago he's not spending the cursed day locked in the bedroom getting drunk alone. He's out with Lauren and Javier, drinking and dancing. No karaoke yet, but the night is young.

He'd talked to Mandy earlier in the day, she hasn't seen Ian in a while, but she talks to him on the phone. She told Mickey that Ian has started seeing someone new. Some rich dude with a suit and tie job and a loft on the Northside. Looks like Ian's heading for "dog with a little sweater" territory after all.

Mickey sips his margarita (Lauren insisted he have one with her.), and he's struck by a foreign feeling. Contentment. He's not bitter that Ian has a new boyfriend, who's probably out wining and dining him for his birthday right now. He's not mad at Ian for leaving him, over and over. He's not mad at Ian for not choosing him. Not bitter because Ian doesn't love him.

He wants Ian to be happy, with whoever he finds to love him. He wants Ian to stay healthy, to do good in life, to get everything he ever wanted, that Mickey could never give him.

He walks up to the bar and orders three shots of Jameson, Ian's favorite. He hands one to Lauren and Javier each. He raises his own, and they look at him expectantly.

"It's Ian's birthday today, and I just wanted to toast him."

They both nod, looking confused.

"Ian, I hope this year is good to you. I hope you get everything you want. I hope you are loved, healthy, and safe. I will always love you, but I hope your life without me is better than I ever could have given you. Salud."

"Salud." his friends call back. Neither of them say a word. Smart move, in Mickey's opinion.

Mickey's proud of himself. He didn't even tear up. It's finally happened. He's over Ian Gallagher.

He throws back the shot, and doesn't think about Ian for the rest of the night. Doesn't think about him much after that at all.

But now that he's only four hours from Chicago, the idea that he will see Ian in the flesh some day in the future doesn't scare him like it used to. He's fairly certain he can handle it now. Seeing Ian happy with someone else. Finding someone else himself.

That part of his life has been over for a long time. No reason to be nervous. That wound has been scarred over for ages. He bangs his head against the window of the bus as it roars to life for the last time on this journey.

The next time he steps off this bus, it will be into the waiting arms of federal marshals.
He's ready. For whatever comes next.

Chapter End Notes

writing this has been a bit of a pain in the ass. i don't have word, so everything is done on wordpad, which doesn't have the same formatting as the site. so i have to make due with what i have. sorry it's not as polished as i'd like.

Estás bien? - are you okay?
Mickey was awoken by a hand shaking his shoulder gently. He startled, throwing his hands out in front of him to ward off the attack.

"Oh my goodness, sir, I'm sorry, it's just, we've arrived at our destination, and there are some men outside to collect you."

The bus driver. Jesus. Mickey was not one to be startled awake. The guy was lucky Mickey didn't deck him. Damn it.

The drive to Texas had been uneventful. Quiet. It gave Mickey way too much time to think about what awaited him in the states. He had mulled over it for so long he started to feel panicky and anxious. He stuck his hand into his bag and fished out an Ativan Lauren had given him for emergencies tossing it back dry. It felt like a moment ago, but in reality all fourteen hours had passed him by, because here he was, in San Antonio, with federal marshals waiting outside to take him into custody.

Shit.

He grabbed his small bag, essentials only, (as the rest of his belongings had been shipped to Mandy last week) and groggily made his way to the front of the bus.

He sighed. This was it.

He walked down the small steps and came face to face with a burly dude with a buzz cut, and tattoos running up both arms. He had a black vest with "US MARSHAL" emblazoned across the front, and he looked like he took no shit whatsoever.

"Mikhalio Milkovich?" he asked.

"That's me." Mickey replied, resigned.

"Put the bag down and put your hands behind your head." the man said, hand hovering over his gun.

Mickey fought an eye roll. Like he was going to put up a fight now, after offering himself up on a silver platter. Idiot. Mickey dropped his bag to the pavement and laced his fingers behind his head. The man walked up to him, flanked by his partner who scooped Mickey's bag up off the ground, keeping his eyes on him the entire time.

"You are under arrest for felony escape, you have the right to remain silent...."

Mickey lost interest as soon as the dude started reading him his rights, he'd heard it all before. The guy took his hands and clasped them behind his back, the cool metal of the handcuffs slipping over his wrists. It was a feeling he had tried desperately to forget. But he knew better. You could change
and you could grow. You could move on. But you couldn't change who you are deep down. The past was always waiting to pull you back in when you least expect it.

"Do you understand these rights as I have read them to you?" the marshal asked.

"Ain't my first rodeo, dude. Let's get this show on the fucking road." Mickey spat back, his old armor settling around him like a second skin. His walls went back up like a trap being sprung. He was closed off and cold, like he always had to be. Like he had never wanted to be again.

"Alright then, fuckface, let's get you back to the windy city then." the guy chuckled, leading Mickey to the SUV waiting in the parking lot.

Two weeks later, Mickey was laying awake in his bunk as the rising sun shimmered through his barred window. Slowly spiraling thoughts and blossoming anxiety his only company in the early morning hours. The soft snores of his nameless, faceless cellmate droning in the background. His silent revelry was interrupted by the loud metallic clang of his cell door opening. A guard stood in the doorway, also nameless as far as Mickey was concerned.

"Milkovich, get your ass in gear, you got court this morning, wagon leaves at 7 am sharp." and he was gone before Mickey could even look over at him.

Mickey sighed, running a hand down his face. This was it, the past four years of his life all culminating into this foggy Chicago morning, in which his whole life could change in less than four hours.

He had done all he could do. He had tied up all his loose ends in Mexico, gotten his shit together up here as much as he could through Mandy. He got dressed silently, running a hand through his hair and pulling his sweatshirt over his head. A guard came to collect him at 630, leading him down the long hallway to reception, where all the other inmates were waiting to be loaded into the paddy wagon to go to court. He took a seat on the bench, his small plastic bag of personal belongings clutched between his spread legs. All he had on him was his wallet, his burner phone, and a small ticket with a number on it. If things went according to the DA's plans today, he'd have to come back and trade the ticket in for his duffel bag later, in prison storage somewhere. He wasn't too optimistic.

He was handcuffed to the man before him and the man behind him, all the men together in one long line. It made stepping up into the back of the van a bitch, but Mickey wobbled his way in unassisted. The men were shuffled single file into the back of the paddy wagon. Mickey stuck between two huge dudes on either side. The long bench seat under his ass was hard metal, unyielding and painful. There was barely room to breath, a long metal wall separating the two rows of men on either side. It was more of a cage than Mickey had ever been in, claustrophobia creeping up the back of his neck.

The ride to the courthouse was punctuated by random conversations Mickey had no interest in being involved in. He was in and out of a dazed sort of half consciousness. Lack of sleep for the past two weeks and constant worrying had taken a toll on him.

Before he knew it he was downstairs in the basement of the courthouse, cuffs off, thank god, sitting around waiting to be collected to go before the judge. Mickey spoke to no one, looked at no one. He kept his eyes on the linoleum floor, silently biding his time and trying to keep his raging thoughts in check.

One by one the prisoners were brought upstairs. Some came back down to return to prison, some never came back at all, presumably set free. That set a little fire in Mickey's stomach.
'No. Don't you dare fucking go there.'

Mickey refused to give himself any kind of hope. It usually only led to disappointment and heartache.

"Milkovich." Yet another nameless guard called his name. Mickey stood up and weaved his way around the inmates strewn about the room. He stood in front of the guard and put his hands out, cuffed back up and followed the guard out of the cell and up the stairs, into the courtroom. It gave him a sickening sense of de ja vu, walking into that court room, scanning the room for friendly faces.

Last time he had been alone. Not one single person gave enough of a shit to even want to know what his sentence would be. Svet had been a no-show, Mandy had been out of town. Iggy himself had already been in jail on a stupid probation violation.

And Ian, fuck. He obviously was nowhere to be seen.

Mickey kind of wished it had stayed that way. Not that he regretted seeing Ian before he left for Mexico, it just opened an old wound he'd thought had scarred over. He learned back then that Ian was like heroin to him. He got hooked so hard, and he had to either go cold turkey, cut it off at the wrist, or he could succumb to it, and be devoured whole.

Ian had made the decision for him, in the end, anyway. Cold turkey it was.

This time, though, as he looked around the courtroom, he caught sight of Mandy. Sitting in the second row, behind the defense side. Looking smart in her little black dress, her hair back to it's natural color. As usual, Mickey thought she looked beautiful.

Not that he'd ever tell her that.

She caught his eye and gave him a small wave, her eyes dancing with excitement.

Mickey brought his cuffed hands up to wave back awkwardly. No smile, though. That never looked good in court.

Mickey was surprised, however, to see Jack sitting next to her. He looked good, his dirty blond hair wild as ever, falling in his eyes a bit. He looked skinnier than the last time Mickey had seen him, some of his jailhouse bulk gone now. His face had sharp lines and Mickey could clearly see his shoulders through his blue henley. But he looked good, regardless, a sight for Mickey's sore eyes.

The bailiff called out "All rise." and everyone in the court house stood, Mickey and his lawyer, Myra Eckhart included. She was decent enough, a pro bono defense attorney Davis had gotten him in touch with. She had certainly worked magic, in Mickey's opinion.

In a meeting they had had earlier in the week, Mickey agreed to plead guilty to the felony escape, and they would vacate his previous attempted murder conviction due to lack of evidence and prosecutorial misconduct. They had agreed to time served, which floored Mickey. He never, in all his life, had such luck. He had to sign a waver promising not to sue the state of Illinois, although he had the go ahead from Davis to sue the original prosecutor and judge if he saw fit. He didn't. He just wanted to put all this bullshit behind him. For good.

The judge stood before the bench for a moment, glancing over the courtroom, before she sat down.

"The honorable Nancy Graves presiding," the bailiff called out as the judge fiddled with some papers in front of her. "Be seated." the bailiff said, and everyone sat.
"Calling the case of the State of Illinois vs. Mikhalio Milkovich." the bailiff called out as everyone sat down. Mickey rubbed his wrists, still raw from a morning in handcuffs.

"Marcus Davis for the state, your honor." the DA said, standing up at the opposite table.

"Myra Eckhart for the defense, your honor." Mickey's lawyer also stands.

"Well, let's get this show on the road, shall we?" the judge asks, looking over her paperwork again.

"Your honor, as I'm sure you are aware, the previous district attorney is in the process of being disbarred by this very court, and...." Marcus started rambling and Mickey was having a hard time keeping up. He was no idiot, not by a long short, but things like constitutional violations and jurisprudence were way above his pay grade. He sat silently while the two lawyers and the judge went back and forth for what felt like hours. Then the judge put her hand up, ultimately silencing them both mid-sentence.

"Let me get this straight," she started. "My colleagues, Ms. Richardson and Hon. Banks colluded to secure convictions, Mr. Milkovich's case here being one of the affected cases. With perjured testimony and falsified evidence, they garnered this young man a 15 year prison sentence. Do I have that correct so far?"

"Yes, your honor." both lawyers parroted out.

"And you, young man, stand please." the judge motioned for Mickey to rise.

"You deny the original charges, son?" she asked.

"Yes, your honor." Mickey replied, doing his best to maintain eye contact under the stark scrutiny of the judge's gaze.

"Yet, instead of appealing, you escaped and absconded to Mexico, correct?"

"Yes, your honor." Mickey said, finally casting his gaze to the floor.

"Why would you do that?" the judge asked, sounding genuinely curious instead of interrogating him.

"Honestly, your honor, I knew the fix was in. It was my word against a DA and a judge. I knew I was wrong for what I did, but I didn't try to kill anyone. But no one would listen. I was frustrated and alone, and I couldn't trust anyone. I know running was the wrong thing to do, but I felt I was out of options." Mickey replied as honestly as he could. No use lying now.

"Well," the judge paused, pushing her glasses up on her nose and grabbing the papers again. "It looks like the original charge was assault, before the DA upped it to attempted murder. And the term of incarceration for that is 18 months, which you served before you absconded. And since your lawyer has worked out a deal with the new DA, Mr. Davis here, to apply time served on that assault conviction, with a five year suspended sentence for the escape, that's what we'll do. As I do not see you serving further time to be in the interest of justice. You will be on parole for those five years, I'm sure you are familiar with the rules and regulations of parole, are you not, Mr. Milkovich?"

"Uh, yes, yes your honor, I am." Mickey stuttered. Was this really happening?

"Very well then, we'll call this what it is, then. A miscarriage of justice. You have the apologies of the court, Mr. Milkovich. You are free to go. Make sure to check in with the parole office before you leave today."

and the judge banged her gavel and put the papers to the side. "Call the next case." she said blithely,
like she didn't just change Mickey's entire life with that one exchange.

Mickey could kiss the old bitch.

Mickey could hear his sister gasp in the gallery. She obviously didn't expect this either.

Mickey turned to Cynthia, and she held her hand out. "Well, Mikhailio, looks like my work is done here." Mickey took her hand without hesitation and shook it vigorously.

"Thank you. Seriously. I don't know how to thank you for this." he stuttered.

"No need to thank me, this is what I do. Cases like yours are the reason I got into defense law to begin with. Now take this second chance and make something of it. You have my number if you need anything. Don't hesitate to call." she picked up her bag and made her way out of the courtroom.

Mickey turned to watch her go, and saw his sister and Jack standing in the gallery, bright eyed and excited. He walked over to his sister in three long strides, wrapping her in a bone crushing hug.

"Fuck, Mandy. It worked. It fucking worked." he spoke into her hair, not wanting to pull away even an inch.

"Oh Mick, I am so damn happy for you. Missed you, you prick." she replied wetly.

Mickey pulled back and looked her in her red rimmed eyes. "Hey, Mands, don't cry, it's over, okay? I'm not going anywhere. Not for a while."

"What do you mean?" Jack interjected. Mickey had almost forgot he was there for a minute, his reunion with his sister overtaking his senses.

"Well, now that I'm free and clear, I may go back to Mexico for good." he said.

Mandy pulled out of the embrace and punched him in the shoulder, hard.

"Ow, Mandy, what the fuck?"

"Don't you dare talk about leaving again. I just got you back."

"I didn't mean today, Mands, christ." Mickey said, rubbing his sore shoulder.

"Better fucking not be." she growls, stepping aside so Jack can get at Mickey. He pulls an unsuspecting Mickey into a tight embrace. It hits Mickey in that moment that he's never hugged Jack, not properly, not like this. It feels awkward for all of two seconds before Mickey think 'f*ck it' and squeezes harder. He missed this motherfucker something fierce, and he's not ashamed of that shit anymore.

"Hey man." Jack says, his voice close to Mickey's ear.

"Hey." is all Mickey can muster, suddenly overwhelmed by the reality of what just happened to him. He feels a little dizzy and starts to sway, but Jack just holds him tighter.

"I got you, man." he mumbles, too soft for Mandy to hear, a promise for only Mickey. He pulls back and pushes on Mickey's shoulder. "Let's get you the f*ck outta the courthouse before they rescind the offer, eh?"

Mickey huffs out a laugh, swatting at his friend lazily. "Fuck you. But yeah, get me the hell away from this building."
They find themselves a swanky bar on the Northside, near the apartment Jack lives in, but his parents pay for. It's ridiculously overpriced in Mickey's opinion, and he feels like an idiot sitting there in his court clothes, with his plastic evidence bag full of belongings from jail. But Jack's paying and the drinks are strong, so Mickey lets go and enjoys the moment. He's in Chicago, with his sister and Jack, free and clear. No running, no hiding, no lying. It's liberating.

He takes out his phone while Mandy and Jack are discussing a TV show Mickey doesn't know about. 'Who gives a fuck about zombies?' He dials and waits, excited.

"Dímelo todo, que pasó" Javier says by way of greeting.

"Well, if I'm calling you on my cell phone, what do you think happened?" Mickey teased, still high off adrenaline. He was buzzing.

"You are a free man now, yes? Free to do as you please, no more fear?" Javier mused.

"Not totally free, I'm on parole for five years. But all things considered, I think it went well."

"Five years?" Javier says, voice lower now, less bright.

"What's five years?" he can hear Lauren's voice somewhere in the background. Maybe they're at work.

Javier puts his hand over his phone and fires off something to Lauren in Spanish that Mickey can't hear.

"That's a long time, Mickey. We will miss you down here." Javier's voice seemed to be getting smaller and smaller. "But thank you for keeping us updated."

"Of course man, we're family." Mickey is a bit surprised Javier isn't happier. He knew Mickey would be staying in Chicago for a while. They had talked about this.

"Family." Javier repeats, his voice breaking a bit. "Here Mick, Lauren wants to speak to you. Te amo."

"Te amo." Mickey replies, and Javier is gone. Lauren's bright voice fills the silence moments later.

"Mick?" she says.

"Hey Lauren." Mickey replied, smiling softly. He misses her.

He looks up in that moment to see both Mandy and Jack watching him. Jack looks amused, but Mandy looks shocked. Mickey ignores them both for the moment.

"Javier told you just now?" he asks.

"Yeah man, I'm happy for you." she says, her voice wavering. "But, uh, we were hoping you'd be coming back sooner. You are still coming back, right, Mick? You're not going to stay in Chicago forever?" Lauren sounded more vulnerable than Mickey had heard her in a very long time. Probably since they discussed their past lives, before Mexico, when she was scared all the time, her husband her personal boogeyman. Mickey realizes in that moment how much they had all relied on each other, propped each other up. The three of them against the world.

"Why don't we take it one thing at a time, huh, L? We're all going to be okay. Promise." Mickey wished he could say something real, something with substance. Instead of these empty platitudes. But he couldn't make any promises. Lauren didn't deserve to be lied to.
"Sure, Mick, we can do that." she sounded dejected.

"Hey, come on. We knew this was gonna happen. I'm not disappearing on you guys. You know me better than that." Mickey spoke with conviction, trying to convey the truth behind his words.

"You're right, Mick. It's just hard for us without you here. We got used to your cranky ass." she laughed. "We're so happy for you." Lauren said, she let out a quick huff of breath. "Well, we gotta get back to work, but I'm gonna put you on speaker for a sec." Lauren fumbled around for a minute. "Can you hear us?" she asked.

"Yeah." Mickey replies curiously.

He hears a giant commotion on the other end of the line. It sounds like the entire staff at the bar is clapping and cheering. He hears "Yes!!" "Go Mickey!" "We love you." and finally he hears Javier and Lauren screaming "Michael Popov is DEAD!!"

Mickey laughs so hard he thinks he going to piss himself. "Okay, okay, I gotta go guys. I'll call you soon."

"We love you, Mick." Javier says, seemingly having taken the phone from Lauren yet again.

"I love you guys too. You know that. Talk soon." he says, smiling so hard it hurts his face.

"Bye." Javier says, and the line goes dead.

Mickey pockets his cell again, and returns his attention to his sister and Jack. "What?" he asks when he sees their shocked faces.

"When the hell did you get so nice? Telling people you love them like it's nothing?" Mandy asks.

Before Mickey can respond, Jack interjects. "Who the hell is Michael Popov? Did you kill him?"

Mickey bursts out laughing. He had a bit of explaining to do....

Chapter End Notes

i know a bit about court procedure, but nothing about the shit i talk about in this chapter. so it's all from my head, not actual law.

dime que paso - tell me what happened

te amo - i love you
Haunted houses, haunted people

Chapter Summary

Ian had the distinct feeling he was walking into one of his dreams. The ones he has too often. The image of this living room burned into his psyche. He has to steady himself with a deep breath as he walks into the house. Staving off the panic attack simmering under the surface. He takes his shoes off and hangs up his coat, like he's done a hundred times here. But this time felt so different. Empty.

Ian wakes up early on Saturday morning. Brian had been out late the previous night, going out to spite Ian for having plans of his own on Saturday. Ian had asked Brian to come with him today, but Brian had told Ian 'I am not spending my day off doing backbreaking manual labor in a dangerous neighborhood for people I don't even like to appease your needy ass.'

Today was the day Mandy was moving out of the condo she shared with Jeff in Old Town, and moving back the the house on S. Trumball. Ian hadn't heard from her at all during the week, but he had promised to help that day in the coffee shop. He wasn't about to let her down when he had just gotten her back in his life.

Ian stretched his arms over his head, looking over at Brian sleeping next to him. He felt nothing, staring at his boyfriend. No butterflies, no warm-fuzzies. But no white hot hate or disgust. He felt absolutely nothing. He wondered for a moment if that was normal. Maybe he should call his therapist.

'No. She'll just tell you Brian is the problem.'

Ian shakes his head to rid himself of the thought, and slips out of bed, careful not to wake his bed mate. Waking a hungover Brian is a sure fire way to ruin the entire weekend.
Ian walks to the bathroom with his cell phone in his hand. He turns on Pandora low and strips his boxers off, turning on the shower and taking a piss while he waits for it to heat up. He needs a cigarette. But Brian would kill him.

He jumps in the shower, letting the too hot water run over his tired body. He loses himself in the quiet sounds of Evanescence coming from his phone and the blistering water flowing down his back. He feels at ease for the first time in weeks, alone there in the shower.

His mind goes where it's been going for days now. The house on S. Trumball, a house he still has nightmares about, a house that gives him a plethora of mixed emotions. Happiness, horror, anxiety and bliss. He's not sure he wants to go back.

But he promised Mandy, and he wasn't going to back down. The house wasn't haunted. He was.

He hopped out of the shower and grabbed towel off the bar by the sink. He dried his body quickly and wrapped the towel around his waist. He ran a hand down the mirror to clear it of all the condensation. He gazed at himself in the mirror, distorted by the swirling water. He was losing
weight again. All sharp shoulder bones and odd angles. He sighed.

He opened the medicine cabinet, eyes raking over the line of pill bottles. Lined up one after the other, just sitting there, mocking him.

'take your pills, bitch.'

Ian felt a small smile creep across his lips. He still heard Mickey's voice in his head every time he was considering skipping a dose. Like his own bad ass jiminy cricket. He took three bottles out, taking a pill from each bottle. He lined them up on the sink before putting the bottles back and filling a small glass from the sink with tap water. He put all three pills in his mouth followed by a gulp of water and swallowed them down.

He walked back into the bedroom, towel around his waist, phone in his hand. He wanted to be as silent as possible. Get out of here without waking Brian. It would be much easier than starting his day with an argument.

But just as he was opening the closet to grab a shirt, a shoe box fell off the top shelf and went crashing to the floor.

Ian winced.

fuck.

"Ian, what the fuck are you doing?" Brian's groggy voice filters through the pillow he's got his face stuffed in.

Ian pulled the first T shirt he saw off the hanger and pulled it over his head. He grabbed a pair of not quite dirty jeans off the floor, tugging them over his hips.

"Brian, you know what I'm doing, we've been arguing about it all week." Ian reminds him, sitting in a chair by the bureau to slip on his Adidas and double knot the laces. If he was moving shit and doing heavy lifting all day, he didn't want to invite any accidents. He was klutzy enough as it is.

"I can't believe you are even entertaining the idea of going back to that slum, at the beck and call of some old acquaintance, who only called you for free manual labor. You do see you are being used, right? There is no way you are that dense." Brian rolled over to look at Ian fully. He sat up in bed, sheets pooling around his naked body. "You aren't serious about this shit."

Ian sighed. This is exactly what he wanted to avoid this morning.

"She is not an 'old acquaintance', Brian. She is my best friend since I was fifteen years old. She is going through some shit right now, and she reached out to me. I have been a shit friend for the past few years, and I am not doing that anymore. I'm not going to abandon her when she needs me." Ian was getting angry. Face flushed hot and his fingers itching to hit something.

"Ian," Brian sounded exasperated, like he was arguing with a small child and not his adult boyfriend. "That girl is trash. You outgrew her years ago. And she has an army of equally trashy brothers that can help her move back to that cesspool neighborhood. Besides, being back there may trigger you. You don't want to lose your shit again, do you?" Brian asked the last question innocently, like he didn't know exactly what he was doing to Ian's confidence.

But Ian knew better. He was hip to Brian's mind games, and for once he wasn't gonna let it get to him. This shit with Mandy was too important to bend to Brian's will.

"Seriously, Brian. I am not doing this with you right now." Ian said, with finality. He turned and left
the bedroom. Brian's screams of 'fine, do whatever you want' and 'i don't want to hear it when you fall apart again, Ian.' echoing behind him. He brushed it off. He's not letting Brian get into his head today. He grabs his jacket off the kitchen chair he left it on last night, and his keys off the hook by the door. He's still seething over his argument with Brian, the same argument they have over and over. He opens the door and walks into the hallway. Suddenly he wants to be as far away from the apartment as possible. As far away from Brian as possible.

He's out on the street before he realizes he hasn't even called Mandy to see if this shit was even still happening today. 'Idiot.' he admonished himself, fishing his phone out of his jacket pocket and dialing her number. He leans up against the brick surface of the building, cradling the phone against his ear with his shoulder so he can put a cigarette between his lips and light it. He inhales deeply, holding the smoke in his lungs until it burns and letting it out slowly as the phone continues to ring.

Finally, after a half dozen rings, the line comes to life. "Ian?" Mandy says, breathless.

"Uh, yeah, what's up, you never called. Are we still on for today? Moving?" Ian asks. He kicks at an empty coke can on the sidewalk before he decides to be a good samaritan, scooping it up and walking to the end of the sidewalk to toss it in a city trash bin.

'fucking littering, on the god damn Northside.'

He can hear Mandy shuffling around on the other end of the line. A door opening and closing. Then he hears the unmistakable sounds of the Southside. Sirens and people screaming, she must be outside.

"Uh, well, I actually got some help moving already. You know my idiot brothers, always say no, but when it comes down to it, they're there for me." she laughed.

No, Ian didn't know that. None of Mandy's brother had ever been there for her. Except Mickey. She could almost count on him.

But Mickey wasn't there. No one knew where he was. At least that's what Mandy told him whenever he grew the balls to ask. (which was rare these days, Ian felt like a pussy more often than not) Iggy had another six days in jail for his last probation violation. Would Colin or Joey help Mandy move? It had to be one or both of them.

"Are you sure? I already left the apartment, got into another huge fight with Brian over coming out today. Don't tell me that shit was for nothing." Ian said. He made his way down the street toward the L. He was getting the fuck out of the Northside today, whether or not it was to see Mandy. Maybe he'd stop by Fiona's. Now that he was out of Brian's orbit, thinking clearly for himself, it seemed like as good an idea as any.

He did miss his siblings.

"How about this," Mandy started. "Me and the boys are gonna get all the furniture and stuff situated, and you can come over in a few hours and help me unpack the other shit. The delicate shit these morons would break with their stupid meaty hands." she laughed as someone in the background yelled an impassioned "hey, fuck you."

"Just get that shit inside and keep your comments to yourself." Mandy called back. She chuckled a little and Ian couldn't help but notice how much happier she sounded since the last time he saw her. Ian supposed getting away from Jeff would do that for her.
He wondered for a moment how it would feel to leave Brian. He shook the thought off immediately. Brian was good for him. Everyone had a few unattractive qualities, Ian himself especially. He was in no place to judge someone who put up with all his crazy bullshit. He had no right.

"Uh, sure. I can do that. What time do you think you and your brothers will be done? Don't really wanna run into Colin, he still hates me."

"Oh, Colin's not...um, I mean, right. Sure. Colin's a dick like that. How about around 11? I should be ready for you then."

Ian didn't miss the way Mandy was stumbling over her words. What was that shit about Colin? He was the brother that was helping her, right? Iggy was still in jail....

"Sure, 11 it is. Tell Joey I said hi, preferably without Colin in earshot, I'd rather not have him breathing down my neck again. He's still pissed at me cuz of, well, you know."

Ian should have know the Milkovich boys would hold a grudge over what he'd done to Mickey. They were livid, considering how he left Mickey an unforgivable betrayal.

"Will do. Can't wait to see you, Ian. Thanks for doing this for me today."

"Anytime." Ian replied. "See you soon."

He hung up just as the L pulled into the station. Looks like he'd be heading over to N. Wallace after all.

________________________________________________________________________________

Mandy sighed to herself. Of course Ian would remember what they had talked about and want to come over and help her. He was always a good friend to her. He just got caught up with some douche bag that promised him a fairy tale ending. She could relate to that.

Now, on to more pressing matters. She has to break it to her brother that Ian will be coming over. She hasn't told him they've been in touch. She's still getting used to having Mickey home. It's only been a couple days. She doesn't want to spook him, having him running away when she just got him back.

"That wasn't your prick of a husband wanting to come collect you, was it?" Mickey asked, dropping a box full of girly bathroom shit on the floor in the living room. Jack came in behind him, a suitcase overflowing with clothes grasped in both his hands. He dropped it next to the couch and stood awkwardly off to the side.

"Sit, motherfucker. You're making me nervous." Mickey pointed to the couch and Jack obediently sat.

Mickey made his way to the kitchen, opening the fridge and taking out three beers. Mandy was right behind him, crowding him in the small kitchen.

"Hey, back up!" he barked, pushing a beer into her chest as a way to get her out of his personal
space. Years out of prison, and still he didn't like to be cornered.

Mandy took the beer and twisted the cap off, flicking in the general direction of the overflowing trash bin.

"So, thanks for helping me move, Mick. I knew Colin and Joey were gonna flake on me."

"It's the least I can do for your destitute ass, princess." Mickey said around the mouth of his beer. "Should've been here to keep you from making this fucking mistake in the first place."

"It wasn't up to you, Mick, I gotta live my own life." Mandy said.

Mickey nodded, not really knowing how to respond to that.

"But, uh, were you gonna stay at Jack's tonight?" she asked, looking up at the clock above the stove.

"Why, got a hot date already? You slut." Mickey laughed.

"Um, no. Ian's coming over to help me unpack." Mandy mumbled, taking a huge swig of her beer to avoid looking at her brother.

Mickey's eyes went wide at the mention of Ian.

"Are you fucking serious right now? You asked him to come here? To my house? After everything I told you? You have got to be fucking kidding me Mandy." Mickey gaped at his sister, he could not believe this bullshit.

He hadn't even been home for a week proper. He hadn't gotten his room back the way he liked. He hadn't gotten fucked like he wanted. (Jack wanted to, but Mickey had his reservations about that situation) He hadn't even had a chance to get good and drunk yet. Shit with his probation and trying to find Svetlana, check on his kid. He'd been so busy trying to put his life back together in Chicago, he hadn't had a moment to just be.

And now, on the first night he was feeling a little relaxed, like he could breathe for a moment, his sister had to swoop in and cut open that one old wound that just won't heal.

"Not everything is about you, Mick." she screamed, slamming her beer down on the table, causing the beer to overflow from the bottle, foam spilling over the lip and pooling on the table. Mickey instinctively took a step back. Angry Mandy was something to always be wary of.

"Hey," he said softly, putting his hands up in surrender. "Sorry, I know you've got a lot going on. You probably need someone to talk to about that shit. I get it. I just didn't know you and Gallagher were even friends anymore. And you know I am not ready to deal with his ass. I don't want him to know I'm back." he was trying to be fair to his sister, while still maintaining his dignity.

He wasn't scared to see Ian, per say. He was just nervous. It had been so long, and even though things were over between them, he was still a little uneasy about the way the redhead still made him feel. Out of control and vulnerable. It was unsettling, to say the least.

"I know you don't want to see him, Mick, that's why I asked if you were going to Jack's. Ian is just coming back into my life, and I don't know where he's at, you know, mentally. I wanted to feel it out and see if we still had that same connection. I miss him." she pleaded. "I need a friend right now. You have Jack, and even Lauren and Javier. What do I have, Mick? Besides my asshole brothers? Please, don't be mad at me for this. I'm not doing it to spite you."

Mickey ran a shaky hand down his face and nodded to his sister. "Yeah, okay. You're right. We're gonna head out. But I'll be back in the morning. I need to start looking for a job before they decided to toss my ass back behind bars."
Mandy stood up and wrapped Mickey in a tight hug. "Thanks Mick, I know it's not an ideal situation, but I really appreciate this."

Mickey squeezed his sister for all of two seconds before he was pushing her off. "Yeah yeah," he mumbled. "Clean this shit up." he motioned around the kitchen table, puddles of beer dripping onto the dirty linoleum.

Mickey walked into the living room and grabbed his coat off the back of the couch. Jack stood up when he saw him come in. "We're going." he said over his shoulder as he shrugged his coat on and toed on his shoes.

Jack scrambled to do the same, sensing the urgency. He had overheard the conversation in the kitchen, but he wasn't dumb enough to ask about it. If there was one thing Jack learned being friends with Mickey, it was that the topic of Ian Gallagher was off fucking limits. Unless Mickey brought it up himself, the punishment for infraction would be swift and painful.

"Bye Mands." Jack called back while trying to balance long enough to slip a boot on. Successful in getting his boots on, he grabbed his hoodie and followed out the open door. He heard a muffled reply as he slammed the door.

Mickey was standing on the front porch, cigarette between his lips, sunglasses perched on his nose. He looked nonchalant to an outsider, but Jack could tell he was coiled tight like a spring.

"Let's get outta here." he said, walking past Mickey toward the sidewalk.

The two men made their way toward the L in silence. Jack was going to wait this one out. They hadn't spoken about Ian since they had been back in jail, when Jack was nothing but a quick fuck of a cellmate, someone Mickey never thought he'd see after he wrapped his bid. He told him everything. Things that he never told anyone, secure in the fact that Jack would never meet Ian, never be part of his real life. That's what had made it safe.

And now here they were, walking away from the southside, not just haunted by the ghost of Gallagher, but in real danger of coming face to face with the man himself. Mickey couldn't breathe. He wasn't ready for this shit.

"Can I stay at your place tonight?" Mickey asked, lighting yet another cigarette.

"Of course, Mick. But I have to tell you, this is not how I envisioned our first sleepover." Jack replied, smiling.

"Ain't a fucking sleepover, just can't be there when..." Mickey trailed off.

"I get it, man. You can stay the night. We can get drunk and play video games. And in the morning I'll call my dad and see about getting you a job with the crew."

Jack's dad was in construction. He had a very successful company that did huge jobs all over Illinois. Jack worked for him sometimes, but kept getting strung out and leaving, only to come back begging for another chance. His dad always gave in.

"You don't have to do that, dude. I can find my own job." Mickey said. He wasn't anyone's damn charity case.

"Mick," Jack sighed. "Friends do this kind of shit for each other. My dad always needs help, you have experience. No strings attached. Don't be stubborn."

Mickey said nothing. He just stared at his feet slowly leading him to the L. Jack bumped his
shoulder. He looked over at him.

"Just talk to him. It's good money, Monday through Friday, benefits, all that white bread middle class bullshit. It could be good for you."

"Alright, alright. Enough. I'll talk to your fucking dad."

Jack smiled brightly. He bumped shoulders with Mickey again.

"Cool, now let's get some booze in you, I've been dying to see you drunk for years." Jack laughed as he ran ahead into the train station.

"You don't know what you're getting yourself into." Mickey yelled, following after him. It was good to be home.

--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Ian had the distinct feeling he was walking into one of his dreams. The ones he has too often. The image of this living room burned into his psyche. He has to steady himself with a deep breath as he walks into the house. Staving off the panic attack simmering under the surface. He takes his shoes off and hangs up his coat, like he's done a hundred times here. But this time felt so different. Empty. Ian shook his head. 'Don't do that. You're here for her.'

"Mandy?" he called out. He looked around. Someone had cleaned up the house. Probably Iggy's new girlfriend. The living room had a new rug, new couch (thank god) and a new entertainment center. There was a flat screen TV affixed to the wall, which looked newly painted. The kitchen looked redone too. Cabinets painted an off white color, the counter top free of the clutter that used to be a permanent fixture. Even the giant cupboard that used to hold the family's arsenal was gone. It was like a whole new family lived there.

Ian felt out of place.

"Ian?" Mandy's disembodied voice floated out from the back of the house. He followed it back to her childhood bedroom.

That's where he found her standing, amid a mass of cardboard boxes and overflowing trash bags. Her life reduced to this pile of stuff.

"Hey." he said, taking in the room. It didn't look so different from the last time he'd seen it. It looked like she took nothing with her when she moved in with Jeff. Her bed was the same, in the same spot against the far wall in the corner. Her giant dresser still up against the wall by the window. Her old posters and pictures still littered the walls. It was like going back in time.

"Oh, Ian, thank god you're here. Look at this fucking mess. I need you." Mandy sighed, dropping the bag she was holding to the floor and running over to Ian, wrapping her thin arms around his waist. Ian immediately reciprocated the hug, pulling her close and squeezing her tight.

"How are you doing?" he whispered into her hair. She even smelled the same. Like Ralph Lauren Romance and cigarettes. That nostalgic feeling fluttered in his gut again.

"Ugh. My whole life has been turned upside down. My husband is having a baby with a teenager, and I'm back in my childhood house of horrors." she sighed, pulling away to look him in the eye.
"How do you think I'm doing?"

"I'm sorry, Mands, I wish there was something I could do to help." Ian said. He hated watching his friend suffer. She never had it easy. None of them ever did. But he had always wanted more for Mandy.

"You are helping. You came. I honestly didn't know if you would." she said the last part so low that Ian almost didn't hear it.

Ian felt shame blooming in his chest. He had abandoned Mandy. Partly due to his own bullshit, cutting her off because being around her was too painful. She reminded him too much of Mickey. They were so similar, it was like seeing a ghost.

The other reason, of course, was Brian. He hated anything having to do with Ian's past. He wanted to erase the person he was before they met, and recreate Ian into the person Brian thought he should be.

So Ian had selfishly done the easy thing. Compartmentalizing his life into 'before' and 'after' and locking up all the difficult parts inside himself.

But look where that had gotten him? His best friend suffering for years, and he had no idea. His own family strangers to him. The one person he had ever love out there in the world somewhere, and Ian had no idea if he was safe or not.

Ian had fucked up. Big time.

"Okay, enough of this girly bullshit. Let's get some work done." she said, pulling away. "Can you take this bag to the bathroom and put this shit wherever. You remember where I used to keep this shit?"

Ian looked into the bag. It was full of makeup and hair product. He smiled. "Yeah, I remember. The cabinet next to the tub, right?"

"You do remember! You big ol' softy. You love me." she beamed.

"Of course I do. I'll take care of this and be right back." he started toward the hall.

About four steps into the hallway he remembered where the bathroom was. He stopped dead in his tracks.

Mickey's room.

A cold sweat broke out on his back.

'Jesus. that's all it takes to lose your shit. it's just a room. it's not haunted.'

Ian rolled his shoulders and resumed his walk down the hall. The door was bare now. No signs or stickers anymore. He turned the knob and walked in.

It didn't look the same at all. All Mickey's things were gone. All the furniture was in the same spots, but the clutter that used to adorn the room was long gone. No more brass knuckles or water bongs. No more girl on girl porn strewn across the floor. No more holey socks sticking out from under the bed, or empty gallon jugs of orange juice piled up by the dresser. The walls were freshly painted a soft gray, and there was a brown area rug on the floor. Nothing in this room said 'Mickey' anymore. That thought alone made Ian sadder than anything else.

Someone had been in the room recently, though. There were boxes lined up against the wall, and a
hoodie on the bed. A pair of shoes sticking out from under the dresser. Ian idly wondered if this was where Joey or Colin stayed when they spent the night.

He let the sadness wash over him for a moment. Mourning a loss he was positive he'd never get over. He wondered for a moment if he'd ever get a chance to talk to Mickey again. Mandy didn't seem inclined to give him any information on his ex. It was a touchy subject, and he didn't want to cause her any more pain. He had to tread lightly with her right now. He walked into the bathroom and started putting her things away. He was here to help her today, no time to get sucked into his own bullshit.

"Jesus, nice place." Mickey muttered as he followed Jack into his apartment. The place was huge. One giant open space, with two doors off to the side. Mickey assumed bedroom and bathroom. The kitchen was off to the left once you came in the entryway. Stainless steel appliances, granite counter top, big island surrounded by tall bar stools. To the right was the living room. Black leather couches made a kind of semi-circle around an over sized glass coffee table. The far wall was all windows, with a giant flat screen TV on the far wall. Strange artwork framed on the walls. It almost looked BDSM. Naked men and women, blindfolded with their arms tied. Kinky shit. Mickey had no idea Jack was into that kind of stuff.

"Thanks." Jack said, taking his hoodie off and hanging it in the closet by the door. "My dad pays for it. But you knew that already." he laughed. "Here, gimme your coat, and take your god damn shoes off, you heathen."

Mickey scoffed, but took his shoes off anyway. He handed his coat to Jack.

"You did say something about getting me drunk, no?" Mickey asked. He wandered into the kitchen and opened up the fridge like he belonged there. He grabbed two beers he had never heard of and closed the fridge with his hip. "What the fuck is this bullshit?" he asked, waving the offending alcohol at his friend.

"Vienna Lagar?" Jack answered, more like a question than he intended.

"You sure, tough guy?" Mickey quirked an eyebrow at him. "Never heard of this shit."

"Well, I doubt you have a very refined pallet." Jack joked, taking his beer from his friend and walking into the living room to turn on the Xbox. He put on some first person zombie killer game.

"I'm here with your stupid ass, so I guess I can't have the best taste. You got me there." Mickey retorted. He took a sip of his drink and made a face. He'd have to guzzle quite a few of these to get used to the taste.

"Fuck all the way off, Mick." Jack laughed.

Mickey sat down next to him and took the offered controller. "I'm about to own that ass." he laughed smugly.

"Promises, promises." Jack smirked.

It was gonna be a long night.
"And it's like, I really thought I could have it, you know....the white picket kids and the 2.5 fence." Mandy slurred.

"Uhm, I'm not sure that's they saying." Ian laughed. He was tipsy, but Mandy was trashed.

She cocked back and socked him in the arm. Hard. "Fucker." she muttered.

They were laying on her childhood bed, rum and coke sitting on the nightstand. Night had fallen hours ago, and they had gotten very little organizing done. Opting instead to get good and drunk and rant about their relationship issues.

"I just, I really thought he loved me. But I don't think Jeff loves anyone but himself." she sniffed lightly and reached across Ian for her drink. Ian sat up too and took his own glass. He shouldn't be drinking, but did he ever need it.

"I know what you mean, Mands, Brian is not at all who I thought he was. He's controlling and he belittles me. I feel like he's trying to turn me into a faggy northside asshole just like him. He doesn't want me as I am."

" Faggy Northside asshole?" she balked "Well, fuck Brian, and fuck Jeff. We don't need 'em. I was just looking for someone to get me outta the soutside, get me outta the life."

"And I was looking for someone who could help me forget....." Ian trailed off. He drained his glass, leaning over the bed for the half empty bottle of rum.

"This about my brother?" Mandy asked. She took another huge sip of her drink, wiping her mouth on her sweater. She handed her glass to Ian and he filled them both up half rum, half coke.

"I don't know." Ian sighed. "When I first got sick, you know, everyone was telling me Mick was holding me back. Fiona, Monica, Lip. Then when he got locked up, I got better, you know. At the time I just wanted to reinvent myself. New healthy Ian, taking my meds, got a good job. Had a boyfriend, someone who never knew life like we did. I thought that's what I was supposed to want. You know, like you said, dinner parties and nights at the theater. All that bourgeois fag shit. But then, when Mick broke out and I saw him again, I felt like I was alive again for the first time in years. Just holding his hand was better than any sex I'd had since he'd gotten locked up. It was incredible, Mands. Never felt that shit before or since." he sighed, feeling the hot sting of tears in his eyes. "Shit, I'm drunker than I thought." he laughed wetly.

Mandy put her glass down and wrapped her arms around Ian, pulling them both to lie down on the bed again.

"You never did tell me what happened, you know, when you guys drove down to Mexico..." she knew it was a touchy subject, but with Mickey back and Ian still in the dark, she had to know. She had to know where Ian's head was at, before he saw Mickey again. It was bound to happen, even if Mickey was adamant about keeping his distance.

"When I first saw him, I was so shocked. I thought I was having some kind of psychotic episode," he laughed. "And all those feelings I tried so hard to bury came flooding back. I loved him just as much as I ever did. I had been lying to myself the whole time. It hit me like a fucking truck."
He asked me to go with him, and it wasn't even a question. I was down. We left, and the trip down there was amazing. Crazy, but amazing. But the closer we got to the border, the more I started to doubt it. Not Mickey, or his love for me. Myself. I was doubting myself. Like, here I am, running away from my life. Taking off with my ex, an escaped convict, going on the run from the feds. It just reminded me so much of Monica. I was scared I wasn't thinking clearly. And before I left, Fiona said some shit that really got to me. About Mickey ruining my life, and made me think I couldn't trust myself. I just felt like running away with Mick would be a cop out, leaving behind all the stuff I worked so hard for, on the off chance I'd have a happy ending."

Mandy just looked at him for a minute.

Then she smacked him hard across the stomach with the back of her hand.

"Ow, what the fuck?" Ian cried, curling up in a ball cradling his stomach.

"So what you're telling me is that you and your cunty sister think you're better than my brother, and you equate loving my brother with being insane?" Mandy sat up and looked over at her friend, fire in her eyes.

"No, no, Mandy, that's not what I'm saying." he put his hands up, trying to placate her. "I'm saying I don't trust myself to know what's real anymore... Running away seemed like an impulsive, irresponsible thing to do. Something I would do when I was manic. I didn't want to be like Monica, running away from my life and responsibilities.

I was stable, living a normal life. My family was proud of me, didn't look at me like I was going to lose my shit any second. It was a nice feeling. And I don't have feelings anymore. That was one of the biggest things that scared me about running away with Mick. The minute I saw Mick, my whole body lit up on fire, and I felt so much. Everything. Happiness, excitement, I was so damn horny." he laughed. "It was the best I'd felt in years. And that scared me more than anything. I am so used to being numb now. It's my new normal. So feeling such strong emotions with Mick scared the shit out of me. It made me wonder about myself, my mental health. I don't feel things like that anymore, Mands. I decided then that I couldn't risk it. I couldn't lose my mind to keep my love. I was a coward." he sighed. He covered his face with his hands, not wanting to look at her any more.

Mandy scooted closer to him, putting her arms around his waist and settling her head on his shoulder. "I get it, Ian." she said, her voice muffled by his body. "But just because you feel things doesn't mean you are going crazy. Being numb all the time is not normal. It makes me so sad that you think that way about yourself now. I wish I had been there for you when all this shit started. I would have told you then that you weren't thinking straight. Fuck your sister, she doesn't know shit about shit. She wants what's best for you, I'm sure. But she always hated Mick, and I think she blamed him for shit that wasn't his fault. Like what went down at the club when you worked there, or you taking Yev. Blamed us for not seeing the signs in time, even though she didn't see it either."

Ian let out a shaky breath. He didn't know he needed to hear those words until Mandy had uttered then. It felt like a huge weight had been lifted off his shoulders. He put his arms up to wrap around Mandy's, still tight around his waist.

"I guess none of this shit matters anymore, you know." Ian finally said after a long silence. "He's gone, and this is my life now. Nothing I can do now, just gotta make the best of what I have."

Mandy didn't say anything. She couldn't. She promised her brother she'd keep his secret a while longer. But it was killing her, seeing her friend suffering. She didn't know if Mickey and Ian could ever be just friends, with all the history they shared. But she did know that they needed to work through their shit, if either of them were ever going to be happy.
So she turned on her ipod, and her little speakers, and let the sounds of Bright Eyes fill the silence. They drank and listened to melancholy music. All their personal bullshit would still be there in the morning.

"So, you're just going to avoid him?" Jack asked. He looked over at Mickey's profile. It was dark in the apartment now, long past sunset. They were sort of watching an old horror movie Jack swore by. Mickey wasn't too invested in it.

"That's the plan." Mickey replied. He took a sip of his beer and tried to focus on the girl getting gutted on the screen.

"You think that's the best idea? I mean, he's your sister's best friend. We almost ran into him today, and you've only been home for a little over a week."

"Jack, seriously, I don't want to talk about this shit with you right now. I don't want to talk about his gangly ass at all. Please fucking drop it." Mickey was trying to keep his cool, but it was damn near impossible where Ian was concerned.

"Alright, Mick. I'm sorry, I just don't want you bottling this shit up. It gets you all fucking up. Remember when we were in jail? You were a mess for months. It took forever to even get you to use complete sentences."

Mickey sighed. Jack was right. He had been a mess, for a lot more than a few months. And he didn't want to go back to being that guy. After everything he'd been through since his escape, he didn't want to crumble all over again, because of Ian fucking Gallagher. Jesus.

"Okay, man. Yeah, it's fucking me up a bit. There's still a lot there that will need to be dealt with at some point. But not tonight. Nothing's going to be resolved right now. If I promise not to shut you out, will you shut the fuck up about it?" Mickey asked.

"Sure, Mick." Jack smiled. He took Mickey's beer out of his hand, much to his dismay. Mickey eyed him skeptically.

"What the fuck?"

Jack just smiled even wider, crawling over the couch to get in Mickey lap. He swung one leg around Mickey's legs, setting on top of him. "If were not going to talk about your feelings, how about we do something else with our mouths?"

Mickey laughed. This fucking guy.

"You can do something with your mouth, if you're feeling frisky." Mickey replied lowly.

Jack looked a little disappointed for a minute. But he schooled his features quickly.

"You want that, Mick? Want me to suck your dick?" Jack breathed, grinding his crotch against Mickey's.

Mickey let out a long, low breath. "Knock yourself out, kid." He let his head fall back onto the back
of the couch.

He'd like to fuck Jack tonight. And he was sure that's what Jack had been hoping for, but he just wasn't in the right head space for that shit right now. He had just gotten home. He wasn't sure what Jack was hoping for out of them meeting up on the outside. His head was full of Ian related bullshit. It just didn't seem right to be fucking Jack right now.

But a blowjob was a whole other story. That shit was meaningless.

At least that's what Mickey told himself as Jack got to his knees in front of him.

He needed this shit. He hadn't gotten off since he'd come back to Chicago.

Jack ran his hands up and down Mickey's jean-clad thighs. "I've been thinking about this since you escaped." he mumbled, nosing into Mickey crotch. "I knew something was up that last time we hooked up. Thought I was never gonna see you again." he lifted up a shaky hand and fumbled with Mickey's button fly.

"Couldn't tell you." Mickey sighed. He ran a hand through Jack's dirty blond hair. He inhaled sharply as Jack stuck a hand inside his pants, rubbing his growing bulge. "Wanted to. I got in touch as soon as I could. You know that."

Jack nodded mutely, finally taking out Mickey's dick. A shiver went through Mickey's entire body as he felt Jack's warm breath fanning over his hard cock. He tightened his grip in the other man's hair, keeping eye contact as Jack started lapping at the head.

He'd forgotten how good Jack was at this. This porn star shit. His tongue danced around the head of Mickey's cock, collecting the precum that was dripping out. Keeping his hungry eyes on Mickey's the whole time, he started bobbing his head. Slowly at first, running his tongue along the vein on the underside.

He started tugging on Mickey's pants. Mickey got the message, lifting his hips so Jack could pull them down around his ankles, along with his boxers.

With more room to work, Jack really went to town. Bobbing his head relentlessly, deep throating every third pass. He moved one hand up to rest on Mickey's thigh, the other cupping his balls gently. It felt good. Really good. He wanted to keep his eyes on Jack, working his cock like a pro. He rolled his head along the back of the couch and pulled his head back up. Jack was still watching him, mouth full of cock. His red lips spread around Mickey's straining erection. He pulled off for a second, taking Mickey's dick in his hand and pumping it a few times, swirling around the head with his tongue. "Love blowing you." he said, smirking. He took his left hand and unzipped his own jeans, pulling out his erection. With one hand on his own cock and the other steadying Mickey's he lost himself in the act, sucking down on the cock in front of him while stripping his own in time with his mouth.

"Fuck hell, man. Keep doing that. Just like that. You suck dick so good, made for that shit." Mickey sighed, finally giving in and dropping his head back in pleasure. He closed his eyes, hand still on Jack's head, rocking his hips unconsciously. Jack moaned around him. Taking that as a good sign, Mickey started thrusting up into Jack's hot mouth. Jack moaned again, his hand picking up speed.

"Oh Christ, gonna come." Mickey moaned, fucking into Jack's mouth. His orgasm hit him hard, a rush of pleasure coursing through his body. Jack buried his face as far down as he could go, nestled in Mickey's coarse black hair, swallowing it all greedily.

Mickey could hear him still jerking his dick as he finally pulled his mouth off. He rested his head on Mickey's bare thigh and came all over his hand a moment later.
It was silent for a minute, both men trying to get their bearings, breathing heavily.

Jack was the first one to move. He stood up and zipped his jeans back up. Mickey finally got with the program, leaning down to pull his pants and boxers back up. He sat on the couch while Jack headed for the kitchen.

Mickey just sat there. The lame horror movie filling the silence. He was sure they'd have to talk about this shit, but for now he was content to let it be. He was too tired for honest conversation about their non-relationship right now.

Jack came back with two new beers and some paper towels."Figured we'd finish the movie then go to bed. We can call my dad in the morning about that job." he said as he stooped to the floor to clean up the mess he'd made. He balled up the paper towels and tossed them toward the kitchen. They hit the floor about halfway there with a wet plop. Jack shrugged, Mickey laughed.

"Sounds good, man." Mickey replied, relieved that Jack seemed to be on the same page as him. Let it go, for now.

Jack handed him his beer and settled next to him on the couch, closer than last time. They didn't speak again for the rest of the night. After the movie was done Jack lead Mickey wordlessly back to his bed. The fell together under the sheets. They didn't cuddle or spoon, just lay there together, but alone.

Jack turned over to turn the light off, but stopped short when he caught sight of Mickey's upper body. Mickey had forgotten, Jack hadn't seen it yet.
Jack ran a hand over Mickey's bare chest. "I like the cover-up." he stated simply. He traced the black and white heart with his index finger, almost lovingly. He didn't comment on it further. Jack had always teased Mickey mercilessly about his tattoo, but now didn't feel like the time for ribbing. If he had any ideas about the meaning behind it, he kept it to himself. That was one of the reasons Mickey liked Jack so much. He didn't have the desire to ask questions, didn't need Mickey to explain every little thing he did, didn't ask Mickey to delve into his past or his feelings. They could just be friends, and when Mickey felt like talking, he listened.

"Thanks man. I like it too." Mickey smiled, saying nothing else.

Mickey was happy to have Jack back in his life. He had never been one to have a lot of friends. But now that he had opened up to the idea, it was nice to have people he could count on, people he could be there for. He was just a bit uneasy about how Jack saw their relationship. It was easier in jail, no strings, no commitment, no way to hurt or get hurt.
He couldn't help but feel like he crossed some kind of line tonight. He didn't know how Jack felt, and it was conceited to assume he had caught feelings for Mickey. But Micky knew he had to talk to him about this shit. Just like he had had to lay down the law with Javier in Mexico. He didn't want to use his friend, but he sure as hell wasn't looking for a relationship.
His thoughts were starting to spiral, and he was twitching uncomfortably in the soft bed.

"Less thinking, more sleeping, asshole." Jack muttered from his side of the bed.

"Sorry man." Mickey said, rolling over to face the opposite wall.

"No worries, it's actually a bit comforting to know your crazy ass hasn't changed all that much."

"Fuck off." Mickey reached behind him without looking and swatted at Jack's head.

"G'night Mick. It's nice to have you back."
"Thanks man, it's nice to be home." Mickey replied. And it was. He never thought that would be the case. But he was happy to be back in Chicago.
If it would stay that way, he had no idea.
He closed his eyes and let the familiar sounds of Jack's quiet breathing lull him to sleep once more.
Close calls & Near misses

Chapter Summary

Ian and Mickey are in the same city for the first time in years. Ian has no idea, and Mickey wants to keep it that way as long as possible.

Months go by and Mickey is settling into his new "old" life in Chicago. He ended up getting the job working for Jack's dad, Matt. He was a tough old dude who took no shit. Mickey liked him. The work was hard, but honest, and it was more fulfilling than working at the bar had been. Building something with his own two hands that other people actually paid for the privilege of living in. It was a trip.

He and Jack had an understanding of their own. Sex with no strings. He did not want a relationship. He hadn't wanted one in Mexico, even though Javier was wonderful. And Jack was a great guy too, but Mickey's heart wasn't in it, and it was unfair to either of them to go there and not go all in. Javier had understood that. And Jack seemed to be more than okay with the arrangement. He wasn't a commitment type guy at all. He was affectionate and caring, but he just didn't want to have the added pressure of having to be there for someone else. He was selfish and he had the presence of mind to realize that. Drugs came first for Jack.

Mickey didn't like that, not really. But he wasn't Jack keeper, or his father. And he certainly wasn't his boyfriend. So he stayed out of it.

He was staying at Jack's more often than not, doing his damnedest to avoid Ian at all costs. Mickey was actually amazed that he had managed to dodge Gallagher for this long. His sister was helping him steer clear, albeit reluctantly at first. Mickey had promised her he'd make contact, but on his own terms and when he was damn good and ready. Not a minute sooner.

Mandy was doing better, moving forward with her divorce from that shitty excuse for a husband of hers. As soon as Mickey was done with his parole, he was gonna whoop that prick's ass. Mandy had settled into life back on S. Homon as best she could. She made fast friends with Iggy's girlfriend Tessa, and the two girls and Ian were almost inseparable. Iggy was long back from his last jail sentence, and promised his girl and his sister that it would be his final fuck up.

Mickey supposed only time would tell.

Mickey didn't go fishing for information on Ian. He never asked or brought it up, but every once in a while Mandy would go off on a rant about Ian's own douche bag boyfriend. Seems like Mandy's not the only one with shit taste in men nowadays. Mickey would listen while Mandy droned on and on about this Brian prick and how he put Ian down any chance he got, isolating him from his family and friends, calling Ian crazy and making him question everything he did, every thought he had. Needless to say, Brian had quite a bit to say about Mickey. Even though as far as either he or Ian knew, Mickey was still thousands of miles away.

It kinda mad Mickey smile, thinking that just the idea of him could unsettle the asshole.

But it irked him that Ian would let any guy treat him that way. That wasn't the Ian he remembered. The strong, independent guy who took no shit. He wasn't afraid of anything, especially not a guy. Mickey wondered if it had something to do with his diagnosis. Ian had sort of folded in on himself...
when he got sick. But Mickey was so sure, when Ian left him at the border, that when he said "this
isn't me anymore" he meant giving parts of himself away for a guy, even if that guy was Mickey.
Mickey had to respect that. But that didn't seem to be the case. Ian had lost himself to this guy, and
that rubbed Mickey all kinds of wrong ways.

'None of your business, asshole.' Mickey reminded himself for the thousandth time. He was finishing
up a long day putting up blue-board and plaster at a high end apartment building on the Northside.
Matt was long gone, it was just Mickey and a few other guys on the crew. Jack didn't come in today,
for the third time that week. He really did makes his own hours.

Staying with Jack was a lot different that sharing a cell with him. He was more open, more himself,
less guarded. In turn, Mickey found himself opening up even more, letting his true colors shine
though too. Something he'd only ever done before with Javier and Lauren. And Ian before them, but
that's different all together. Everything with Ian would always be different.

He pushed those thoughts to the back of his head yet again, gathering up his things and getting ready
to call it a day at work.

"Yo, Dave, we done? I'm gonna get outta here." Mickey yelled from one empty room to another.

"Yeah, get your pale ass outta my building." Dave called back from somewhere in the apartment.

"You wish it was your building, prick. You're just a slave laborer like the rest of us," Mickey said,
grabbing his backpack and heading towards the stairs. He didn't hear anything else form Dave, so he
considered himself dismissed.

The building he was working in was walking distance to Jack's loft, so he started on his way back.
He took out his phone, seeing a text from his sister, and a call from Javier.

He hadn't heard from his friend in a couple weeks, it would be nice to hear his voice. But he checked
his text first.

miss bitch: divorce has gone through!! i'm throwing a divorce party. ;)

Mickey was confused. What the fuck was a divorce party? Like celebrating a divorce? Is that some
new fucked up hipster shit? Maybe being married to Jeff really did turn Mandy into a pretentious
snob. Mickey shook his head disbelievingly, shooting off a reply.

me: wtf is a divorce party? will there be booze?

miss bitch: it's exactly what it sounds like. celebrating my liberation. and of course they'll be booze.

miss bitch: this is the perfect chance for me to meet Lauren & Javier. Call them and get them up here.
They have 3 wks to make arrangements. No is not an acceptable answer....

me: idk if they can drop their whole lives to come to chi to drink w/us. but i'll ask.

miss bitch: k will u b home ltr?

me: prolly not. jacks

miss bitch: k ttyl

me: k
Mickey pocketed his phone, making a mental note to call Javier later and ask about them visiting for the party, and took a cigarette out of his pack, placing it between his lips and lighting it. He put his smokes and his lighter back in his pocket and started picking up the pace. He was starving, and Jack promised to get Chinese tonight. He worked like two days a week, but he was always loaded. Must be nice to have rich parents.

He made it to Jack's building in about ten minutes. He let himself in with his key (Jack insisted on giving him one when he started staying over.)

"Hey man, you home? How come you didn't come to work today?" Mickey called into the apartment. He shed his shoes and hung his coat up on the hook by the door. He saw the chinese takeout already out on the kitchen counter, along with a six pack of beer that had yet to be put in the fridge. He grabbed a beer and popped it open, looking through the takeout boxes. He grabbed a container of lo mien and a crab rangoon and made his way over to the couch. Game of Thrones was paused on the TV, so he turned it back on and got comfortable.

"Hey Mick, how was work?" Jack asked coming out of the bathroom.

"You would know the answer to that question if you bothered to show up." Mickey replied. He stuffed his mouth with some noodles, washing it down with a sip of his beer.

"Yeah, well, my dad said it was cool, so...Why? You miss me?" Jack said.

"You wish, bitch." Mickey laughed, stuffing the crab rangoon in his mouth.

Jack sat down on the couch next to Mickey and pulled a couple of baggies out of his pocket. "Let me make up for my absence." He dropped the bags on the glass coffee table.

"What the fuck is that shit?" Mickey wondered. His pulse picked up a bit. He was still on parole. But fuck if it getting high didn't sound enticing.

"Just a little coke, and some dope." Jack replied. He took his wallet out of his back pocket and placed his debit card and a dollar bill on the table next to the baggies.

"You're doing heroin again, Jack? What the fuck?" Mickey was shocked. He hadn't noticed Jack acting all junked out. Maybe he hadn't been paying enough attention.

"Nah, I just ran into a friend today. Couldn't say no." Jack shrugged as he cut some of the drugs into two long lines, mixing the heroin and cocaine together. "I usually shoot speedballs, but since you're a virgin we can do it like this."

Mickey knew it was a bad idea. He knew he should be telling Jack to go fuck himself. Telling him that getting high only ever got him in trouble.

But Jack knew all that shit already. He just didn't care.

And who was Mickey to turn down free shit?

"Ain't not fucking virgin, prick. Just cuz I don't mainline speedballs doesn't make me a fucking boy scout." he spat.

Besides, it's not like Mickey was inexperienced as far as narcotics went. This was certainly not his first time. So he shrugged and took the offered bill, dipping his head down and sniffing one of the lines in one long go. He sat back against the couch, pinching his nose with his fingers. It burned like a motherfucker, and he gagged a bit.
He heard Jack snorting his own line, and felt him sit back next to him, letting out a quiet chuckle. "Fuck yeah," he sighed.
The drugs took affect almost instantly. He felt a warm rush throughout his whole body, and suddenly he was keyed the fuck up, but warm and slow at the same time.
Speedballs were weird. All the energy and talkativevness of cocaine, with the warm, relaxed undertones of heroin.
And it made you horny as a motherfucker.
He opened his eyes slowly, to see Jack staring back at him with fire in his eyes.
"I either want to tell you all about how I discovered I was gay, or fuck the shit out of you right now..." Jack laughed. He bent down to cut two more lines.
"Slow your fucking roll with that shit. We just did one." Mickey said. He put a hand out and rested in on top of Jack's. Jack looked up from the table.
"Oh Mick, don't be such a square." Jack laughed again, going back to what he was doing.
Mickey sighed and reached for his beer. Probably stupid to try and get between an addict and their drugs.
Jack blew another line and sat back again. "So, you wanna talk about life? Or you wanna fuck?"
"I'll take option B." Mickey laughed. He polished off his beer and reached for Jack, pulling him to lay on top of him on the couch. Jack dove in immediately, the drugs flowing through his veins making him hot and desperate. He kissed Mickey hard, pushing his tongue past his lips and into his mouth.
Mickey reciprocated the best he could, pinned down as he was. He snaked a hand around the back of Jack's head and pulled him down harder. Jack grunted into his mouth, grinding his pelvis down against Mickey's.
They made out feverishly for a while, groping at each other. Their dinner totally forgotten, Mickey slipped a hand under Jack's shirt, palming his chest. Jack arched his back and moaned, dipping his head into Mickey's neck to suck a dark mark on the pale flesh there.
Mickey could feel everything. It's like his body was alight. Every touch amplified, every sound echoing. It was incredible. He felt consumed by need, more want than he could remember in a long time.
All the thoughts that had been plaguing him since he'd come home disappeared, and all that existed in that moment was Jack, and his raging hard on.
"Wanna try something?" Jack asked, grinding his erection against Mickey's.
"Uh, like what?" Mickey stuttered. This was torture. He needed more.
"Flip fuck." Jack breathed. He grabbed a fist full of Mickey's hair, tugging his head back to get better access to his neck. He licked a long stripe from his collar bone to right behind his ear.
"You know what that is, don't you Mick?" he breathed, hot breath fanning over Mickey's neck causing him to break out in full body chills.
"Yeah, yeah, I know." Mickey ground out, thrusting up as Jack ground down again. "We could do that, shit."
Jack pulled back to give Mickey a sinful smile, jumping up from the couch and pulling Mickey up with him. He bent over the coffee table to bump another line, Mickey following suit. Then they made their way to the bedroom. Mickey sniffed hard, feeling the chemicals slide down his throat, followed
by a warm numbness. He was floating. He felt bright and alive and shit was beautiful. Jesus, he was fucking up.

When he got to the bedroom, Jack was already naked on the bed. Next to him on the Comforted was a huge bottle of lube and a black butt plug.

"You don't fuck around, do you?" Mickey smiled. He pulled his shirt over his head and threw it on the floor. He strips his pants and boxers and kneels on the bed. "Kinky fucker."

"You're telling me you are a hot, young gay dude, and you've never seen a fucking butt plug?" Jack laughed. He ran a hand down his chest, eying Mickey hungrily.

Sure Mickey has, back when....
no no no. don't you dare.
Back when he and Ian.....
motherfucker

Mickey pulls himself back into the moment just as Jack slides down his body, fingers already lubed up, mouth hovering over his cock. How the fuck did he miss Jack doing all that shit? When did he ever grab the lube? How did he even get on his back?

His train of thought cut off mid-stream by Jack's warm mouth engulfing him. Mickey jerks in surprise, but Jack steadies him with his unlubed hand on his hip. He looks up at him, winks. Mickey looks up at him, winks. Mickey laughs, which turns into a moan as Jack sinks down on his cock, all the way down, until his tip is jammed against the back of the kid's throat. Jack makes a small gagging sound, but doesn't back off. He goes down and down, back up, swirling tongue, down again. His mouth is so hot and wet. His hand slides down towards Mickey's ass.

Mickey can feel the cool, wet finger slipping around his entrance. He jerks again as a slick finger slips inside. Why is he so god damn jumpy?

Jack pumps his finger in and out of Mickey, mouth wet and warm around his dick. The dual stimulation is making Mickey's head spin. He adds a second finger and starts scissoring them. In, out, back forth. The stretch is delicious, that fine line between pleasure and pain.

Jack sits up, his fingers slipping free, Mickey's cock slapping back against his stomach with a wet plop. He grabs the butt plug and waves it around in front of Mickey's face. It looks a bit strange, curved. Prostate simulator, as Javier would say. He's seen them before, never used one...

"You wanna do it, or can I? I want you to wear this shit while you fuck me, then we'll switch. S's fucking hot." he was sweating, his pupils small. That must be the heroin, Mickey thinks, because he was so turned on, his eyes should have been all black, dilated wide. Mickey wonders what he looks like right now.

"Not sure I'm gonna last long enough to do all that pornstar shit." Mickey says, watching Jack lube up the plug quickly.

"That's the thing about dope, Mick, you don't come. We can fuck for hours, stay hard the whole time, but we won't come. Trust me, I know." Jack laughed. He leaned down and scraped his teeth along Mickey's collar bone. Mickey hissed, arching up.

"Where's the fucking fun in that?" Mickey balks. He wants to sound annoyed, but it comes out a little desperate as he can feel Jack easing the plug into his stretched hole.

"Fucking hot." he hears Jack whisper, almost to himself. "Trust me, Mickey, we're going to have lots
of fun tonight."

Mickey was quite positive the drugs in his system had numbed his whole body by this point. There was no intense pressure when the fattest part of the plug breached him. He felt a twinge of disappointment, he liked that initial thrill of pain, that sweet release of the burn before it melted away into mind-blowing pleasure.

Jack pushed and pulled the plug a few times, finally hitting that spot in Mickey that made him see god. Not even the speedballs could dull the feeling of his prostate being brought to life. He felt a hot flush over his whole body, writhing with it.

"So fucking hot." Jack repeated. Mickey had almost forgotten he was there for a moment. He must be really fucking high. He opened his eyes. (when did he close them?) To see Jack hovering over him, hand out behind his back, presumably fingerling himself open.

"Lemme." Mickey murmured, moving to sit up, but Jack put his free hand on his chest and pushed him back down on the bed.

"Nah." he sighed. "Wanna do this for you. Make you feel good." Jack said, a breathy moan escaping his lips. Mickey lays his head back down on the pillows and closes his eyes. His hearing is amplified with his eyes closed. He can hear every muted grunt and sigh that escapes Jack's lips. His head is swimming, drowning in the muddy feelings of sex and want and need.

He feels a hand on his painfully hard cock, slippery with lube, and then he loses himself. Tight, wet heat envelops him and he can't think. Can't speak. Can't breathe. He's lost. Totally at sea.

"Oh my fucking god....."he hears. Far away. Distant.

Jack start rocking back and forth, planting his hands on Mickey's chest. Staking his claim.

"Oh god, yes, fuck me with that cock. Jesus, been waiting so long..."

Micky is between worlds. He can feel Jack bouncing on his dick. He can hear the filthy words spilling out of his mouth, but he doesn't feel anything.

Not like with........
Nonononono...
Don't you dare.

That was close. That was a close call.
Mickey steels himself. He focuses on what's real. What's in front of him right now.

"You wanna get fucked?" he breathes, bucking his hips up into Jack's writhing body. "You want me to fuck you good and hard???

"Yes, oh Jesus, yes." Jack moans.

Mickey flips them over. He's hovering over Jack's surprised face. He smirks. "Okay then." he says, and starts pounding into him. Jack cries out over and over, digging his blunt fingernails into the pale flesh of Mickey's shoulders. Marking him in a way he'd have never allowed back then, back with....

NO. Fucking NO.
Stop that fucking shit.

No matter how hard he fucks him, no matter how long he gets fucked, no matter how long he goes,
his orgasm won't come. Mickey thinks in that moment that heroin is the dumbest drug ever invented.

He finally gives up at 3am.

After he's fucked Jack. And Jack's fucked him. And they've gone back and forth, inside and outside and upside down. No release comes. No calm after the storm. He doesn't relax.
He crumbles.
He implodes in on himself.
He falls out. Hard. All black. Sudden.
Nothingness.
It's not so bad.

Mickey isn't sure what time it is when he comes to next. All he knows is there is a warm mouth around him, a firm grip on his thigh. He's so tired and a little bit fucked up still from all the drugs and booze he consumed last night. Like he's still floating somewhere between fantasy and reality.

He squeezes his eyes shut, losing himself in the sensation of lips and tongue and pressure just this side of too much. It's good, so good. And maybe it's because he was on the cusp of coming for hours last night and never got there, but he feels like he's about to burst.

"Oh fuck, Ian." he sighs.

'what the fuck? jesus christ. what the fuck.' He goes rigid, waiting for Jack to bite his dick off. But nothing comes, Jack just keeps sucking his dick like it's going out of style, and Mickey thinks he's dodged one more bullet.

Maybe he didn't really say it out loud.

He can feel his balls tightening and his stomach coiling up. He leans his head back and comes, hard down Jack's throat. He keeps his fucking mouth shut, not trusting himself to say a damn word.

Jack sits up and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. "Morning." he smiles.

So he didn't hear it. Good.

"I uh, I gotta go, man." Mickey sit up, feeling woozy and light headed. Probably all the fucking partying they did last night. Or the mind blowing orgasm he finally got. Who knows.

"Gotta go so soon? Thought we'd do something today." Jack says it so innocently, so nicely, that Mickey feels like a dick. Because all he wants to do is get a little alone time. This shit was intense, and Mickey all of the sudden didn't know where Jack stood.

They were friends that fucked. That's all there was to it. They had both agreed.

But this shit was morphing into something else entirely. He was skirting that line, and someone was going to get hurt if he didn't put the brakes on.

"Nah, man, gotta help my sister get ready for her divorce party. You still wanna come? Don't hafta." Mickey was already up and searching the bedroom for his discarded clothes.

"Yeah, I'm still gonna come. Told you and her I would. Don't get weird, Mick, it's still just sex to me." Jack stood up off the bed and got in Mickey's face. He put his hands on Mickey's hips, shaking him back and forth a bit. "Told you, you don't have to worry about me catching feelings. I'm cool with this arrangement."
Mickey sighed. That's good. That's really good. Because Mickey didn't want to be a dick. He liked Jack, always had. Just didn't want to wife him up. Kid was chaos. Mickey was chaos. But their particular brands of insanity didn't mesh quite right.

Not like.... motherfucker.

Close calls like this were happening more and more since he came home. He wasn't able to ignore it like he had in Mexico. He had been able to bury that shit pretty deep when he was thousands of miles away. Thoughts of Ian and what he'd lost only coming when he was beyond wasted drunk. Then, he'd always had Javier and Lauren to talk him down, remind him that he was okay now, that shit was done.

But now he was back home, and that shit didn't feel so finished anymore.

He'd have to deal with this bullshit soon, or he'd never be able to move on.

"Cool, man. I like you a lot Jack, and we have fun. But you know where I'm at." he tapped the side of his temple to emphasize the fact that he was fucked in the head.

Jack laughed. "I know, Mick. I know all about it. Now get the fuck outta my house." He threw Mickey's T shirt at him, hitting him square in the face. Mickey laughed.

"Alright asshole. I'll see you at the bar tonight." He didn't wait for Jack to respond, pulling his shirt over his head, grabbing his keys, wallet and phone off the coffee table. He eyed the drugs out on the glass surface. A new baggie of heroin was out, along with a spoon. There was a brown residue in the bottom of the spoon, a small bit of cotton in the middle.

So Jack had shot up this morning before he came in to blow Mickey awake. That's why he didn't ask Mickey to return the favor.

Mickey shook his head at the mess in front of him and made his way over to the door to let himself out. Even if he did want Jack as a boyfriend (which he didn't) he didn't think he could ever be with someone so caught up in drugs. Strung out and desperate. Reminded him of his mother, before she died.

That's what addicts did. They died. He hoped to Christ Jack didn't die on him. That would fucking suck.

Mickey made his way out of the apartment building and onto the L, headed back to the Southside, back to his real life. Leaving the fantasy of what he had with Jack behind.

He shifted on the hard seat uncomfortable, his ass aching in a way he was all too familiar with. As he was moving around to try and find a position he could tolerate, he felt the slow trickle of come drizzle out between his ass cheeks.

motherfucker.
They didn't use a condom.
They fucked for hours in all positions, giving and taking it equally.
And they didn't use fucking condoms.
How high had he been?
Fuck.
And Jack was shooting up.
Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.
Mickey banged his head against the window of the car, hard. An old lady across the car glared at him.
He fucked up.

"Brian, I don't know why you think you can tell me who I can and can't hang out with. You are not my god damn father, and you are not my fucking keeper." Ian ground out, fuming.

He had been having this argument with Brian for the past two weeks, ever since he told him about the party for Mandy's divorce. There was no way in hell Ian was going to miss this. Mandy had asked him specifically to support her. And he was so lucky to have her back in his life at all, he wasn't going to flake on her. He was not going to let her down. Never again.

Brian had been drinking all day. He never got sloppy when he drank, it was hard to tell he was even drunk. Until he opened his mouth, that is. He was ruder than usual. And sometimes he got violent. Ian could hold his own in a fight, but Brian never fought fair.

"Ian, you are obviously not thinking clearly. That woman is a mess. She is the sister of your psychotic escaped convict boyfriend. They are trash. And if you go down there, you are nothing but trash as well." Brian walked out from the kitchen, around the dining table, and got right in Ian's face. "Do you want to be trash? Is it because that's what you really are? Trying to dress up a pig, but it's still just a pig. Lipstick or not, you are a pig." He poked Ian hard in the chest with his finger. "And you attach yourself to these crazy, lowly people because they are like you, obviously insane, and complete and utter garbage." he gulped down the rest of his bourbon and immediately poured himself another glass.

"You know what, fuck you. You spoiled, pretentious asshole. Fuck you." Ian moved to go around him, heading for the bedroom. He needed to get out for a while. He couldn't breathe in this posh space. All white walls and expensive furniture. He felt like an interloper. Brian always made him feel that way. Crazy. White trash. A pretender to this life he had worked so hard for.

He turned the corner into the bedroom just as he felt a hard push in his back. He went sprawling to the hardwood floor, banging his knees and hitting his head. He turned over to sit up, but Brian was on him in an instant.

"Don't you fucking walk away from me." Brian growled, he sat on Ian's waist and grabbed him by the face. "You think you're so tough cuz you're southside, but you're just a sad little psycho faggot. Probably couldn't fight your way out of a wet paper bag." and he slapped him, hard. Ian's face jerked to the side, skin on fire with the sting from Brian's open palm. "I won't even hit you with a close fist, you deserve to be slapped like a bitch. Trashy southside bitch." he spat in his face and lifted himself off Ian, walking out of the bedroom without another word.

Ian sat up and put his head in his shaking hands.
That was close. Really close. Too close.
He wasn't in an abusive relationship.
Was he?

He didn't know, his gauge for this shit was off. Brian didn't beat him. He didn't cheat. So he's not abusive, right?
He stumbled to his feet and grabbed his phone off the coffee table, shooting Mandy a text.

me: don't know if i'll be able to make it tonight, brian is not feeling well

He hated lying to her, but he just couldn't risk another fight. They gave him major anxiety and always fucked with his bipolar. He didn't want to risk a slip. Mandy would understand. He looked down in his hand when his phone pinged.

Mandy: it's okay, never thought you were gonna show anyway. you're on lockdown. don't think for a sec we're not gonna talk abt this shit. it aint right. xoxo

Ian loved Mandy even more in that moment. Always there for him, even when he failed her. He hated himself in that moment, so much.

He had to get the fuck out of the house. Even if he couldn't go to Mandy, he couldn't stay in that house another minute. He'd just walk around the block for a while. That would settle his nerves. Sure, that would help.

Ian shook his head and stood up. He changed his shirt and put on his shoes.

He was almost to the door when he heard Brian come up behind him. He braced himself for another push, but instead felt warm arms wrap around his middle.

"I'm so sorry." Brian whispered, ghosting his lips by Ian's ear. He laid a gentle kiss there. "You're not crazy, you're not trash. I was mad because you refuse to listen to what I'm saying." he turned Ian around to look him in his green eyes, red rimmed but not teary. Ian was not going to cry.

"I'll go to this party tonight. For you. I don't want to be friends with these people, Ian. I don't think you should either, they drag you down. Make you that person you used to be. Remember? Sick, violent, turning tricks...."

"Brian, stop." Ian whispered. He couldn't help it anymore, the tears he'd been willing back spilled out of his eyes. Brian always knew just what to say to hurt Ian the most. It was one of his special skills.

"I just want so much more for you, baby. I don't want you to be that cheap whore, unstable and unhealthy. You see that, I know you do." Brian cooed, his voice thick like honey despite his poisonous words. "But we can go tonight. I'll do that for you, because I love you, and I want to protect you. From them. From yourself. Who knows what you would do if I weren't there to keep an eye on you."

Ian cringed at that. He hadn't done anything remotely crazy in a long time. He was medicated, he was stable. Brian hadn't even been around when Ian was bad. But he knew the stories. If Ian had known that he'd use them against him like this, he never would have told him.

"Okay, Bri, thanks." Ian mumbles. "But, uh, please don't put your hands on me like that again. It was scary, I don't like it."

Ian knew it was fruitless to ask, Brian had pinned him and slapped him countless times. Even punched him once or twice. But Ian knew he was a lot to handle. Hell, him and Mickey beat the shit out of each other regularly.

But this felt different. Ian didn't know why.

"I won't baby, I'm sorry. You just make me so mad when you won't listen to reason." Brian said it so
sweetly, Ian was suddenly sure he was to blame for this whole thing. Maybe he could have gone about things differently. He didn't know.

"So let's go make an appearance at this godawful party, then we'll come home and you can make it up to me all night." Brian pulled Ian impossibly closer and ground their crotches together.

"Sure, Bri. Sounds good." Ian said, trying not to flinch at the contact. He followed Brian out of the apartment and locked the door.

As he followed him out of the building and to the car, Ian couldn't help but feel like he dodged a bullet. Brian had given him a black eye the last time they fought. He didn't know how he would have explained that to Mandy.
Chapter Summary

Ian and Mickey finally face each other, but it's not what either of them expected.
warning: this chapter is the reason main reason for the rape/non-con tag in this story. it gets pretty bad for a second.
there is also a lot of mickey/omc in this one.
the entire chapter is pretty heavy, and graphic.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mickey hadn't had a decent night's sleep in the past three days. He was running on fumes and whiskey shots at this point, but he was happier than he'd been in a long time.

Mandy, Jack and Mickey had driven down to O'hare three days ago, to pick up Lauren and Javier. It was a trip to have them up here, like his two separate distinct worlds had collided, exploding all over him. The only thing that could make it any wierder was if Ian were to pop up out of nowhere. That would really put the icing on this insanity cake.

But Mandy had assured him that Ian had turned down the invite to the party tonight, due, yet again, to his asshole boyfriend, and the tight, short leash he apparently had Gallagher on. Mickey never would have pinned Ian for the broken abused housewife type, but he guessed maybe he didn't know the redhead like he used to. He shrugged off the thought and focused on the hilarious scene in front of him.

It wasn't too late yet, but the party was in full swing. They had the VIP room of some posh northside club paid out for the night. The room was raised up off the main floor, seperate from the rest of the club. It was chaotic in there, the walls lined with small tables and booths, the center of the room it's own miniature version of the dance floor in the main club. The music from the main room flowing into the space from speakers on the wall. There was a flatscreen TV affixed to the far wall, for karaoke later, Lauren had already set it up. That girl and her fucking karaoke. There was even a stripper pole in the left hand corner of the room, unoccupied at the moment. But if Mickey knew this crowd at all, it wouldn't stay that way for long.

The room was packed. Mandy was on the dancefloor with Javier and Lauren. The three of them had hit it off immediately, much to Mickey's amused chagrin. The talked like old friends and picked on Mickey mercilessly. He pretened to hate the fact that they got along so well, but secretly he was beyond pleased. He felt like his little ragtag family had finally come together.

Iggy was off at a table in the corner, bumping lines with his girlfriend, whatever the fuck her name was. Tina? Tara? Mickey didn't remember. She was dumb as a box of rocks, but so was Iggy, so he supposed that could be the reason they got on so well. He walked over to them just as Jack appeared behind Iggy.
"You sharing?" Jack asked, putting his hand on Iggy's shoulder.

"Ey, watch yourself." Iggy barked, shrugging Jack's hand off his shoulder. "Mick, tell your boyfriend to keep his grimy hands off me."

"Ain't my boyfriend, Igg, and if you didn't wanna share, you should've kept that shit on the down low." Mickey laughed.

"It ain't no thing, baby, give 'em some." the girl said, smiling at Jack.

"He's a fag, Tess, no need to give him the eye." Iggy said, cutting lines for Jack and Mickey.

"Not that you're not gorgeous." Jack smiled, turning on the charm.

Tess lit up like a christmas tree, blushing like a virgin. Mickey rolled his eyes. What was it with straight girls wanting to fuck gay guys? He didn't get it.

"Here you go, freeloaders." Iggy said motioning towards the two lines on the table. Jack bent down and blew one, moving aside so Mickey could do the same. Mickey felt the burn of the cocaine in his throat and thought, not for the first time, that he needed to slow down on this shit. It seemed like it was everywhere lately. Hanging out with Jack wasn't really helping.

But it was a party, so fuck it.

"Booze." he stated, walking out of the VIP and down towards the bar. Jack followed behind him, grabbing onto the back of his untucked black button up shirt so he didn't lose him in the crowd. The bar was packed, but Mickey sidled right up to it, squeezing between two people and banging a fist on the bar top.

"Whiskey." he said as the bartender rounded on him with his eyebrows raised. "And whatever this princess is drinking." he motioned over his shoulder with his thumb in Jack's direction. Jack huffed an affronted laugh.

Jack ordered and they waited.

"Lauren was telling me you are a karaoke champion." Jack whisper-shouted over the throbbing club music.

"I don't know what the fuck she's talking about." Mickey muttered. He took their drinks from the bartender and paid. Handing Jack his rum and coke, he sipped his whiskey and made his way back to his sister's party.

"Oh, come on Mick, don't be like that. It could be fun." Jack whined. He followed closely behind, again latching onto Mickey's shirt, trying not to get swallowed by the crowd.

"Alright, alright. One song." Mickey laughed. Why the hell not? It was a good night, surrounded by people he loved. Fuck it. Karaoke was apparently a thing they did now.

"Yippee!!!" Jack hollered. He did a fist pump and some kind of jumping kick as they made their way back into the VIP room.

"Fucking idiot." Mickey laughed. He wouldn't have him any other way.
"So I said to Chris, I said 'this investment is going to come back and bite you in the ass' and he didn't believe me. So when he lost his house and his wife left him, I sent him a fruit basket with a note that said 'I told you so.'" Brian laughed. Ian turned from staring out the window of their Uber to stare at Brian.

"Did you really do that?" Ian asked, eyes wide.

"Of course I did." Brian replied simply. "I love being right." Brian had been drinking all afternoon, and when he got drunk he got even more entitled and arrogant. It was hard for Ian to put up with him like this, but he kept reminding himself that he was hard to deal with too, sometimes.

"But you've been friends with him since prep school. He lost his job, his house in foreclosure, and his wife of 10 years left him and took their son. How can you be so flippant about that? You are supposed to be one of his best friends."

"That doesn't change the fact that he should have listened to me. Maybe next time when I give him good, free advice, he won't shit all over it." Brian snarled. He turned away from Ian and looked out the opposite window. "You know, there's a lesson in that story for you too, Ian."

Ian rolled his eyes, but didn't say anything. They pulled up in front of the club and Ian walked in ahead of Brian.

"I'm going to the bar. I'll come find you when I'm ready to." Brian said and walked away without waiting for a response. Ian was starting to think he made a mistake asking Brian to join him tonight. But he also knew he wouldn't have been allowed to come if Brian wasn't here to supervise.

Ian hung his head for a moment, just standing there in the middle of the dance floor. Bodies writhing and grinding all around him. He was hit with a profound wave of sadness, in that moment, light strobing and the floor vibrating underneath him.

Brian was an asshole. And Ian felt stuck. He had melded his life seamlessly with this prick, and had no idea how to extricate himself. Or if he even deserved freedom anymore. Maybe this was all there was for him now. Maybe there was no one better out there for him anymore. He sighed, feeling his eyes sting with the start of tears. He took a deep breath to steady himself. He'd deal with this shit later. No use in falling apart right now.

He looked around for the VIP section Mandy had mentioned when they had last spoke. There was a big yellow door at the far end of the dance floor, up on a platform of some sort. A raised room, up two tiny steps. The walls looked like windows, that could be opened to the dance floor below, or closed for more privacy. They were closed now, dark black curtains hiding whatever was going on inside.

Ian took one more very deep breath. He looked around for Brian real quick, but when he didn't see him in the immediate vicinity, he decided 'fuck it' and took the two small steps up to the VIP. He was not prepared for the sight that greeted him when he swung open the door to the VIP room. Everything else faded away. The walls, the music, the smiling, laughing people that filled the room.

The only thing that existed in that moment was the man standing on the small stage in the back of the room. He looked good. Amazing, even. Like a dream Ian had had a hundred times before. Ian's heart was lodged in his throat.

Mickey.
'what the fuck. what the fuck. what the fuck. am i losing my mind? am i hallucinating? is this a high? am i manic? Oh god. Please no. Jesus fucking Christ.'

Suddenly he was sweating, he couldn't feel his fingers. Panicked numbness overtook him.

His head was spinning. He was losing it. He hadn't hallucinated Mickey in a long ass time. Not since that one really bad break down after he left him at the border. He had ended up in the hospital for a while. Med tweaks. Shit ton of inpatient therapy. He had gotten numb for a long time after that. Met Brian shortly after. And all his Mickey hallucinations had stopped. Maybe it was seeing Mandy again....

The ringing in his ears subsided and he felt himself falling back to earth as a hand grabbed him by the arm, hard.

"Ian, what the fuck are you doing here? You told me you couldn't come." Mandy asked, she looked over her shoulder to where Mickey was standing.

Mickey was standing there. Really standing there. Ian shook his head, not bothering to respond to Mandy.

As his surroundings came back into focus, he noticed Mickey was not just standing on the little stage, he was singing. This had to be some kind of fucked up mind shit, there was no way.... Mickey was on stage with a girl. A small, thin girl that reminded Ian of a slightly older Mandy. She had short dark hair cut into a bob, and wore a standard little black dress and combat boots.

Mickey looked at her fondly as he took up his part singing.

They were doing fucking KARAOKE. Now Ian knew he'd really lost his god damn mind.

He watches aghast as Mickey spins the girl with one hand, holding his mic in the other. She has a blinding smile on her face, looking at Mickey like he hung the moon.

'are they fucking? no way...'

Ian can't help but feel sick all of the sudden. He needs a fucking drink. Then Mickey starts singing.....

"And now our bodies are, oh, so close and tight
It never felt so good, it never felt so right
And we're glowing like the metal on the edge of a knife
Glowing like the metal on the edge of a knife
C'mon, hold on tight
C'mon, hold on tight"

He's smiling wider than Ian can ever remember. Ian feels like he's intruding on a private moment, even though he's in a club surrounded by people. Then all of the sudden Mickey puts his hand down and pulls someone up on the stage with him and the girl. It's a man. A sexy ass man. He looks Latin. Tall. Muscular. Dark skin and dark eyes. Perfect brown hair pushed off his flawless face.

Just when Ian is sure this nightmare can't get any more twisted, Sexy Latin pulls another dude up on the stage. This guy is much shorter than Sexy Latin. Pale, like Mickey but much skinnier. He's got shaggy blond hair that reminds Ian of Lip for some reason. But what really fucks Ian up is how he slinks up to Mickey, as they all start belting out the lyrics to this old ass song, using the same mic like some bizzaro singalong. The guy puts his arm around Mickey's waist and Mickey puts his fucking
arm over the kid's shoulder. They are all super close, dancing around each other and scream-singing the lyrics off beat.

Ian thinks they all must be hammered. They look hammered.

And happy.

The song starts winding down, and Mickey and the girl finish the last lyrics, smiling fondly at one another.

"It was long ago and it was far away,
And it was so much better than it is today.
It never felt so good, it never felt so right
And we were glowing like the metal on the edge of a knife"

They all laugh and embrace each other, Ian doesn't miss the kiss between Mickey and Skinny Lip as they all jump off the stage and disappear into the crowd as a couple girls jump up on stage and a Pat Benatar song starts up.

Ian is certain he's lost his damn mind, and he feels like he's suffocating, watching Mickey happy and free and in fucking Chicago.

He turns to Mandy, fire in his eyes. "What. The. Fuck." he grinds out, trying his best not to punch something.

"Ian," Mandy starts, moving to put a hand on his arm. He shakes her off.

"What the fuck?" he repeats.

"He asked me not to tell you. It wasn't my place. Please, Ian, don't make a scene." she rushes out.

"Make a scene? Are you for real right now?" Ian cries.

He sees the shocked look on her face and softens immediately. "Sorry," he sighs. "I just don't know what the fuck to do with this," he gestures toward the space Mickey had just occupied.

Mandy doesn't say anything, she just puts her hand back on his arm, squeezing his bicep softly. He face is also soft, like she's afraid of breaking him.

Ian takes a deep breath, trying to calm his spiraling thoughts.

"I should probably just go. Brian will kill me if he finds out he's here. And I don't want to ruin your night." Ian can't even believe himself right now. Every instinct in his body is telling him to go to Mickey, to touch Mickey. To grab onto Mickey and never let him go.

But that's not what he should do. He needs to let the past stay in the past. Mickey is obviously doing well. Somehow not on the run anymore, somehow home again. He looks happy. Ian doesn't want to ruin that for him. If he'd wanted contact with Ian, he knew where to find him.

Obviously, he didn't want that.

Ian can feel the prickling of tears in his eyes, his throat closing up.

'Don't you dare fucking cry. Jesus.'

Ian turned to leave, bumping into Brian on the way to the door.
"You didn't even wait for me." Brian said, grabbing Ian by the arm. "How rude of you."

He has a half drunk cocktail in one hand, and a full one in the other. He polishes off the first drink in one sip and drops the glass loudly on a nearby table.

"Brian, we can just go." Ian stammers. He didn't want this to be the way Brian met Mandy, with Ian's head a mess and his emotions running amok, and Brian embarrassingly drunk already. He wasn't even sure about shit with Brian anymore. His relationship with Brian felt like it was on thin ice lately, and this confrontation would probably be the last nail in the coffin. He had to get them out, now.

"Oh, hell no, Ian. You wanted this shit. We are here. Don't be doing that bullshit flip flopping on me now. You know I hate it when you get this way. You really know how to piss me off, you know that?" Brian was using that authoritarian tone that Ian hated. Like he was an errant child who deserves a serious punishment. "Days and days you bitch about this fucking party, now we are here, I haven't even finished my first drink, and you want to leave? Un-fucking-believable." he downed his second drink, dropping it next to the first on the table, making a loud clatter.

Everyone in the room looked over. The only noise now was the karaoke music blaring in the background.

Great, this is exactly what Ian wanted. To make a scene.

Before Ian could apologize, try to diffuse Brian's anger, Mandy stepped in front of him. She crossed her arms over her chest and narrowed her eyes at Ian's boyfriend.

"I don't think we've had the pleasure. I'm Mandy. You must be Brian." she didn't extend her hand, just continued to stare him down.

"Oh, I know all about you." Brian sneered. "Ian told me all about his fucked up childhood, his fucked up life, his fucked up head, and his fucked up friends. I don't know why I even bother with his stupid ass. He obviously belongs here in the gutter with you people."

Mandy just smiled. A wicked little grin with her raised eyebrows. Ian thought she looked like Mickey in that moment.

She shrugged her shoulders and looked over her shoulder at Ian. Ian just stared back, feeling vulnerable having Mandy seeing him dressed down by his boyfriend. She gave him a look full of sadness and pity before she turned back to Brian. "You're a dick. If this wasn't my party, I'd kick you in the balls. You can get the fuck out. Ian, you stay, yeah?" she said the last part with none of the venom the rest of the sentence had been delivered with. It was gentle, like she was trying to coax him out of hurting himself.

Maybe she was.

"Oh, no fucking way. I knew this shit would happen. You see!! You see!! Ian, I told you they were trying to drag you back in. She's jealous you got out, you have a real man. A real life. You don't need this trash anymore, I'm taking you home." he grabbed Ian's arm so tight Ian flinched.

"Brian, come on. You're drunk already. Please don't get mad, it's okay. We can just go." Ian said in his most placating tone. He didn't move to pull away, knowing that would only make Brian angrier. "Mandy," he turned to his friend with pleading eyes "I'm just gonna go, he's had a lot to drink today and he's not himself."

Brian barked a sinister laugh, letting go of his arm only to shove Ian in the back hard. He went
sprawling forward, bowling into Mandy. They held onto each other, stunned.

"You don't speak for me." He pushed Ian again before he could even right himself, shoving him harder into Mandy's arms. "You think you can speak for me? I do what I fucking want."

Ian tried to stand up, but Brian grabbed him by the back of the neck, pulling him back so he was facing Brian. "You always do this. Make me out to be the bad guy. Make a scene so everyone can see us fight. You love to play the victim, don't you? Make it seem like I'm trying to control you, when all I want is what's best for you. You need someone to protect you from yourself. Pathetic." he sneered.

Ian looked over at Mandy, seeing shock and pity in her eyes. But her voice was hard when she spoke again. "You better fucking let him go."

The commotion already attracting attention from the rest of the party, now someone had turned off the music. The only sound in the room now was Brian's heavy breathing.

Ian was mortified. Not only was he being mistreated by his boyfriend in public, but Mickey was here. It was the first time he's set eyes on him since the border, and now he's going to see him like this. This pathetic victim. He wanted to die of embarrassment.

Brian tightened his hold on Ian's neck, shaking him back and forth roughly. Ian could smell alcohol on his breath. It made him want to puke. "Trashy little south side faggot. I should have known better than to try and move you uptown." He let go of Ian's neck and shoved him.

Ian stumbled yet again, feeling drunk even though he hadn't had a drop of alcohol yet. His head was swimming with anxiety and embarrassment.

"Fuck you, Brian, there's nothing wrong with me." he screamed, losing all sense of where he was. "You are always telling me I'm crazy, telling me I'm trash. Always telling me I'm not good enough. There's nothing wrong with me. You're the fucked up one. You controlling prick!!"

Brian smiled at that. Then he cocked back and punched Ian right in the face.

Pain bloomed all over the left side of Ian's face. He stumbled once more, falling into Mandy's open arms. He felt blood dribbling out of his nose, felt sharp pain behind his eyes.

"What the fuck is going on over here?" Ian jumped when he heard that voice. Could this get any worse? Mickey had come up behind them, intervening on his behalf. Of course he was.

Ian opened his eyes again, still being held by Mandy, to see Mickey standing there with his two friends. Skinny Lip-lookalike and Hot Latin. Wonderful.

"Oh you must be the infamous Mickey." Brian spat. "What is going on here is none of your fucking business. I'm talking to my petulant child of a boyfriend. None of any of you people's concern." He grabbed Ian hard by the hand that was not clutching his bleeding face, and started pulling him toward the exit of the room.

"Well, fuckface, since you're at my sister's party, and you just fucked up her best friend, I'd say it's very much my business." Mickey smiled. That deadly smile Ian knew so well. "So why don't you let Gallagher go, and get the fuck outta here, before me and my boys here rearrange your ugly face."
Brian laughed. A loud, maniacal sound that scared Ian. He pushed Ian out of the way harshly so he could step up and face Mickey.

"You think just cuz you're south side you can take me in a fight?" he laughed. "Ian here is just as south side as you and he's the biggest pussy I've ever met. I don't think any of you assholes have got any balls." he stepped up even closer to Mickey, so his whiskey breath was fanning over his face. He had a good three inches on Mickey, but the other man didn't look intimidated in the least.

"You gonna defend his honor now? Still hung up on this pathetic little faggot?" Brian laughed, pushing Mickey back with both hands on his chest. "C'mon, Mickey." he sneered drawing out his name tauntingly. He pushed him again, harder this time. "Be the hero."

Mickey smiled again, rubbing his eyebrow with the back of his thumb. He looked over at his two friends, who both looked just as shocked as Ian felt. Mickey nodded his head to nobody in particular, then looked back at Brian.

He didn't say anything. He just brought his knee up and buried it in Brian's crotch. Brian grabbed his balls and doubled over in agony. A pained grunt passed his lips. When he landed on his knees on the floor, Mickey grabbed him by the back of the head and kneed him in the face.

Mickey stepped back immediately, avoiding the blood pouring out of Brian's nose as his body fell forward on to the floor. There was a dull thud as his face hit the hardwood floor. Mickey knelt down and pulled Brian's head up by the hair. He got real close to his face, to whisper in his ear.

"Okay, fuckface. I was trying to be nice. But now you've gone and fucked that all up. Get your entitled douchebag ass out of my face or I'm going to break every bone in your damn body."

He dropped Brian's head and walked away.

Ian's mouth was hanging open, blood still pouring out of his nose from the hit he took. He watched, flabbergasted, as Brian struggled to his feet and looked at Ian. His face was swollen and he'd most likely have two black eyes.

'we're gonna look like twins'. The insane, unwelcome thought came unbidden to Ian as he continued to stare at his boyfriend.

Brian looked scared. He never looked scared.

"I'll be outside, Ian." he said, trying very hard to put some of his previous bravado back into his voice. "Don't make me wait." he turned around without another word and walked out of the room.

Brian was gone, the spectacle was over. Everyone went back to the party. It felt surreal to Ian, like maybe the whole confrontation happened in his head.

But the blood steadily dripping out of his nose was all the proof he needed. He put a hand up to his face to try and catch some of the mess.

Mandy had grabbed a towel from behind the bar and handed it to him. "You don't have to go, Ian. It's probably safer for you to stay with us." she said quietly as she pressed the towel hard to his nose. He flinched away from the touch, taking the towel in his own hand.

"Nah, Mands, it will only make it worse if I don't go with him. He's not usually this bad. I pushed him to come tonight, and I shouldn't have. He's just trying to prove a point." Ian dropped the bloody towel in the trash, nobody would want to wash that shit.
"Ian." Mandy started, putting both her hands on his shoulders. She squeezed again, softly. "What are you doing? That guy...." Mandy gestures vaguely with her hand.

Ian looked behind him, seeing that Mickey and his friends have gone back to the party, leaving Mandy and Ian alone. Ian felt a tinge of sadness at the fact that Mickey could just turn away from him. But he was relieved at the same time. He didn't want Mickey or his friends to be privy to any more of his problems.

Ian turned back to Mandy and took a deep breath. He had a moment of clarity, then, staring into his best friend's worried eyes. Finally admitting to himself something he'd be avoiding for months.

"I know, Mands. I have been trying to make it work with him for months now, guess I was in denial. Didn't want another failed relationship." he did his best not to look in Mickey's direction as he said that.

"Ian, you and I both know from experience that you can't make shit work with people like Brian. He's just like my ex-husband. It's impossible to make people like that happy. You're only going to get hurt, more and more. I had no idea he hit you." she sounded so damn sad. This wasn't the Ian she knew.

"He doesn't do it often, only when he's drunk, really." Ian said, even though he knew it sounded like an excuse. Because it was.

"Ian." Mandy started. Her face contorted in pain as she shook her head.

"I know. I know." he cut her off, putting a hand up to stop her interruption. "Listen, I've gotta go, but I'm pretty sure this is the end with Brian. I can't live like this anymore. But I gotta go right now. I'll call you when I've got things figured out." he had to get out of there. He was emotionally overwhelmed, anxiety flooding his system.

"Okay, hun. If you need a place to stay, call me." she said.

"What about...." Ian started, looking behind himself again to see Mickey talking to Hot Latin, purposely not looking anywhere near Ian and Mandy.

"Don't worry about him. You know he would understand. Besides, he's never even home, stays with Jack most days." she said, trying to be reassuring, but regretting it the second the words slipped out of her mouth.

"Jack?" Ian asked, looking behind himself again. Mickey was laughing, smile animating his whole face. He saw Skinny Lip-lookalike reach up and ruffle Mickey's hair. Mickey shook his head and shoved the guy playfully.

"Yeah," Mandy said, also looking behind them. "That kid with the dirty blond hair. He's a friend of Mick's from jail, before the escape."

"You gonna tell me about that shit?" he asked. He felt so left out of the loop. No one wanted him to know anything.

"Not tonight, Ian. You need to figure your own shit out first." she said with a finality that left no room for argument.

Ian gave her a terse nod, sniffling a little trickle of blood back into his nose, and headed out of the room without another word.
What the fuck just happened???

------------

Mickey watched his sister consoling Ian. He watched her attend to his bloody face, while they had what looked like an emotional discussion. He watched as Ian attempted to hold back tears, cleaning up his bloody face with a dirty bar towel. He wanted to go to him.

But he didn't.

Mickey had no idea Ian was going to be at the party tonight. Mandy had promised his asshole boyfriend had forbidden him from being in the same room as Mickey. Apparently, this Brian dude had a problem with all of Ian's friends, as well as his family.

But having seen what just went down tonight, Mickey understands what it's really about.

Control.

Ian's gone and gotten himself his own Kenyatta.

If that's not ironic, Mickey doesn't know what is.

Mickey idly wonders if Ian's going to try and cut Brian's throat too.

He shakes the thought off as he watches his sister clean up the blood on the floor. She turns to him then, dropping the towel in the trash along with the one from Ian's face. He tries not to make it obvious as he watches Ian give his sister one last nod of his head and walk out of the room without another word.

Mandy rounded on Mickey, who had been lurking nearby.

She stands stiffly in front of him, crossing her arms over her chest. Her default 'do not fuck with me' stance.

"I told Ian he could stay with me, if he decides to get out of Brian's apartment."

Mickey gave her an incredulous look. "You did what now?"

"Don't fucking start, Mick. You saw what just happened. He's not safe there with that abusive asshole. You may act like you don't give a shit, but I see right through you. He needs help, and I'm going to fucking give it to him. He's my best friend. We lost each other for too long, letting asshole men tear us apart. And I'll be damned if you're going to be just another asshole doing the exact same thing. You hear me?" she glared at him, leaving no room for argument.

Mickey wasn't going to argue anyway. She was right.

Ian's safety would always be more important than Mickey's comfort.

"Yeah, okay Mands. I'll do my best to make myself scarce. I'll talk to Jack. But I really wasn't planning on staying with him too much. He's, uh, partying a lot. Don't wanna get too caught up in that." Mickey doesn't elaborate. No need for Mandy to get all worked up about shit that's none of her business.

"You gonna be okay to stay there, Mick? Don't want you fucking up your parole." Mandy suddenly feels like she put her brother in a bad spot. Maybe she should have asked him first.

"Nah, Mands, I'm good. I can take care of myself. It's not like Jack can peer pressure my innocent
ass into doing something I don't wanna." Mickey said.

He wasn't going to let her go back on her promise to Ian. Whatever it took to help him, Mickey would do it. He could handle Jack.

-------------------

Ian hung his head as he followed Brian out of the bar. He could feel anger radiating off his (soon to be ex?) boyfriend. He had no idea what was waiting for him back at the loft, but he knew it was going to be ugly, and brutal. And most likely it would end in more fists. Ian could hold his own with anyone else. He didn't know why facing off with Brian always made him feel like a bitch. But he had to do this. There was no way he could put himself through all this pain anymore.

He deserved better.

It's about damn time he started believing that again.

He stood off to the side, leaning against the building, smoking a cigarette while Brian stood closer to the curb waiting for the Uber to come and bring them back to the loft.
"Are you really fucking smoking right now?" Brian spat, looking up from his phone to give Ian a disgusted look. "You know I hate that shit."

"Is there anything about me you don't hate?" Ian shot back. He threw his cigarette to the ground as a car pulled up in front of Brian.

The window rolled down and a thickly accented voice wafted out. "You guys call for a ride?"

"Yeah, we did." Brian said. He opened the back door and got in without sparing Ian another glance.

Ian tipped his head back, closing his eyes for a minute. After a moment to steady his breathing, he followed Brian to the car.
It was now or never.

-------------------

"So, that was Ian?" Javier asked. The party was winding down, most of the guests having left as it got closer to last call.
The only people left in the room were Mickey, Mandy, Javier, Lauren, Jack, Iggy and Tessa. They were seated around a table in the back of the room, snorting the rest of Iggy's coke.

Mickey took a sip of his whiskey. He had no idea how much he had had to drink tonight, but he was feeling pretty tipsy.

"Yeah, man. That's Ian." Mickey sighed. He motioned for Iggy to pass the glass plate with the coke on it. Iggy passed it, and Mickey wasted no time talking the offered straw and snorting two lines in quick succession.

"He's hot." Jack mused.

Mickey shot him a glare that would kill any other man on the spot. But Jack just smiled. A wide, bright thing illuminating his whole face. "Try and deny it, Mick. That right there was a ginger Adonis."
Javier chuckled from across the table. Lauren hit him across the chest with the back of her hand, shutting him up.

"Fuck off with that shit." Mickey said. Jack shrugged, taking his turn with the plate of coke.

"Mick, I swear I didn't know he was gonna come. He told me Brian had put him on lock down." Mandy sighed. She would never set her brother up like that. She just hoped he knew that.

"I know, Mands." Mickey mumbled, looking into his glass, swirling it around watching the brown liquid sloshing around with the ice cubes.

"So," Lauren started, pushing her black hair behind her ear "Are you gonna, like, talk to him, or something? I mean, it looked like he was about to pass out when he saw us up on stage."

"He saw us on stage?" Mickey blushed. He had no idea why, after all he and Ian had been through together, the idea of him seeing Mickey singing could embarrass him.

"Yeah, he walked in towards the end. But don't avoid my question. Are you going to talk to him?" Lauren pressed. She took a sip of her own cocktail, keeping her eyes on Mickey.

"I don't know, Lauren. He's got that uppity north-side asshole boyfriend. And I don't want to get involved in that mess. Besides, you know the whole sad story. The shit with him is ancient history, we've obviously both move one." Mickey gulped down the last of his drink and stood up.

Lauren gave him a look that said she was not at all satisfied with his answers, but thankfully she didn't press him further.

"So, uh, we gonna continue this party somewhere else?" Jack asked, sensing Mickey's discomfort with the current topic of conversation. Mickey sighed in relief.

"This conversation is not over, Mickey." Lauren said. She pointed a stern finger in his direction. Mandy leaned over and wrapped her arm around Lauren's shoulders.

"I like her, Mick." she laughed.

Mickey shook his head. He knew it was a bad idea letting these two bitches meet. He'd never have a moment's peace again.

"Of course you do. You both get off on torturing me." He said. He grabbed his coat and looked at his friends. "So what are we doing?" he asked.

The girls stood up, grabbing their jackets and purses.

"Well, I don't know about you assholes, but I told Lauren we could have a spa day tomorrow, so we are going back to the house." Mandy said. "Tessa, you down?" she asked, looking over at Iggy's girlfriend, who was currently sitting on his lap, sucking on his neck. Iggy looked blissed out, and it was kind of creepy to watch for everyone in the room. She pulled off his neck and tossed her dirty blond hair over her shoulder. "Sure, I love pedicures." she purred, going back to sucking a dark hickey near Iggy's shoulder.

Mandy made a gagging noise in the back of her throat and turned away.

"Scarred for life." she muttered to Lauren, who just laughed.

"Mick, you and Javier can come back to my place tonight. Looks like your house is going to be full."
Jack said as he shrugged his coat on.

"Sure, whatever." Mickey replied. He was more than ready for this night to be over. "You cool with that, Javi?" he asked, not wanting to speak for his friend.

"Oh yeah, I'm cool with that." Javier spoke, a salacious tone to his voice.

'oh great.' Mickey thought. 'this is where this is going tonight.'

Mickey didn't hate the idea. Being surrounded by hot guys on all sides is not a bad way to spend the evening.

They made their way out of the bar and onto the street, piling into Iggy's care so they could all get dropped off at their respective houses.

Mickey squished in between Javier and Jack in the back seat, with Mandy on his lap. She turned around and looked at him.

"So, that was a successful Milkovich party, huh Mick?" she asked.

Mickey laughed, putting his arm around her waist. "Yeah, drugs, booze and a beat down. Sounds about right."

She laughed, leaning into him. "I'm glad you're home, Mick. I missed you."

"Enough of that sappy shit, you're drunk." he said, although he pulled her closer, held her tighter. "Happy divorce, Mands."

"Happy Divorce." the rest of the car echoed, and they drove away from the bar and into the night.

------------------

"You ungrateful little shit." Brian screamed. He slammed his hands down on the granite counter top, staring Ian down in the kitchen. "I move you into my home, I pay for your medications, I get you in with the best therapist in Chicago, and this is how you treat me?"

Ian put his hands up, trying and failing, yet again, to placate Brian.

"Come on, Bri, I had no idea he was going to be there. Mandy didn't say anything." Ian was still reeling from the incident at the party. He hadn't even had a moment to process the fact that Mickey was back, or what that even meant. He had been assaulted and humiliated in front of his friends and his ex, and apparently his ex's whole new crew of beautiful women and bangable dudes. He didn't know what to think or how to feel.

And this shit with Brian was a mindfuck all it's own.

"You didn't know? You didn't know? And that's supposed to make it all better? You are MY boyfriend, Ian! MINE!" Brian closed the space between them and grabbed Ian by the face. He winced in pain, still swollen and sore from the hit he took at the club. "You cut ties with those dirty fucking people, or we are done. Do you hear me? No more loft, no more vacations to Bermuda, no more fucking therapy. Nothing. I will cut you out of my life like you never existed. Is that what you want? Go back to the south side and wallow in the filth where you belong." he pushed his face away, disgusted.

Ian gingerly ran a hand through his hair. This was it. Brian was trying to scare him into submission, but the idea of going back to the south side didn't scare Ian. Brian did.
"Yeah, Brian, I think that's probably a good idea. I don't think I wanna do this with you anymore."

He tried to brace himself for the other man's reaction, but nothing could have prepared him for what happened.

Brian punched him. Again. In the face. Hard. Much harder than he had at the club. Ian didn't stumble or waiver. He went crashing to the ground, out cold......

Ian groaned in pain, putting a hand up to his face, feeling the bloody mess with his fingers. His lip was split, but he didn't feel any broken teeth, so that was good. If his nose hadn't been broken earlier, it certainly was now. And his left eye was swollen shut.

Fucking wonderful. He wondered, in his groggy, pain addled brain, how he was going to explain this at work.

He opened his eyes, expecting to be on the floor in the kitchen, where he'd been knocked out. He was surprised, and a bit worried, to find himself in the bed. The bed he had shared with Brian. When he was so sure he could make this work.

If he was quiet enough.
If he didn't make waves.
If he went along with the program, did what was asked of him and wasn't too demanding.
He could have a normal adult relationship, with give and take and honest, open communication.
A relationship with support. Love.
What a fucking joke.
He needed to get out of here.
He moved to sit up, but just as he did, Brian waltzed into the bedroom. He was undressed, only his black boxers on, a fresh glass of whiskey in his hand. How long had Ian been out?

"Look who's finally awake." he smiled. It was an ugly smile. Ian's body recoiled from him. He shivered.

At that moment Ian realized he was also undressed. On the bed in only his boxers.

"What the fuck, Brian? Why do you keep fucking hitting me tonight? And where are my clothes?" Ian felt uncomfortable and vulnerable. He put a pillow over his lap, covering himself as much as he could.

Brian laughed. "Modesty a thing for you now? My slutty little stripper. You think you have anything left to protect?"

Ian looked away. He wasn't proud of his past, but he wasn't necessarily ashamed either. But Brian just had a way of twisting everything around, making Ian feel wrong and dirty.

"I don't want to fight anymore, Brian, I just want to go. I'll come back and get my shit another time. I just can't be here." Ian put the pillow down and moved to stand. Brian put a strong hand on his shoulder and sat him back down.

"Not so fast, there." he said.

Ian looked up at him. Brian was looming over him. He gulped down a mouthful of whiskey and smiled that smug smile again.
"I already packed all your shit. What's really yours, anyway. I kept all the shit I bought you. Which is most of your clothes, your phone, your Ipod and laptop and the meds, of course."

Ian shot up off the bed. He ran to the bathroom, Brian striding up behind him, chuckling.

Ian tore open the medicine cabinet.

They were gone. His meds were gone.

"Where the fuck are my pills, Brian?" Ian asked, unable to keep the panic out of his voice.

"I flushed them, asshole. Those pills belonged to me."

"No, I paid for them with my insurance. I pay my own way. You don't own me, I take care of myself." Ian screamed.

He was panicking already. It was Friday night. The doctor's office is closed for the next two days.

He can't go two days without his meds. He can already feel the crippling anxiety creeping up his spine. He can't breathe, he can't feel his face. Everything is numb.

He's so scared. He's going to lose his damn mind, right here in this apartment, tonight.

"You know, Ian, this all could have been avoided, if you would have just given yourself to me. We could have had a really beautiful thing, but you just had to be defiant."

Ian can't even think about what Brian is saying. His thoughts are spiraling, he can't catch his breath.

Brian turns Ian around with a hand on his shoulder. He's crowding him again, too close. Ian starts backing up, trying to put some distance between them. But Brian just keeps coming, backing Ian up farther and farther until his legs hit the mattress.

"Keep all the shit, Brian, I don't want any of it. Just please tell me you didn't flush my pills." Ian knew he was begging. He hated feeling so weak, but he was so afraid of what could happen if he started missing doses.

"You and your fucking pills." Brian spat. He shoved Ian hard and he landed back on the mattress, spread out and scared. He immediately sat up again, feeling open and vulnerable laid out like that.

"You know, I don't believe a word of this bipolar shit. You are just a whiny bitch who can't deal with life, looking for any excuse to blame for all your fuck ups. You're pathetic. Only good for one thing."

He grabbed Ian by the throat and shoved him back, his back colliding with the mattress roughly. Ian scrambled backwards, crab-walking on his hands, dragging his feet behind him. He stopped abruptly when his left hand hit the edge of the mattress, almost sending him crashing to the floor below.

Brian laughed lightly, sitting on the bed between Ian and the door. He looks like a predatory animal, sizing up his prey before inevitably devouring it whole. He slid closer to Ian, leaning over his body. Ian instinctively pulled back, but ending up shrinking in on himself when he realized he had nowhere else to go. He was trapped.

"And I'm gonna get that one thing, and then you're going to take your shit and get the fuck out of my apartment." he settled all his weight on top of Ian, whiskey breath right in his face. "You owe me."

He sat up enough to draw a hand back and punched Ian again.

His vision went blurry with blood and tears mingling together. Everything hurt.

Ian struggled to get out from under Brian. He thrashed and wiggled, but he got nowhere. He was
exhausted and beaten. He knew where this was going. He'd been here with Brian countless times. And he knew the struggle just turned him on more. So he stopped thrashing, a blank, empty calmness settling over him.

He was far away from the room, floating somewhere above himself as Brian wrapped a hand around his throat again, using his free hand to rip his boxers down roughly.

"Fucking slut." he growled. He pulled back so he could flip Ian over onto his stomach. "You make me sick."

Ian didn't respond. There really wasn't anything to say. He closed his eyes, face buried into the mattress. He was probably bleeding all over Brian's duvet. He found that thought oddly comforting.

Brian's weight was crushing him. He couldn't breathe. His face hurt.

But that was nothing compared to the pain of being violently penetrated, no lube or prep.

Not so much as a warning.

One minute, Brian was hovering over him breathing alcohol-laced insults into his ear, and the next he was roughly shoving his dick into Ian's sore body.

Ian groaned. He didn't even have enough energy to scream. If Brian was looking for some kind of fight, live out his sick rape kink, he'd be sorely disappointed. Ian had no fight left in him.

Brian propped himself up on one hand, using the other to grab Ian roughly by the hair, shoving his face further into the mattress. He pounded into Ian mercilessly, grunting in his ear.

"Take that dick, you little slut. All you'll ever be good for." he growled. "Pathetic little faggot, you love it, don't you. Being used. Giving your body over to someone who knows what to do with it. You love getting fucked. Whore."

Ian closed his eyes. He was a second away from a full blown panic attack, and he didn't know how he'd survive that on top of all this shit. So he tried to breathe, block it all out. Wait for it to be over.

"Fucking take it." Brian barked. The closer he got to orgasm, the more brutal he got. Pulling Ian's hair so hard it was tearing out. He reached down and grabbed one of Ian's wrists, twisting it up behind his back as he continued to fuck him. He wrenched his arm so hard, Ian couldn't help but cry out in pain. Tears finally spilling out of his eyes.

That one single scream seemed to send Brian tumbling over the edge. He gripped Ian's hair and his arm tighter, slamming his cock into Ian's abused body over and over until he finally stilled, coming hard. His labored breathing the only sound in the room.

He didn't get up or let go. He dropped his face down right next to Ian's ear. "That was okay." he laughed, breathless. "Not the best I've ever had. Now get your fucking shit, and get the fuck out of my house. I don't ever want to see you again."

He finally let go of Ian's arm and pushed himself off his body, pulling out and standing. "I'm getting in the shower. Don't be here when I get out."

Brian left the room, leaving Ian laying there stunned on the bed.

He had had an idea that breaking up with Brian would have been a shitty, emotional experience for him. But never in his wildest dreams did it play out like this.
He sat up in the bed. He looked down at his body. He was covered in bruises and scrapes. He
looked like he had been in a bar fight.

'no, Ian, you look like you were raped.'

He dismissed the thought as soon as it came.

He stood up on shaky legs and put his clothes back on. Slowly. New boxers, new socks. White t
shirt, jeans, grey sweater.

What do you wear when you're running away?

He wandered around the apartment, dazed. He walked over the the hallway, where his old army
duffel was sitting by the closet. He unzipped it and peered inside. It was full of clothes, his uniforms,
and random odds and ends from the bathroom and bedroom. He walked over to the kitchen, where
he found his phone and Ipod in the sink, smashed to shit, with the hammer used to destroy them
sitting on the counter next to the dish strainer.

He sighed. How the hell was he going to get in touch with anyone? His anxiety spiked again.
Why the hell was he sitting here, worried about stupid shit like his fucking phone when he had no
meds and nowhere to go?
'god fucking dammit' he slammed his hand down on the counter. He opened the freezer and took out
the bottle of vodka Brian always kept there. He unscrewed the cap and took a long pull off the bottle,
wincing as the harsh liquid burned his throat. He put the bottle down on the counter and wiped his
mouth with his sleeve.

As the booze settled in his system, he calmed the tiniest bit.

This was it, it was really happening.
He was leaving Brian.
He was going to be free.
But he wasn't free just yet.
He knew where he had to go. There was no way around it. He couldn't let Brian take anything else
from him.
So he grabbed his bag and his wallet and left the apartment. He hoped he'd never have to set foot in
this apartment ever again.
This evening had been a nightmare, and it was far from over.....

---------------------------------

"Wow, nice place." Javier mused, following Jack and Mickey into the apartment.

"Yeah, I get that a lot." Jack replied easily.

"His parents pay for it." Mickey laughed. Jack punched him lightly in the shoulder as the three of
them made their way into the living room.

"Why you gotta tell everybody that?" Jack asked.

"The truth hurts, bitch." Mickey smiled.

Mickey took his coat off and hung it up in the closet. He put his hand out for Jack and Javier's coats
too, placing them on hangers next to his own.

"Drink?" Jack asked the other two. He made his way over to the kitchen, pulling out three glasses.
"Yeah." Mickey said.

"Sure." came Javier's reply. He was already seated on the couch, feet up on the coffee table.

Mickey walked over to the stereo and put on some low music. Depressing shit that Jack was always listening to. The Smiths or whatever, Mickey couldn't be bothered to find out.

"Be right back." Jack said with a smile as he put down the glasses on the coffee table. He headed toward the bathroom while Mickey picked up his glass and sipped it. He knew exactly what Jack was doing in the bathroom. He knew he didn't have a right to be pissed. He should just be grateful he wasn't shooting up in front of Javier, that would have made shit awkward for sure.

"So, you stay here? Is this where you live now? Much nicer than the beach house." Javier said, looking over the apartment again.

"It's okay. I don't like, live here live here. Just stay sometimes. We're not together or anything. Just friends." Mickey replied, sipping on his drink.

"Oh, Mick, I know all about your 'just friends'." Javier laughed. He sipped his own drink, gulping it down. He set the empty glass on the coffee table and turned to Mickey. "So, are the three of us gonna be 'just friends' tonight? That's why we're here, right? Might as well make the most of my time in the states, right?" Javier scooted closer to Mickey, placing a hand on his thigh. "I've missed you. Give me some memories to take back to Mexico?" he moved his hand up his leg and settled it on his hip, pulling him closer to him on the couch. Their faces were inches apart, Javier's eyes darting all over Mickey's face. "Would you like that?"

"Uh..." Mickey's mind was instantly blanked out. He had a feeling that there was some kind of bizarro porno vibe going on between the three of them back at the club. And there was an unspoken agreement when they all came back to Jack's place. But now that they were here, and it was actually happening, Mickey felt a sudden twinge of nerves.

He'd done a lot of crazy shit in his life. Had a lot of random sex since moving to Mexico. But a threesome with two people he actually knew? That shit was uncharted territory.

But he was drunk. And high. And horny, of course.

And the night was weird enough already. With Gallagher making an unscripted return to his life is such epically awful fashion.

A distraction was in order.

"Yeah, Javi, I'd like that a lot." Mickey breathed.

Javier pulled Mickey onto his lap, kissing him fiercely. Mickey opened his mouth, inviting Javier's tongue in. They kissed sloppily, drunkenly. Teeth clashing together, saliva spreading all over their chins. Mickey ground his ass down in Javier's lap, earning himself a labored grunt from the other man.

"Jesus, Mickey, I missed this." he sighed. He leaned his head back on the couch. Mickey took the invitation and started kissing down Javier's neck.

"Looks like you started without me." Jack laughed, coming out of the bathroom. "But it looks like you are both still wearing too many clothes." he pulled his own shirt over his head and threw it to the floor. He came up behind the couch and pushed Mickey back a bit, separating the two men just enough so he could hook his hands under Mickey's shirt and pull it over his head. "You too, big guy." he remarked, pointing at Javier.
Mickey took the hint and grabbed Javier's shirt along the hem and pulled it over his head. Javier lifted his arms to assist, once the shirt was discarded, he pulled Mickey back to his chest, feeling skin on skin.

"Come on guys, there's more room in the bed. How and I supposed to get in on this if you're all tangled up in each other on the fucking couch?" Jack laughed. He grabbed Javier by the hand and pulled him to his feet. They immediately fell into each other. Jack kissed him passionately, pulling him flush to his body by his still clothed ass. "Fuck, Mickey, you have incredible taste in men." he said, eyeing Javier hungrily.

"No fucking kidding I do. Let's get this show on the road, it's getting fucking late." Mickey said. He lead the two men into Jack's bedroom. The bed was still unmade from earlier in the day. It felt like forever ago, when he woke up this morning to get ready for Mandy's party. Everything had changed in the matter of 24 hours. Nope. Not gonna think about that shit now.

Focus.

He shed his pants and boxers, falling onto the bed on his back in all his naked glory. Hand going to his rock hard dick without a thought. Javier and Jack came into the bedroom, still tangled up in each other. When they turned and saw Mickey naked on the bed, stroking his hard cock, they both stopped dead.

"Motherfucker. I'll never get tired of that view." Jack moaned, pulling his boxers off and kicking them across the room.

"You're telling me, how am I supposed to go back to Mexico, leave this all behind?" Javier asked. He also shed his underwear, jumping onto the bed, making Mickey bounce around on the mattress.

Mickey laughed, trying to regain his balance. "Watch it, asshole, gonna dump me on the god damn floor."

Javier crawled over Mickey's prone form. Hovering over him, he batted Mickey's arm away, wrapping his own big hand around his erection, stroking it slowly. "What was that, Mickey? You say something?"

"Nah, Javi, nothing." Mickey moaned. He let his head fall back on the pillow as Javier worked his cock with steady, slow strokes.

"This is like a wet dream come to life." Jack mused. He laid down on the bed on the other side of Mickey. "Kiss me?" he asked Javier.

Javier happily complied, leaning over Mickey laying on the bed to kiss Jack deeply. Mickey managed to open his eyes, watching the two men above him attacking each other's mouths. He got impossibly harder at the sight.

"Fuck." he muttered, thrusting up into Javier's fist. "How are we doing this?" he asked.

Jack disengaged from Javier's mouth, looking down at Mickey's flushed naked body. "Whatever you want, I'm down. You know me, Mick."

Javier looked at Jack, nodding enthusiastically. "Yeah, I'm into whatever." he breathed. Mickey knew Javier, knew him well. And he could tell by the heated, predatory look in his eye that he was willing to do anything Mickey said in that moment.
"Jack," he said, sitting up a bit between the two men. "Lube and condoms, dude. We are not making that mistake again."

Jack nodded, looking Mickey right in the eye. They had both been tested since the mishap months ago, but Mickey was adamant they not fuck up like that again. Mickey didn't trust Jack, especially with the IV drug use. Jack understood that. It made him feel shitty, but he brought it on himself, so he got it.

He rolled over in the bed, opening the bedside table drawer, pulling out an almost empty bottle of lube and a sleeve of condoms, as well as his infamous black butt plug. He tossed it all over his shoulder on by one, hearing Mickey and Javier's muffled laughter. He rolled back over to see the two men wrapped up in each other again. "What, you told him about that?" he laughed, pointing at the plug. Mickey smiled, nodding.

"I couldn't not tell him." he laughed.

"Okay, okay, let's get down to business." he said, causing the two men to pull apart. Javier laid down on the bed next to Mickey, while Jack loomed above them, lube in one hand and the plug in the other. "So, since everyone here is, and I quote, 'down for whatever'" he smirked. "I'm gonna call the plays." He ran a hand up Mickey's leg for a moment then moving over to caress Javier the same way. Both men groaned out loud, causing Jack to smirk. "So fucking sexy, can't believe this shit is happening."

He sat back on his knees and popped the cap off the lube. "Javier, give me your hand." he said.

Javier sat up and put out his hand. Jack squirted some lube onto his stretched out fingers.

"Open him up." he motioned toward Mickey with his head. "And I'm gonna work open your hot ass. Then we're gonna get to the good part."

Mickey laid out on his back while Javier got up and knelt in front of him. He maneuvered Mickey's legs so they were bent up, knees pointed toward the ceiling. He stuffed a pillow from the head of the bed under his hips, giving Javier better access to his ass.

"Hands and knees, Javier." Jack murmured from behind him. He pushed Javier down until he was kneeling over Mickey on all fours. "Suck his dick, too. Wanna watch."

Javier did as he was told. He took Mickey's hard cock in his mouth. Mickey hissed, closing his eyes. God, it felt so good.

He had no idea how he ended up here, in the beginning stages of a gay porno. But he wasn't gonna ask stupid questions. It was good to be distracted right now. His head was all fucked up after tonight.

'Nope. Don't do that. Focus. Jesus.'

He was dragged out of his own head by the feeling of a lube up finger breaching his ass. "Holy fuck." he sighed. "Yeah, Javier, Jesus."

He heard Javier grunt around his cock, and opened his eyes. To say the image in front of him was obscene was an understatement. Javier bent over his body, mouth full of cock, fingers shoved up his ass, with Jack standing on his knees behind him, pumping his fingers in and out of Javier's quivering body.

"Take it so good, just like Mick here." Jack groaned, fingers sliding back and forth, Javier struggling to maintain control. He ran his tongue up Mickey's shaft, swirling it around the tip of his dick,
flicking his tongue over the slit, collecting the precum dribbling out. He shot Mickey a wink, and sunk back down, deep throating him as best he could. Breathing through his nose, as the tip of Mickey's cock slammed against the back of his throat.

"Fuck. Suck that dick." Mickey sighed.

"Alright, enough." Jack murmured. Javier backed off, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand.

"Okay." Jack huffed, out of breath already, too turned on to function. "We're gonna plug you up, Javier, then Mick here can suck you off while I fuck that fine ass. Then we'll switch it up and you can have at me. If you want, of course." He lubed up the plug as he was talking, eyeing Javier with that hunger in his eyes again.

"Yeah, yeah." Javier agreed, equally turned on, full sentences escaping him. He laid on his back while Mickey scooted off to the side. Jack hovered over Javier, kissing him. First on the mouth, then down to his neck, his chest, stomach. He moved the lubed up plug to his asshole, swirling the tip around his stretched hole. Javier drew in a stuttered breath.

Mickey held his breath. This was by far one of the hottest things he's ever been involved in. Jack pushed the plug in a bit, watching Javier arch his back. He pulled it back out, pushed it back in a bit more. Mickey watched, enraptured, as Jack pushed and pulled over and over again. He couldn't tear his eyes away as the widest part of the toy breached Javier's ass. Javier let out a breathy sigh, relaxing into being stretched. Once the toy was all the way in, Jack twirled it around by the base, putting just enough pressure on it to hit Javier's prostate.

"Oh Dios mío." Javier groaned.

Jack laughed. "Does he always revert back to his native language when he's turned on?" he asked Mickey over his shoulder.

"Every time." Mickey replied. It was one of the things he found incredibly hot about Javier.

"Okay, alright, get over here, Mick. I'm ready for you." Jack said, moving away from Javier and grabbing one of the condoms off the bedspread.

Mickey motioned toward the pile of condoms with his chin. "Don't forget that shit. Not at all tonight. Okay?" he asked, leaving no room for argument.

Jack made a criss-cross motion over his bare chest with an extended finger. "Cross my heart, Mick. No worries." he promised.

Mickey nodded. He scooted up the bed and settled his face over Javier's hips. Javier looked down at him with lust-blown eyes. "Carino." he said, running a gentle hand down Mickey's face.

Mickey smiled up at him as he grabbed his hard dick in his hand and started stroking it. Javier let out a long breath, maintaining eye contact as Mickey wrapped his lips around the head of his dick and sucked. He lost himself for the moment in the act of sucking Javier off. The other man was always so receptive, turning Mickey on with his moans and sighs.

Tonight was no different. As Mickey bobbed his head, taking Javier into his throat, he could hear Javier moaning shamelessly above him. Cursing in English and Spanish. Pulling his hair and thrusting up shallowly into his waiting mouth. Mickey was so into sucking his dick, he didn't hear the condom being ripped open. But he did feel a warm hand on his hip, and a hard cock pressed between his ass cheeks.

This was it. He was in the middle of a gay threesome. Shit. If his father could see him now....
The disturbing thought disappeared from his mind as Jack started pushing in from behind him. The stretch was perfect, just the right side of painful. The burn present but not uncomfortable. He closed his eyes and sunk down on Javier's dick, burying his face in his pubes. Javier let out another choked moan as Jack pushed in the last few inches, fully seated inside Mickey's ass. He was surrounded on all sides by hot guys. Didn't he think this exact thought earlier in the night? Fuck, he's wasted. He bobbed his head enthusiastically, swirling his tongue and sucking hard.

"Mother of god." Jack moaned. "This is the hottest shit ever." And he started thrusting his hips. Mickey opened his eyes again, to watch Javier's face, as he had the best view of what was going on right now. His eyes were huge, pupils blown so wide, it looked like he had none at all. He looked down at Mickey and nodded his head. "Amazing." he whispered.

Mickey arched his back as Jack started picking up the pace. Pounding into his body, hands digging into his hips, pulling him back to meet his thrusts. Mickey could feel them everywhere. Javier's burning hot skin under his fingers, the salty taste of his precum on his tongue. Jack's tight grip on his hips, his dick stretching him in just the right way. His head was spinning with pleasure. He didn't know what was up or down. He was just going along for the ride.

"Switch, switch." Javier suddenly blurted out. Mickey backed off, letting Javier's cock fall out of his mouth.

"Huh?" Jack asked, stilling his motion, still buried in Mickey's ass to the hilt.

"I wanna switch, don't wanna come like this." Javier explained.

Jack smirked at Mickey, knowing full well he'd not be orgasming tonight. Mickey was thankful he'd only done a bit of coke tonight, ensuring he'd at least get to nut at some point. He thought Jack was insane. Who picks drugs over an orgasm? Whatever.

"Okay, what do you want, Javier?" Jack asked seductively. He pulled out of Mickey and tossed the condom in the trash by the bed. Mickey shuddered at the loss, feeling empty instantly. "I'm not gonna come tonight, so let's make it all about you two."

Javier sent a questioning look Mickey's way, but Mickey just shrugged. It wasn't his place to explain Jack's shit.

Javier didn't ask, just looked at Mickey, eyes blown out and a bit crazed. "I want you to ride me."

Mickey's rock hard dick twitched at the idea. "Yeah, yeah, I can do that, for sure."

Jack laughed at that, standing up off the bed and handing Javier a condom. "Here you go, tiger, this I wanna see."

Javier took the condom from Jack and ripped it open with his teeth. He spit the wrapper onto the floor and rolled the rubber down his shaft, jerking his cock a few times to spread out the lubrication. Jack handed him the lube and he drizzled some on his dick.

Mickey crawled up his body, straddling his lap. "You ready for this?" he asked, positioning himself over his straining erection.

"Fuck yes." Javier growled. He put his hands on Mickey's hips, steadying him as he took Javier's cock in his hand and positioned it by his entrance. They locked eyes as Mickey sank down in one slow motion. "Mierda!" he screamed.

Jack knelt on the bed next to Mickey and wrapped an arm around his waist, kissing his neck. "Ride him, Mick. Make him come." he murmured in Mickey's ear.
Mickey did just that. He started out slow, rocking his hips back and forth, grinding down on the hard dick inside him. Jack kneeling next to him, kissing and licking his neck. He grabbed Mickey's dick and started stroking it in time with Mickey's motions. "There you go. Fuck him, make him come, and I'll make you come. Good boy, Mick, so fucking good."

Mickey moaned at the praise, picking up the pace, lifting up and slamming back down on Javier's dick. Javier moaned loud, his hands on Mickey's thighs as he started thrusting up into Mickey's tight heat. "Jesus, Mickey." he groaned, throwing his head back.

"Ah, gonna come." Mickey moaned, surprising himself.

"Do it." Jack replied. Mickey couldn't form words right now if he tried. Jack was stripping Mickey's cock as his rhythm started to stutter. He could feel himself getting close, that familiar swirling in his stomach, his balls tightening.


"Oh god." Javier yelled out, gripping Mickey's hips as he continued to fuck up into his as Mickey rode out his own orgasm, rocking back and forth lazily while he came down from his high.

After a moment, he crawled off of Javier's lap, while his friend tied off the condom and dropped it in the trash with the first one. Jack reached down gingerly and removed the plug from Javier's ass. Javier winced, but didn't complain.

"Gonna finish you off." Jack said, placing the dirty plug on a towel on the floor and grabbing a new condom off the bedside table. Mickey sat up against the headboard, sated and spent, watching his friends intently.

Jack ripped the condom open, spitting the wrapper on the floor, and wrapped his dick, giving it a few tugs.

He made eye contact with Javier for a moment, then looked over at Mickey as he started to push inside. His eyes fell closed as he bottomed out. Javier sighed.

"I'm already close." he told Jack.

Jack nodded and started moving, wasting no time picking up the pace, slamming into the other man's stretched hole.

Mickey scooted closer on the bed so he could reach down and wrap a tattooed hand around Javier's weeping cock. Kissing his neck, licking behind his ear.


That was all it took. Javier was spilling all over Mickey's hand and his own chest, moaning low and cursing in spanish.

Jack pulled out and tied off the condom, tossing it with the others in the bin. Mickey grabbed a dirty t-shirt from the floor and went about cleaning up himself and Javier as best he could. He tossed the soiled shirt on the floor next to the plug, to be cleaned in the morning.

"Well fuck. That was incredible." Jack laughed.

Javier looked over at him with a lazy smile, but frowned when he saw Jack still had an erection.
"What about you?" he asked.

"Uh," Jack started, running a hand through his messy hair "I'm on some meds that make it hard to come, so, you know, I don't always get to finish."

Javier looked between Jack and Mickey skeptically. He knew about Jack's proclivities, his problems with montega. He's seen it a million times back home. But it's none of his business, so he plays along.

"But I had a ton of fun, so no worries. Why don't we get some sleep, it's really fucking late."

Javier let him believe he took him at his word, not pressing for any further information.

The three of them got under the covers, Mickey in the middle. Jack turned off the light and they all got comfortable together. Arms and legs tangled together. He had an arm swung over Javier's waist, with Jack nuzzled into his back, his breath fanning across his neck.

An hour or so later, the other two men long asleep, Mickey lay awake, trying to process everything that had happened tonight.
He'd had a threesome with his two closest friends.
He'd seen Ian for the first time in years.
And he'd kicked Ian's boyfriend's ass.
He sighed, looking up at the ceiling, painted in pale moonlight.
It had been a long, crazy night.
Who the fuck knows what tomorrow is going to bring.

Chapter End Notes

i'm a bit uneasy about this one. it's heavy, on a lot of levels. but i love it, so i hope you do too....
The more things change, the more they stay the same

Chapter Summary

Ian and Mickey navigate their new reality

Ian woke up, groggy and in pain. He looked around, hoping the past 24 hours had been a nightmare. No such luck, he was in fact on the psych unit of Cook County Hospital. Surrounded by other sleeping patients. It was obviously very early, the room was still dark. No sunlight coming in the barred window just yet.

When Ian had left Brian's the night before, he knew the only way to stave off a total relapse of his disorder was to walk into the emergency room and get himself admitted for the weekend. His therapist wasn't in office until Monday, and he just couldn't wait that long.

So here he was, again, biding his time in the nut house, getting his meds adjusted and getting treated for the beat down Brian had issued him. The emergency room personnel had been very interested in his injuries when he'd arrived, prodding him for information on his assailant. But Ian kept his mouth shut. He didn't want to press charges. He didn't want anything to do with Brian anymore. He didn't want justice, he didn't want to see him pay. He just wanted him to disappear.

He hadn't called anyone when he had checked in the previous night. The staff had given him the option since he came in on his own accord, not on a hold or under arrest. But he hadn't wanted to call Fiona or Lip, to hear their smug 'I told you so's. He wasn't in the mood for a lecture, and he was in no condition for their special brand of smothering, so he didn't call anyone. But now, laying here in the early morning twilight, he knew who he wanted to call.

He brought his hands up to his face, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. He winced, sucking in a harsh breath when he hit his swollen eye.

'that's right, your face is all fucked up' he reminded himself. 'idiot'

He sat up in bed, tossing the blankets back. He swung his feet over the edge of the bed, toeing on his state issue orange slippers. He'd take a shower, then he'd go down to the phone and make the call. He didn't want to wake anyone up so early. His problems aside, it's rude to wake someone up this early on the weekend.

He opened the bedside drawer and pulled out the small bottle of shampoo and the miniature soap the hospital issued upon admission. He pulled a clean towel off the bar of the bunk and tossed it over his shoulder.

He pushed open the door to the room he was sharing with five other strangers and made his way down the shabbily carpeted hallway. He remembered this place, vaguely. His first time here was a blur of jumbled memories and disjointed feelings.

But of all those blurry memories of this place, the one that sticks out the most to Ian to this day, is when Mickey came to visit him. He came all the way down here, two buses and a train, with Fiona
of all people. Just to see him. To let him know he cared, to support him through the hardest time of
his life. And Ian had been so lost, so trapped in his own mind, that he couldn't even appreciate what
Mickey was trying to do for him.

He certainly appreciated it now.

He sighed, running a hand through his hair. Now that he was really paying attention, it was dirty and
matted. Probably with his own blood. He shook his head, making his way into the bathroom. It was
deserted right now, everyone else on the unit still in a drug induced slumber.

He made his way to the last stall on the left hand side of the row of showers. He pulled the little
curtain closed as far as it would go, not nearly enough to really cover him. He shed his grey sweats
and boxers, setting them down on the hard little chair in the corner of the cubicle. He pulled the
yellow t-shirt over his head and dropped it on the chair too, swinging the towel over the divider
between the two stalls. He looked down at his naked body. He was covered in bruises and scrapes.
Bloody fingernail scrapes down his ribs, finger-shaped bruises on his hips. His legs covered in
mottled purple masses. He couldn't see his neck or face, but he could feel his black eye and his
swollen jaw, feel the tenderness in the tendons of his neck.

Brian really did a number on him. Inside and out. Emotionally, physically and sexually violated him.

Ian felt like an empty shell. A shadow of who he used to be.

He wasn't even sick right now. No burning mania, no crippling depression. But he felt emptier than
he ever had. Like a fucking ghost. Brian had sucked him dry.
Who knows how long it will take him to get back to the person he was before. If that was even
possible now.

He turned on the shower. Pathetic water pressure, but what did he really expect? He knew the drill
around here.
He jumped under the spray, pulling the shower curtain closed behind him. He tilted his face up
toward the water, gently scrubbing the dried blood from his under his eyes and around his nose. He
even felt some caked around his neck and shoulders. How much did he bleed last night?

Too much.

Any blood at the hands of your significant other is too much.

It was different if it was a heat of the moment fight, Ian grew up with that shit. Him and Mickey used
to get into it all the time. Hell, he and Lip beat each other senseless countless times. But that shit with
Brian always had a different feeling to it. It wasn't boiling over passion or frustrated fumbling. It was
calculated assault. Violence for the purpose of control and manipulation.
And that shit was wrong. Ian was done with it. He'd never let another person treat him that way ever
again.

He washed his hair with the hotel shampoo, and ran the mini-bar of soap along his bruised body,
carefully washing away whatever blood remained. He rinsed off his body and turned off the water,
stepping out into the small dressing area.

He grabbed his towel and started to dry off his body, being careful to avoid pressing too hard on his
tender parts. He was sore all over. His body ached in a way it never had before. Not in all his late
nights, or early mornings, waking up in a stranger's bed, naked and bruised.

He'd figured all that shit was behind him when he got well.
Who would have thought he'd get caught up in this shit when he was stable. He felt like an idiot. He was an idiot.

He sighed again. Tears welling up in his eyes. He wasn't a victim. He wasn't anybody's bitch. He had gotten out, he was getting help. And he was going to pick up the pieces of his broken life, once again, and start the fuck over.

He pulled his boxers back on, followed by his sweats. He shook his head out like a dog, water cascading all over the small enclosure. He pulled the ugly yellow t-shirt back over his head and tossed the damp towel back over his shoulder, slipping his feet back into those grody flip flops. He had to hurry if he was going to make it to med line then breakfast.

His thoughts were going in a million different directions. What was he supposed to do now?

He thought he'd made some real strides in his life, moving things forward like a real adult. But looking around him now, he realizes he's the same scared kid he was when he first got diagnosed. He hasn't changed at all. He dressed up the outside, shined up like a new penny, but inside he was the same broken kid he was when he was dancing at the Fairy Tale, giving hand jobs for 20 bucks.

All his 'changes' were skin deep, none of them going any deeper than surface level.

What's that saying? he wonder.... 'The more things change, the more they stay the same.'

He smiled to himself. A dark, ugly thing, his lips curling up crookedly, lip splitting back open. He tasted blood.

'Fuck that shit.' he thought. 'shit's gonna change this time.'

"Are you sure you have to leave already?" Mandy whined for the millionth time that morning.

They were seated around the Milkovich living room. Lauren and Javier on the couch, pretty much sitting on top of each other. He was laid out against the side of the couch with her sprawled out in his lap, his toned arms wrapped around her tiny waist, her head on his chest.

Mandy sat in the arm chair across from the sofa, her legs folded up in her lap, a coffee set between her crossed legs.

Mickey was wandering around the kitchen finishing up coffee for himself and Javier, since Mandy and Lauren hadn't bothered to make any for them when he'd called her to tell her they were on their way back from Jack's.

What happened at Jack's last night was burning a hole in Mickey's brain. Never in a million years did he expect to do something so.... so what? gay? kinky? sexy? He didn't fucking know. All he does know is a) it was hot as fuck and b) it probably shouldn't happen again. These two dudes were his best friends.

Maybe he needed to stop fucking his friends.

Eh, maybe not.
The three of them had decided on a "what happens after the divorce party stays after the divorce party" strategy. They had spoken about it a little bit after they woke up, albeit awkwardly, deciding what's done is done, and not to make it weird. Jack had done this type of shit before, unlike Mickey and Javier, so he was cool as a fucking cucumber. Javier seemed to be okay, and Mickey really didn't give a fuck, as long as it didn't fuck with their friendships.

Besides, Javier and Lauren were heading back to Mexico this morning, hence Mandy's whiny tirade.

"We'd love to stay forever in the Windy City with the Milkovich clan, but we do have lives to get back to in Mexico." Javier chuckled. "But you have been amazingly gracious hosts, I've never had so much fun on a trip to the states." he gave Mickey a knowing look and Mickey rolled his eyes in return.

Javier was part of that shit, and he'd still never let Mickey live it down. How the fuck did that work?

"I had an amazing time." Lauren said. "It was so nice getting to know you, Mandy, I feel like I've made another friend for life. And just like Mick here, I'm sure you'd help me bury a body if the need ever arose."

"You fucking know it, girl." Mandy laughed, and they clinked their coffee cups together in some kind of ghetto murder toast.

"So, Mickey." Lauren started, turning around in Javier's arms so she could look at him better. "Did you think any more about what we talked about last night?"

Mickey sighed, tilting his head back and rubbing his eyes. "Fuck, Lauren, I haven't even finished my coffee, do we really have to talk about this shit now?"

"Yes, we do. Iggy is waking up in an hour to drive us to the airport, and I am not leaving this country until you tell me you are at least going to talk to the boy." she sat up on the couch and crossed her arms over her chest.

Javier looked between the two of them "This about Niño bonito?" he asked.

"Don't fucking call him that." Mickey said. "Besides, I don't think he's waking up very pretty this morning. That asshole really did a number on him last night."

Mickey didn't like seeing Ian leave with that prick, but what the fuck was he supposed to do about it? They weren't friends anymore. They were nothing. He told Lauren as such.

"There's nothing I can do about Ian. He's a grown ass man, makes his own decisions. Just like Mandy makes her own." he looked over at his sister, who didn't meet his gaze. "Couldn't get her to leave either. Not til she was ready. Besides, it's not my place. He made that perfectly clear years ago. You know that. We didn't even speak to each other last night."

"And who's fault was that? That fucking guy." Lauren huffed. She looked pissed. Mickey didn't understand why. "Mickey, Ian needs help. He's in trouble. I know what that feels like."

Ah, so this was about Lauren's own abusive relationship. Mickey gets it now.

"Alright, Lauren, how about this? Mandy's his friend, not me. She can call him later, and if he agrees to leave like she suggested last night, I'll do whatever I can to help. I'll even kick the prick's ass again, if I have to. But if Ian doesn't want help, I can't help him. Nobody can. You know that better than anyone."
Lauren looked away, but nodded.

It would have to be good enough. There was nothing else Mickey could do.

Mickey walked over to his two friends, who he loved more than almost anything, bent over, and pulled them both into an awkward three-way hug. He held on for a long time, conveying all the things he could never say.

He would always be there. He would always love them, he would never let them down. He'd always have their backs.

Just like they would always have his.

The subject of Ian dropped for good, the friends went about packing up Lauren and Javier for their trip back home.

----------

Ian had had a long morning. He wasn't regretting his decision to check in, get away from Brian. Not at all. But he was just about fed up with this fucking place. He forgot how shitty it was here. He was currently sitting with a therapist he didn't know, trying to convince this prick just to call Caroline. He didn't want to hash out the gory details of what happened with Brian with a complete stranger. That's not why he's here. He's here so he doesn't fuck up his medication schedule. Why the fuck is that not a good enough answer?

"Mr. Gallagher, Ian, may I call you Ian?" the man starts. Ian immediately hates him. He's short and fat and has an air of superiority about him that makes Ian grind his teeth. "Your time here would be much more productive if you'd open up about what brought you in to us."

"I have my own fucking therapist. She doesn't work weekends. That's all there is to the story. I came in to make sure I can get my meds. My ex-boyfriend flushed them. End of story." he crossed his arms over his chest, jutting his chin out defiantly.

"Oh, very interesting, tell me about this incident with your boyfriend." the fat fuck asked, typing on his computer. He seemed way too interested in Ian's horror stories, almost licking his chops at the prospect of some bloody gay drama with obvious morbid curiosity.

"Fuck no. I want to talk to Caroline, or I'm going to check out of this shit hole right fucking now. Do you understand me?"

"Okay, okay, Ian." the man put his hands up in surrender. "I'll get your personal therapist on the phone. No need for threats."

"I didn't threaten you." Ian sighed. What the fuck was wrong with this dude. "Can I make my phone call now?"

"Yes, yes. I'll get Caroline on the phone and we can discuss your exit plan. You are staying until tomorrow evening, right? As long as we see your meds were not interrupted during your crisis, I don't see why you can't go home Sunday night. No need to miss work if your mental health is in check. I do however, recommend you speak to your therapist about the events that brought you in to us. From the ER reports, it seems like a violent encounter. These type of things can negatively impact your stability. But you know that, don't you?"
"Yes." Ian said, looking down. He knew he’d have to deal with what Brian had done to him. He didn't want that shit festering inside him. That was a relapse waiting to happen.

"Good, good." the man said. He picked up the phone on his desk and dialed the number Ian had provided him with. "Let's get in touch with your therapist now."

Ian walked out of the psychiatrist's office, and back onto the floor, headed towards the TV room.

The shrink had called Caroline and Ian had spoken to her briefly, going over what had happened to him on Friday night, and what brought him to the psych unit. Caroline went on and on about how proud she was of Ian for finally ending things with Brian. How pleased she was that he had put his mental health first, and didn't hesitate to check in when his stability was in jeopardy. Ian didn't tell her about what Brian did to him, he wanted to tell her that shit in person. It was too painful to speak about over the phone, and in front of a stranger no less.

After Ian had gone over the basics of his Friday from hell with Caroline, the shrink put her on speaker and the three of them discussed Ian's exit plan for the following day. They were going to tweak his meds, sticking with the Depakote as his mood stabilizer and Risperidone for his anti-psychotic, but switch up his antidepressant from Paxil to Celexa. His previous combination was working well, so Caroline and the shrink here were hopeful Ian could avoid a relapse if he stuck with this new regimen. Ian was hopeful too.

He had been doing so well, and he'd be damned if he let Brian fuck that up for him. He'd already let Brian take too much.
Ian thanked the psychiatrist and was dismissed from his office. He had one more night in this place and then he could go home.

Home.

That was a tricky one, wasn't it?

He obviously didn't live with Brian anymore. He never wanted to see that motherfucker ever again. But he didn't want to go home either. He had worked so hard to get out on his own, before he moved in with Brian he was working on getting his own place. No siblings, no roommates, just him. He had been excited.

But he got swept up in Brian. In his money and his sophistication. The nights at the theater and 4 star restaurants. The weekend getaways and the expensive gifts.

If only he knew the price he would have to pay for all that luxury.

Ian had talked a lot with Caroline about his sexual history. Her outside perspective gave him some frightening insight into his past.

Sexual assault.

It was hard for Ian to wrap his head around it.

All those nights at the club, when he was young and manic, dancing on that box in those awful gold shorts.

All those men touching him, doing things to him, him doing things to them. A lot of the time Ian wasn't even coherent during these encounters. More times than he'd like to admit, he'd woken up
sore and bleeding, with no memory of who or what he had done the night before.

Or times when Ian had vehemently refused, but had been forced regardless to preform sex acts. Passed out cold with a dick shoved in his mouth. Dry heaving over the toilet while some dude struggled to get his shorts off. Penetrating him dry while he struggled to get away.

Caroline taught him that this was sexual assault.

Ian had never seen it like that. Just figured he'd gotten himself into the mess, and it ended in the foreseeable conclusion.

But Caroline was adamant. Sexual assault.

And so was what Brian had done to him. Forced him to do things he didn't want to, things he wasn't comfortable with. Coercion. That's what she called it. Pressuring him, prodding him, twisting his thoughts all around until he felt like he owed Brian something. Even if it made him uncomfortable.

Caroline was going to give him hell for keeping this from her. It was unhealthy, and probably caused more damage than Ian even realizes yet.

He shook his head, trying to rid himself of the memories of last night. He didn't want to think about that right now. He could feel the tingling sensation that came with a panic attack tickling at the base of his skull.

Focus Ian.

Going home. That's what he was thinking about.

He turned the corner and headed into the common room on the unit. The room was almost empty, with various afternoon groups taking place in other parts of the hospital right now. There was a girl in the corner with blond hair cut all choppy like she'd taken a butcher knife to it. Maybe she had. She was sitting by herself working on a puzzle of a field of sunflowers. Ian was sure she'd be disappointed when she got to the end and realized there are pieces missing. 'Pieces missing.' he laughed to himself. That's kind of poetic for this place.

He sat at an empty table, a few feet away from a kid with a shaved head, reading what looked like a romance novel. Ian suppressed a chuckle.

He shuffled around in his chair until he was as comfortable as he could get, then set his head in his hands and stared at the table.

Home.

what the fuck does that even mean anymore?

He did not want to go back to Fiona's. He loved his sibling, more than anything, but he could not deal with them always hovering over him. It's like they were always waiting with baited breath for him to fuck up again. Always on his ass about going to therapy and taking his meds. Did you eat yet? How much are you sleeping? Don't you think you're working too much?

It drove him nuts. He didn't need a babysitter, nor a nurse. He has been stable and healthy for years now. But his family never seemed to get that. Always assuming his next big meltdown was right around the corner, and it was their responsibility to prevent it.

But you couldn't prevent it. Sometimes shit just happens. Especially with this disease. And he can take care of himself. He takes pride in the fact that he manages his illness on his own, and has the presence of mind to ask for help when he needs it.

This shit with Brian brings all that into question, though, doesn't it?
Why had he done this? It was unlike him to get caught up in an abusive relationship. He'd never been in this position before.

He banged his head on the table softly, remembering a thought he had a few weeks ago.

He started seeing Brian because he was the opposite of Mickey.

He chuckled darkly, running his hand over the back of his head.

Guess that plan didn't work out too well.

Ian hadn't let himself think of Mickey much since admitting himself to the hospital. He wanted to focus on getting his meds right and dealing with the trauma of what Brian had done. Process how he felt about what happened.

But if he's not going back to Fiona's the only other option is to take Mandy up on her offer to stay with her in the Milkovich house.

Even if she promises him Mickey won't be there, it will be impossible not to feel him in every room of that house. The entire building is just one big memory of Mickey, and all the things they shared.

He hadn't even had time to be properly shocked that Mickey was back. How did he get here? How is he not in jail? Who are these new friends? Is he dating one of them?

Mickey looked like a completely different person in the short time Ian had to observe him before shit hit the fan. He looked lighter, happier, healthier than Ian had ever seen him. And comfortable. He was hugging and kissing those dudes like he'd never been in the closet to begin with.

Ian pulled his hair hard, banging his head on the table again. He was jealous. Of those people that got to have Mickey like that. Ian had spent years trying to coax Mickey to accept himself, to show Ian the affection he desperately craved. Now these pricks got it for free. What the fuck?

Ian sighed, letting go of his hair and tipping his head back.

None of this shit was any of his business. He made that call years ago, leaving Mickey in his past, where he thought he belonged.

Now Ian doesn't know what he thinks. He misses Mickey. He can admit that to himself now, after denying it for years. He misses him, and all his efforts to replace him or get over him have been futile. He wants to know this new Mickey. The one that smiles openly, the one who's not afraid all the time. The one Ian knew was buried deep inside him all along. It didn't seem fair that Mickey only came out of his protective shell after he left Ian.

'but he didn't leave you' Ian thought, pulling his hair again 'he never left you, not once. you always left him.'

Ian felt the sting of tears in his eyes.

Damn it.

He made the decision then. Sitting there at the table in the Cook County Psych Unit, pulling his hair till his whole scalp ached.

He was going to take Mandy up on her offer to stay with her.

He was going to try to get close to Mickey again.
Whatever it took, he was going to know this new, vibrant, free, happy Mickey.

Because the idea of not knowing him hurt more than all the shit Brian did to him put together.

"I miss them already." Mandy mused, nursing her beer on the sofa.

Mickey hummed in agreement, sipping his own beer. He did miss his friends. But he knew they'd be back, he couldn't keep them away if he tried. Not that he ever would.

It was still a bit of an odd feeling for Mickey, having so many good people in his life. People he could really count on.

Iggy had left to bring Javier and Lauren to the airport about an hour and a half ago. Lauren promised to call as soon as they got back to the beach house. Mickey didn't know when he became the overbearing mother of the group. 'call me as soon as you get home' he shook his head, he was a total pussy now.

He didn't mind it so much.

It was a nice feeling to care about people, and to be cared for in return. For no other reason than love. No expectations, no demands. Just mutual respect and admiration. He didn't think he'd ever get that. Not even from his family. But since Terry had died, Mandy and Iggy had slowly gotten used to the idea of being a real family. While he was still away in Mexico, they had all started talking, taking a real interest in each other's lives, more than they ever had during their upbringing. They would never be the Brady Bunch, but they were there for each other when it counted, and that was more than Mickey ever dreamed of.

"So...." Mandy started. She put her beer down and turned to face Mickey.

"I don't want to talk about Ian." Mickey sighed. He sipped his beer, purposefully not meeting his sister's eyes.

"I wasn't going to say anything about Ian." Mandy replied calmly.

Mickey did look at her then. He figured his sister would be all over him about the shit that went down with Ian the other night. It had been a total clusterfuck, and even though Mickey had just said he didn't want to talk about it, he was defiantly lying.

"Okay then." Mickey muttered. "Sorry, I just figured you were gonna bring it up sometime today." he got up from the couch to get another beer, wiggling his empty at his sister, silently asking if she needed one. She nodded.

"Oh don't worry, that conversation's going to happen." she laughed, tossing her black hair over her shoulder. She took the beer Mickey offered as he sat down in the chair again. He gulped a huge mouthful of beer and gave his sister his full attention.

"You know I've stayed in touch with Svetlana..." she started, studying her brother's reaction closely.

He didn't give anything away, though. Slightly raised eyebrows, nod of his head. He sipped his beer casually. Giving away nothing.
But inside he was feeling immediately uneasy. Svetlana had disappeared on him, long before he escaped from prison. She'd stopped accepting his phone calls, stopped bringing the kid around. It was like he had never been married at all.

Which is what Mickey had thought he'd always wanted. But now he knew that wasn't true.

He never loved Svetlana, never even liked her, really. But he did respect her. She was a bad bitch, and a survivor. She took no shit, and she took care of her own, by any means necessary. He'd heard from Iggy what Svet had done to Kev and Vee with the Alibi. He thought it was a fucking shitty thing to do, but clever as hell. If he didn't know Kev and Vee and like them, he would have thought Svet made a good move. But he did know them, and like them, so... It was in fact a cunty move.

But around the time that Svet had her falling out with the Ball family, and the Alibi had hit hard times, she met her new husband, from an ad she put out in a Russian newspaper. Lonely hearts or what the fuck ever. David was an orthodontist, which Mickey is pretty sure is just a fancy name for dentist. He's Russian, like Svetlana, and rich as fuck. And a Jew.

Not that that means fuck all to Mickey, he's not his father.

So, around the time she cut ties with Mickey in prison, the same time she left Kev and Vee high and dry, she was being woo'd by this damn dentist. They hit it off so well, she moved in almost instantly. And when Kev threatened to call immigration on Svet before she could lock down the dentist, she caved and gave him the bar back, moved out of the Soutside and into the suburbs and never looked back.

So she hadn't really taken Yev and abandoned Mickey, she'd reinvented her whole life, and left everyone, including Mickey, behind.

He didn't really think he could blame her for that.

Besides, the kid sure as hell got a sweet deal out of it. He never went hungry, never got hit, and never had to worry that he was fundamentally damaged, and would some day be beaten to death for his flaws.

Mickey was grateful his son would never have to know what it was like to grow up the way Mickey and his siblings did.

But Mickey had been fucking pissed at his sister, when he had first come back to Chicago, finding out that she had, in fact, been in contact with the commie slut the whole time, and had lied to Mickey about falling out of touch with her, at Svetlana's insistence no less. Picking that bitch over her own brother. Seriously?

So why the fuck was she bringing it up now?

"So, you know she lives on the Northside with David now?"

"Yeah, Iggy told me all about it. Said you've known where she's been this whole time, kept that shit from me. Kept my son from me." Mickey spoke, looking at his beer bottle, not meeting his sisters eyes.

"Svet asked me not to tell you, wouldn't let me see Yev otherwise. Said it was for him, to protect him. You understand that, right? You were a fugitive, Mick."

"Yeah, and what about before I broke out? Where the fuck was she then? Where the fuck were you? Iggy? I was alone, Mands. Totally fucking alone. I don't think I would have made it if it weren't for
Jack. Did you know, when he got paroled, he put money on my books? Didn't have to, we were cellies, casual fucks at best. But he did that. Even when he was getting high, he still sent me money. Letters. A card on my fucking birthday. More than any of you ever did. Svetlana I understand, she's an opportunist. The Milkovich well was dry, so she moved on. But what about you assholes? Huh?"

Mandy said nothing. Eyes downcast, she sipped her beer silently. Taking in all Mickey had to say, shit he'd been holding in for years.

"I'm sorry, Mick. We were selfish. All had our own shit going on, figured you'd be there when we got around to it."

"When you got around to it?" he balked. "Like visiting me is like doing the laundry? Some chore you hate but know you have to do sooner or later? Thanks Mands." Mickey sat back, putting his feet up on the coffee table. "What's the fucking point of this conversation anyway? Why bring up all this shit now? What do you wanna tell me about Svetlana?" he wanted to get this conversation over with. He was tired from this crazy weekend, and feeling a bit drunk and depressed. He wanted to lie down.

"I was just gonna say, I talked to Svet the other day and she said she's open to the idea of you seeing Yev sometime, maybe, if you wanna." she mumbled, still not meeting his gaze.

"Huh? Why? What the fuck changed?" Mickey asked. This was right out of left field.

"You changed, Mick. Your conviction was overturned, you're not wanted by the law, you have a good job, on the books, and you aren't the asshole you used to be. Svet knows you're not the guy you used to be, I told her about what you were up to in Mexico. She is willing to give you a chance, if you want it. Yev asks about you all the time."

"No he fucking does not." Mickey scoffed. His face flushed hot. Embarrassment? Excitement? He didn't know.

"He does. He knows David's not his daddy. He's got a picture of you by his bed." Mandy's face broke out into a small smile.

Mickey looked at his sister, stunned. The kid knew him? Wanted to see him? Svetlana talked about him? What the fuck?

Never in a million years did Mickey think Svetlana would utter a kind word about him, never mind to Yevgeny.

Shit.

"Fuck." he said. He guzzled the rest of his beer and set the empty down on the table. "I uh, gotta think about this. I don't even know what I'd say to him." Mickey's mind was spinning. He certainly wasn't tired anymore. He stood up to get another beer. He had to think. He needed time to think.

The silence was interrupted by Mandy's cell vibrating on the table. She grabbed it and looked at the screen, eyes widening as she read the screen.

"Uh, hold on, just a sec." she motioned to the phone in her hand and answered it.

Mickey sat on the couch, drinking his beer, flipping through the Netflix guide, waiting for his sister to get off the fucking phone so they could talk about this shit more.

"Hello?" she answered.
Mickey could obviously only hear her end of the conversation, not really paying attention, surfing through zombie movies.

"What?" she sat up straight in her chair, putting her beer down on the coffee table. "Oh fuck, no way." she ran a hand through her dark hair, clearly agitated.

"He did not. Jesus fuck. Are you okay? You did? That's good, no that was the right thing to do. No, I wouldn't involve the police, it would only make things worse. We could kill the prick."

She laughed at something said on the other line.

"You know I still know how to bury a body." She smirked. "But seriously, are you okay? It didn't fuck up your shit, right? You'd tell me? Okay, okay. Yeah. Are you sure you don't want me to come get you? No, it's no trouble. Stay there, I'll be by in 20. Okay, yep, love you too."

She sighed, a sad look on her face, and stood up. "I gotta go." she said, grabbing her coat off the hook by the door.

"Where the fuck are you going? You've been drinking, shouldn't drive." Mickey reminded her. He knew he was one to talk, but he didn't want Mandy taking unnecessary risks anymore.

"Uh, I gotta go pick Ian up at the hospital. He checked himself in the night of the party." Mandy said. She pulled her coat on and started buttoning it.

Mickey's entire body went ice cold in an instant.

Ian checked into the hospital.

Fuck.

"What happened? Is he okay?" Mickey didn't care that his voice wavered, he was worried.

"No, not really." Mandy sighed. "It's not my place to tell you Mick, but I will say he broke things off with Brian and it went badly. Like, as bad as you can possibly imagine. Ian had to check himself into the psych unit when Brian flushed his pills."

"What the fuck? What a prick." Mickey went from concerned to livid in seconds.

"Yeah, no kidding. But he's stabilized now, and being discharged and he has nowhere to go. I know you guys are not on speaking terms, and he just told me he's not really ready to see you right now, so could you go to Jack's like we talked about? He can't go back to Fiona's. You know how they treat him."

Mickey knew alright. They treated him like damaged goods, like an invalid that needed constant care. Ian hated it.

And Mickey could see that Ian was having a hard enough time as it is right now. He wasn't gonna add to that shit.

He already said he'd do whatever it took to help him.

Even if that meant disappearing for a bit.

"Yeah, Mands, I'll call him right now. I'll be gone before you get back." and he got up and went to his room to get changed.
"Thanks Mick." she called after him.

Mickey went about getting ready to leave for a few days, packing a bag and grabbing his phone. He shot off a text to Jack.

me: ian's coming to stay @ my house w/ mandy. can i crash w/ u?

He threw some clean clothes in his duffel and went to grab his toothbrush. When he got back to drop it in his bag, he had a reply.

Jack: sure thing, mick. you know i can't say no 2 u ;)

Mickey shook his head, this kid was such an ass. As he grabbed his shit and walked to the door, he turned around with his hand on the knob.

"Hey Mands?" he called back into the house.

"Yeah?" she stuck her head out of her bedroom. "What?"

"Can you, uh, just text me later, let me know he's doing okay?" Mickey adjusted the strap on his bag, avoiding her eyes.

"Of course I will, Mick. Thanks for being so cool about this."

"Kid needs help. We're gonna help him." he said, and walked out the door without another word.

As he made his way down the sidewalk toward to L, he wondered, not for the first time since coming home, how he and Ian had managed to switch places in life.

Mickey was surrounded by people who loved him, was stable and had a good job, and Ian was spiraling out of control, under the thumb of an abusive asshole, and estranged from his family. Mickey never wanted that for him. If he could, he'd trade places with him in an instant. Ian could go back to being the golden boy everyone loved, and Mickey would go back to being the busted up shell of a man.

If that would take away Ian's pain, Mickey would do that. He'd bring Terry back from the dead and go head to head with him right now, if it meant keeping Ian safe and happy.

Well fuck.

Some things change. Some for the better, some not so much.

But other things stay the fucking same, no matter how much you try to alter it.

And the way Mickey felt for Ian was one of those things. Time didn't matter, distance didn't matter, and nothing that happened between them mattered.

Mickey would do anything for Ian.
He just hoped it was enough this time....
The new normal

Chapter Summary

everyone's trying to get their bearings in a life that just won't let them breathe for a second.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ian was still getting used to all this. It wasn't as easy as he'd expected, slipping back into his old life. His old neighborhood, his old personality. He wasn't even sure who that was anymore. He'd only been with Brian for a little over six months, but he felt like the man had broken him down, piece by piece, and reassembled him into a totally different person.

It was confusing, not knowing himself anymore.

It wasn't easy to move back to Canaryville. It wasn't easy to make contact with his family. It wasn't easy to go back to making his own decisions, his own choices. Even something as simple as what to have for dinner, he always tried to defer to Mandy. It's like he didn't know how to be an adult anymore, he was so accustomed to being treated like a child. It was an adjustment, to say the least.

It was also beyond bizarre to be living at Mickey's house. He was grateful Mandy had offered him a place to stay after his life went to shit, but that didn't change the fact that he was really struggling to get comfortable in the house. It was nice to be around Mandy all the time, and he could certainly use her support at the moment. But he was living in Mickey's room. A room that they had shared so many memories in. Sleeping in this very bed, watching movies on that same TV, having sex in the shower. Everywhere he looked, Ian could see Mickey.

And now that he knew he was back, that he was out there somewhere wandering around Chicago right now, it made Ian feel all kinds of ways.

He had to confront things he'd thought he'd buried long ago. Regret and guilt and shame. He wasn't delusional about his relationship with Mickey. He knew it hadn't been the healthiest thing, but he could see it all clearer now, years removed. And Mickey wasn't to blame for everything, just like he wasn't. They had been young, and damaged more than either of them knew. Trying to cobble a real relationship out of the scraps they had to offer. Neither one of them were whole or healthy back then. Both emotionally crippled by years of neglect and abuse, not knowing the right way to treat someone you love. The love they shared back then was equal parts passionate and volatile.

When Ian first started taking his health seriously, he had to confront all the shit he'd done while sick. He put the people he loved through hell, and he didn't know how to process those mistakes or start making amends. Looking back, that was around the time he willing gave up control over his own life. Started listening to other people, letting them tell him what he should do.

First it was Fiona. Telling him that Mickey would set a match to his life. And at the time, it made sense. He didn't trust himself anymore. Because no one else did. Every decision he made was always being analyzed, second guessed. So he started to do the same. Doubt himself, question his own motivations and desires. Nothing was ever simple, every single thing he did was shadowed by his
disorder. So when he got back from the border, he started listening to the people around him.

Fiona first. After he told his family where he'd gone, and listened to them berate him, question his sanity and threaten him with hospitalization, he realized he had scared them again. Something he promised himself he'd never do, if he could help it. He wasn't Monica, and he had to work hard every day of his life to not become her.

So he took Fiona at her word, and started following her suggestions. He put Mickey out of his mind, as best he could. He tried not to think about him at all, wonder or worry about him. It got easier over time.

Then she suggested he find a new therapist, since he didn't really click with the one he had at the time. That's how Ian found Caroline. And that was one of the best suggestions Fiona ever gave him. He figured he should listen to her more often. If you would have told a 15 year old Ian that his big sister would make therapy a provision of living under her roof, he'd have laughed you out of the building. Gallaghers don't do therapy. Looks like Ian's the exception to that rule, too.

Then Fiona told him to go back to the gym, that working out could be a real benefit to his recovery. She was right, he always felt better after a good workout, always felt like he'd accomplished something when he got off his ass and sweated out his frustration.

So she had some good suggestions.

Next it was Lip. Lip and Ian were always close, told each other everything. They counted on each other, had each other's backs no matter what. When Ian came out, Lip was the first person he told. When Ian got out of the hospital the first time, Lip was the one he confided in about his fears. When they were kids, and Frank would beat on Ian just because, it was Lip that cleaned up his cut lips and bloody noses. When Monica would barrel into their lives and turn it all upside down, just to desert them yet again, it was Lip that taught him how to let that shit go, not to dwell on it or blame himself. Ian would never forget how important Lip's support was to him growing up.

So when Lip told him he needed to make a clean brake from his old life to really move on, Ian had listened. When Lip suggested he find a new dude to 'get his dick wet', distract himself, Ian thought he may have a point. A new guy could be just what Ian needed to get over his heartache.

When Ian had asked Lip's opinion on Brian, Lip had told him it was a good thing that the guy was so different than they were. He said there was nothing wrong with wanting to better yourself, nothing wrong with moving up in life. Lip saw being with Brian as doing just that. Brian had everything Lip wanted. He was successful, and rich, knew all the right people. On paper, Brian was a catch. In Lip's analytical mind, Ian could do no better.

It was no secret Lip didn't like Mickey. He never had. When Lip found out about Ian's trip to the border, he had lost his shit. He was so mad at Ian for not coming to him first, like they were still kids and Ian wouldn't make a grilled cheese without Lip's approval. Lip took it as a personal insult that Ian didn't ask his opinion before going. It took a lot of time before their relationship was back to normal.

So Ian had made a point to talk to Lip about Brian in the early stages of the relationship. He put a lot of weight on what Lip had said, and he believed his brother when he told it was worth taking a shot.

Of course, when Brian started cutting Ian off from the very person that pushed them together, Ian didn't want anyone to know. He blamed himself for everything going wrong, and didn't want anyone
else pointing fingers at him too. He didn't want Lip to see him so weak, to question his decisions again. And he certainly didn't want Lip to blame himself suggesting the relationship in the first place.

By the time Ian moved into Brian's condo, he had given up making decisions all together. Finding it easier to go with the flow and not put up a fight. He went from letting Fiona and Lip tell him how to live his life, to letting Brian call the shots. He didn't even realize it was happening until it was too late.

Now here he was, out from under Brian's thumb. But he didn't know how to be anymore. Brian had driven a wedge between him and his family, and he didn't know how to go about fixing it.

He did know, however, that he didn't want it to go back to the way it was before. If he was going to have a relationship with his siblings again, it had to be on Ian's terms. He'd just gotten out of one controlling mind fuck of a relationship, there was no way in hell he was going back to that. He knew his family meant well, wanted what was best for him.

But Ian was healthy now, had been for a long time, and he wasn't going to willingly give up control anymore. Best intentions aside, Ian had to be his own man from now on. He wanted love and support, but only that.

He'd told Mickey once he didn't want a caretaker. He didn't want to be babied or controlled.

It's about time he remembered that shit.

He had been laying in bed (Mickey's bed) going over this bullshit in his head for over an hour. He finally stretched his arms over his head, yawning, and struggled to sit up.

He promised Fiona he'd come by the house today and explain his prolonged radio silence to his siblings. It was not a conversation he was looking forward to. But he was going to do it, and he wasn't going to let them walk all over him.

He wasn't.

He sighed, running a hand through his hair. He needed a shower. He stood up slowly, catching himself on the wall when he wobbled a bit. He wanted a coffee and a cigarette. But he needed to clean up first. He'd worked 3-11 last night, stumbling back to the Milkovich house well after midnight and falling into bed without even brushing his teeth.

At least he had the presence of mind to take his meds.

He was an grown up after all.

He smiled at the thought.

'Speaking of meds, better get on that shit.' he thought to himself. It was after 9am, his day off, and he was a couple hours late taking his meds.

These new meds were working well, he hadn't had any symptoms or real side effects to speak of since his weekend in the hospital. He was relieved, he'd been so afraid of a relapse after the shit Brian pulled.

But he'd seemed to have dodged a bullet, and for that he was grateful. It had been almost three weeks since the hospital. Three weeks at the Milkovich house. Three weeks of avoiding his family. Three weeks of obsessing about Mickey.
Something had to change.

He'd start with his Gallagher problem.

He made his way into the bathroom, lucky to have it to himself. He idly wondered where the hell everyone was.

Iggy had been none too pleased when Mandy had informed him Ian was going to be staying with them. He'd been downright rude to Ian when he first showed up, making it clear Ian was still on Iggy's shit list, all these years later. Like Iggy was offended on Mickey's behalf. Fuck with one brother, fuck with them all... Ian couldn't be bothered to care at the moment. He had enough to worry about without fretting over being in the good graces of his third favorite Milkovich.

So Iggy had been avoiding Ian like the plague for the three weeks he'd been staying with them. He also had his girlfriend Tessa under strict orders to keep her distance. Ian didn't really care about all that. She seemed like a bit of a bimbo, a nice one, but still. Ian wouldn't be losing any sleep over not being her best friend.

The one saving grace of his predicament was Mandy. She had taken him in and made him feel at home instantly. Like they had never been estranged at all. Like no time had passed, and they were still sixteen, pretending to date. It was nice to have her back.

The one thing that was off limits was Mickey. Ian supposed he deserved that. He was not to ask about Mickey, talk about Mickey, or allude to anything Mickey-related. That was a house rule, enforced by Mandy and Iggy alike. If Ian wanted to stay, he paid rent, and kept his mouth shut and curiosity in check as far as Mickey was concerned.

That wasn't easy.

He had so many questions.

Ian wandered into the kitchen. He was taken aback by how clean it was. The whole house, really. He thought back to when he'd helped Mandy move back to the house. It wasn't that long ago, in the big scheme of things. But the house had changed dramatically since then. The feminine touch of both Mandy and Tessa could be felt everywhere. The walls had been painted a soft yellow, and every surface of the living space had been scrubbed clean. Years of grime and cigarette smoke washed away. There were curtains on the windows, and a flowering plant on the window sill by the sink. It was surreal. It looked like a real home, where regular people lived. People that never had to pick a pocket or scam the government. People who never set foot in a jail cell or turned a trick when times got rough.

The image was deceiving. Ian huffed a laugh. If the Milkovich house could pass for suburban normalcy, anything could. Times have changed, for sure.

But no matter how much you spruce out the outside, of a house or a person, the foundation stays the same. Ian may have a good job now, be healthy and on top of his disorder, but he could still handle himself in a fight, and he could still hustle if shit went south. He knew his family could too. Even if they weren't living paycheck to paycheck anymore. Even if none of them were on probation or standing in line at the food pantry, they could still survive when other people would crumble under the pressure. He knew now, weeks after moving into the Milkovich house, that they were the same. Their foundations remained untouched, even if their looked and acted different on the outside.

Mandy had her office job. She had a husband, before the douche fucked it all up. She had a bank account, she was in a fucking book club, for Christ's sake. But she was still the same bad bitch Ian
knew growing up. She could still shotgun a beer and hot-wire a car. Those were some of the things Ian loved about her the most. He's glad she didn't lose her hard edges when she grew out of her south side shell.

Iggy, well, he was still Iggy. Rude and crass and loud as fuck. But he worked legit, most of the time, working part time as a mechanic. Or doing odd jobs around the neighborhood. The transition to 'law abiding citizen' hadn't been easy for Iggy, and he fell short of the mark now and again, but he was doing a lot better than Ian had ever anticipated. Hadn't been to jail since before Mickey escaped. Seems to be that once Terry finally died, Iggy left all that criminal shit in the past, like he was just waiting for the opportunity to do so. He had been with Tessa for a long time, treated her well. Didn't cheat, never hit her. It was strange to Ian, how strange it wasn't. Like he always knew deep down that Iggy was a good dude. A good person. He just never got the opportunity to show it growing up, not with Terry eyeballing his every move. He'd had a reputation to protect.

The Milkovich Name.

Whatever twisted shit that meant.

But Iggy and Mandy had both defied the odds. Shed their old skin and become totally new people.

But their foudations were still the same. Just like Ian's. Underneath it all, they were still a group of damaged people, just trying to hold it together long enough to make it through another day.

Ian wondered how much of Mickey's foundation was still intact. He'd renovated his exterior just as much as the rest of them. He'd obviously changed a lot since the last time Ian had really known him. He was more open, loving, and carefree than Ian ever thought he'd see him. Like a totally different person, with none of the darkness that used to hover over him like a storm cloud.

But Ian had a feeling that Mickey was just like him, struggling to hold onto the light newness he's found, and not be consumed by the ugly shit from the past that just wouldn't die.

Not that Ian would know. He wasn't even allowed to ask.

It was extremely frustrating, but he understood. He had no idea what was going on in Mickey's life, but he knew Mickey had every right to not want Ian to be a part of it.

Ian had cut Mickey out of his life, more than once. Who was he to demand anything now, after all this time? After everything that happened?

But he could admit, at least to himself, that he was a little bit jealous that he wasn't the one to witness the incredible change in Mickey's demeanor. He seemed like a whole new person. He moved on, without Ian.

Which is what Ian had wanted for Mickey all along.

So why did it feel so wrong? To see him with new friends, see him flirting with that stupid asshole Lip clone? To see him laughing and smiling and fucking SINGING with those people from Mexico.

Mickey was free. He was happy, and he was loved, and he had made a life for himself.

Without Ian.

Why did that bother him so much?

Because, deep down, Ian had always thought that Mickey could never be happy without him. He thought that Mickey may move on, live a decent enough life, have nice things, maybe even some
friends. But he'd never love anyone like he loved Ian. He'd always miss him, always want him, always long for him above anyone else. Always come to him, because he could never be without him.

And now, Ian wasn't so sure that was the case anymore. Mickey had been home for a month, and Ian had only seen him that one time. He'd made no effort to see or talk to Ian at all. Ian didn't like it.

Maybe he was being selfish. It's not like he'd ever really put Mickey first. Why should he expect anything from him?

He didn't know.

But just the idea that Mickey was in Chicago, and wasn't desperate to see Ian had his teeth on edge. Because Ian was dying to see Mickey. He wondered if this was how Mickey felt when he was in jail, waiting for Ian to visit. Or when he was at home, wondering where Ian was when he took off for days on end.

Karma's a bitch, apparently.

Ian brushed his teeth and washed his face. The shower could wait, he'd promised Fiona he'd be at the house before noon, and he was pushing it.

He opened the medicine cabinet and took out a pill from each bottle, placing them on the sink so he could fill the tumbler with water.

He caught his reflection in the mirror, stilling his actions. He looked better than he had before his hospital visit. The color was back in his face, the dark circles were gone from under his eyes. He'd even managed to gain a little weight back, thanks to Mandy's incessant need to feed him. He gave his reflection a small smile before tossing his meds in his mouth and gulping them down with a sip of water.

He dressed quietly. White t shirt, army green cargo pants, black hoodie. Gone were the designer clothes Brian had insisted he wear. He felt more comfortable like this anyway. No longer trying to be someone he's not. He pulled a pair of black combat boots onto his feet, knotting them twice before standing. He took his phone (had to buy a new one after Brian smashed his old one to shit) his cigarettes and his wallet, stuffing it all in his pockets and walking out of the room and closing the door behind him.

He walked into the living space, seeing no one there. Looks like he really is on his own this morning. He ambled into the kitchen, making a bee line for the coffee maker. Affixed to the pot was a post-it note.

Ian,

Me & Tessa have gone to the mall. If you're a good boy we may bring you back a prize ;) txt me when you're done with your asshole family. maybe we'll get pizza tonight.

ps: Iggy left a peace offering in the cookie jar.

xoxo

me

Ian read and reread the note. Iggy did what now?

Ian made himself a cup of coffee, eyeing the cookie jar the whole time. Did he even want to look? Why would Iggy be trying to make peace with him? He was suspicious, to say the least.
But he was also curious as all hell.

So he took a sip of his coffee and opened the cookie jar. It was shaped like a waving cat. Ian chuckled.

He stuck his hand inside the jar and felt around for a moment before his fingers wrapped around a small, cylindrical object. Ian smiled. This would be Iggy's way of making peace. He took the joint out and set it on the counter. He supposed it would be a decent first step toward having a more civil relationship with Mandy's brother.

Unless that shit was laced with angel dust or something. Ian wouldn't put it past Iggy to try something like that....

But that was unfair. Iggy wasn't a bad dude, and he certainly knew what getting dosed like that would do to Ian. Ian had to stop thinking the worst. He took the joint and put it in his cigarette pack. He'd give Lip the first hit, just in case.

He quickly finished his coffee and made his way to the door, shutting off the lights and locking up behind him. He never thought he'd see the day where the Milkovich house was locked. He highly doubted to this day anyone would be stupid enough to break in. They may have gone legit, but they haven't forgotten how to bust skulls.

Ian chuckles a bit at the thought, hopping down the steps and making his way up the street. It was now or never.

He's going home.

-----

Mickey is tired. Like, dead on his feet, bone-weary, 'can't feel my face.' tired.

He's been working overtime. A shit ton of overtime. He says it's for a lot of different reasons. Maybe he'll get his own place. Maybe he'll buy a car. Maybe he'll buy Yev something nice. Maybe he'll move back to Mexico.

But the truth is, he's working all these hours to keep his mind occupied. So he doesn't have to think. Doesn't have to think about Yevgeny, or the new family he has that Mickey is not a part of.

Doesn't have time to wonder about Javier and Lauren, wonder if they miss him as much as he misses them.

Doesn't have time to wonder how much heroin Jack is doing right under Mickey's nose every day. Doesn't have time to worry if maybe he's been joining Jack too much in indulging his vices.

Doesn't have a single idle second to wonder about Ian, sitting in Mickey's own house at this very moment.

He works so much that by the time he get back to the apartment, Jack has already been there for hours. He drinks every night, a lot more than he did in Mexico. Sometimes he gets high with Jack. Snorting it, not shooting. Most nights they have sex.

It is what it is. He knows he avoiding shit he has to face sooner or later. But he's just not fucking
ready yet.

This is why he came back to Chicago, to put his house in order. If he's ever going to be free of all this baggage, he's going to have to work through his issues.

Just the idea makes him exponentially more tired.

But today's his day off, and there's no way he's going to spend it ruminating on all the fucked up shit going on in his life right now.

It's barely 10 am, but he lurches off the couch and into the kitchen for a beer anyway. He pops the cap on the bottle and takes a long swig, sighing in relief as he wipes his mouth with the back of his hand.

Just then he sees an envelope sitting on the kitchen island. It has his name neatly printed on the face, and the city court as the return address.

He is gripped by instantaneous anxiety.

What the fuck does the parole office want with him?

He runs through all his most recent illegal acts, wondering if he got himself hemmed up.
He has a gun in his nightstand.
There's no way anyone knows about that.
He got into a fist fight at a bar not too long ago, with some prick that tried to steal Jack's wallet.
There's no way that douchebag called the cops.
He's been getting high with Jack for a while now.
But random drug tests aren't a condition of his parole. Drugs were never his problem. Before.

'Fuck it.' he thinks to himself, taking one last sip of his beer before setting it down on the counter to open the letter.

It's not from the parole board at all.

It's family court.

He's being summoned to a hearing regarding the adoption of Yevgeny Milkovich. Svetlana's husband wants to adopt his son.

The letter falls to the floor, Mickey too stunned to move.

-----------------------------

"Hello? Anybody home?" Ian calls, walking into the living room of his family home. It looks the same as ever. Cleaner, maybe, with less broken down furniture and clutter. Fiona has really made some changes in the past few years. Trying to better herself. But Ian knows, her foundation is the same. Cosmetic changes aside, it's all the same underneath.

"Ian!" Fiona comes running from the kitchen, tossing a towel over her shoulder haphazardly as she rushed to embrace him. He falters a little due to the sheer force of her hug. "Where the fuck have you been? Brian got you so tied down you don't have time for your own family?" she laughs, like it so funny.
She has no idea.

Ian sees Lip standing off to the side, sipping a beer even though he probably shouldn't be. He eyes Ian, but says nothing.

Ian think Lip knows more than he lets on.

"Uh," Ian doesn't really know where to start, or how much he wants to tell them. Some of the things that happened with Brian are still very raw, and he hasn't even processed them himself yet. Hasn't even told Caroline about the night they broke up. He just can't go there, not yet.

"Brian and I broke up." Is all he can come up with. They are both staring at him. It makes him uncomfortable. He shifts on his feet, no longer looking at them.

"Good." Lip finally speaks.

Ian looks up at him. Lip smiles. He sips his beer and walks back into the kitchen. Ian and Fiona follow behind.

"Ian, wanna beer?" Lip asks, going to the fridge.

"Lip, what the fuck. He's not supposed to drink." Fiona scolds, like they are all still kids, and she's still in charge.

"Yeah, man. Thanks." Ian replies, ignoring his sister's protests. He takes a seat.

Lip comes up next to him, handing him his beer and sitting beside him.

Fiona huffs in annoyance and grabs her own beer before joining her brothers at the table. "I'm just looking out for you." she says.

"Technically, I'm not supposed to drink either, but you say fuck all to me about it." Lip remarks, putting his feet up on the table.

"It's not the same and you know it, Lip." she says. She crosses her arms over her chest and stares at them.

"I don't want to fight." Ian says. "That's not why I came here."

"We miss you." Fiona looks hurt when she says it, pain evident in her eyes.

"I'm sorry. Things with Brian got really bad. At first it was nice. He had money, treated me nice, we got along really well, never fought. But, uh, after I moved in, things started to change." Ian took a long sip of his beer, setting it down on the table and picking at the label as he spoke. "He didn't want me to see you guys anymore, said you held me back. Said you babyed me, treated me like an invalid cuz of my disorder."

"Ian, that's.." Fiona starts, but Ian cuts her off.

"No, Fi, let me say this shit." Ian gives her a look that shuts her up immediately. He needs to get this out, while he's still got the nerve.

Fiona starts, staring him down, but says nothing more, bringing her beer to her mouth to stop herself from commenting further.

"So, he was right, in a way. I felt like you guys didn't trust me to make my own decisions, always
telling me what to do, how to live my life. And I started to believe you, you know, thinking maybe you were right, I didn't know how to live on my own anymore, I needed help to get it right."

"Nothing wrong with needing help." Lip muttered, eyeing his brother carefully.

"You're right, but there's a difference between accepting help and giving up completely. I stopped trusting myself, and started listening to anyone who had an opinion on how I should live. You guys were never short on suggestions."

Lip and Fiona shared a look Ian couldn't place.

"And neither was Brian." Ian sighed. He pinched the bridge of his nose, taking a moment to calm himself. "Remember when you said Mickey wasn't good for me, Fiona?"

Fiona looked at Ian, surprised he was bringing up something that happened so long ago.

"Uh, yeah, Ian, I remember. Right before you ran away."

"I didn't run.... You know what, forget it. You said Mickey would destroy everything I was trying to build, drag me back into the gutter with him. You remember that?"

"Yes, Ian, I do." Fiona sounded frustrated.

"Well, Brian had the same opinion of you guys. All of you. The family, Kev and Vee, Mandy. He told me that having a relationship with you would hold me back. Keep me stuck in the southside mentality, keep me from moving forward."

"That's bullshit." Lip said.

"Yeah, well, I believed it. It's not so different from what you said about Mickey, Fiona."

"But we're not Mickey. We would never...."

"Never what? Huh? Never put yourself in danger to protect me? Never risk your life to keep me safe? Never give up everything you've ever known to make me happy?" Ian didn't even know he was ranting until he stopped talking and noticed they were both staring at him. He shook his head.

"Sorry, I just, I want you guys to understand."

"I wanted to handle it on my own. I didn't want you guys to think I'd fucked up again. You already don't trust me to make good decisions." Ian sighed.
"Ian, it's not your fault the guy wasn't who he pretended to be." Fiona said, putting her hand over his on the table.

"I just felt so stupid. Like I fell for it, so easy. Blinded by his money and his charm. It was all a lie, he's terrible."

"So, what happened to finally make you decide to leave?" Fiona asked. She kept her and on his, rubbing soothing circles on the back of his hand like she did when he was a kid.

"Well, it's kindof a long story, but the gist of it is, Mandy had a divorce party."

"Mandy Milkovich?" Lip asked, looking shocked.

"What other Mandy is there?" Ian replied. "Focus, Lip, that's not the point of this story."

"I didn't know she was getting a divorced." Lip says instead.

"Anyway." Ian says, trying to bring the conversation back on track. "I wanted to go the party, Brian didn't, obviously. But he came, god knows why. We get there, and fucking Mickey's there."

"What?" both his siblings say in unison.

"Yeah." is all Ian can muster in reply.

"How the fuck did that happen?" Lip asks.

"I don't know. Mandy won't tell me. But anyways, Brian sees him and flips the fuck out. He hit me. In front of everyone." Ian is no longer looking at his siblings, too ashamed to meet their pitying eyes.

"He fucking hits you, Ian? How often does this happen?" Lip sounded livid.

"It had never happened until that night. I mean, he pushed me around sometimes, slaps me or whatever, but never hit me with a closed fist until that night."

"And that makes it okay? Ian, what the fuck? How could you not tell us this was happening to you? We could have done something. Does Caroline know? Are you okay?" Fiona rambled. She downed the rest of her beer and got up to get another.

"It's not okay, I know that Fi."

"So what happened next?" Lip asks.

"I was mortified, obviously. Mickey and his friends came over and broke it up. We didn't talk, but he threatened Brian enough to make him blanch, and then we went home."

"Mickey's still protecting you, all these years later." Lip said with a small smile.

Ian didn't reply to that.

"So, we get home and Brian gives me this ultimatum. He said either I cut ties with anyone and everyone in my past, you guys included, or we were done. I think he was trying to scare me, threaten me or whatever. But he didn't know that's what I wanted. I wanted out. I was done with his shit. Don't know why I put up with it so long. I must be more fucked up than I thought." Ian's voice waivered, but he didn't stop. He couldn't stop now.

"So, uh, when I told him I thought it was best that we end things, he lost his god damn mind. Like it
made perfect sense for him to dump me, but god forbid I want to end things too. He, um, he hit me hard, knocked me out. I don't want to get into it too much, but he beat me pretty bad that night, fucked me up real good. And he flushed my meds."

"He did what? Ian, you can't miss doses like that, you're going to relapse." Fiona sounded horrified. Like Ian's medication was the most important part of the story, not the abuse he suffered. He didn't know if she was right or not.

"I know that too, Fi. I checked myself in for the weekend. Cook County. I got dosed there, they stabilized me. I avoided a crisis. Well, that type of crisis, anyway." he added bitterly.

"Why the fuck didn't you call us?" Lip spat. "You went through all this shit alone? You checked in alone? You didn't even bother to tell us your boyfriend beat the shit out of you? What the hell, Ian? Please for the love of god tell me you are not still living with this prick. Where the fuck have you been staying for the past month?"

Ian was tired. This conversation was draining him quick. "I've been staying with Mandy at the house on Trumball."

"What?" Fiona and Lip said in unison. Sometimes Ian wondered if they had one brain when it came to Ian. Always saying the same shit. Always thinking the same things. It was annoying.

"Yeah, she's been really helpful. We both just got out of bad relationships, we've been helping each other out." Ian smiled, thinking about how good Mandy has been to him through all this.

"This because of Mickey? You trying to get close to him again?" Lip asked. Because he couldn't not be an asshole, not for even a minute.

"No, you dick." Ian sighed. "This has nothing to do with Mick. I haven't even seen him since the party. I told Mandy I wasn't ready to be in contact with him, after all the shit I just went through. He moved in with a friend. I don't even know where he is. I'm not living there for Mick or Mandy or anyone else. I'm there because I want to be. I need to do this on my own."

"Fuck that, Ian." Fiona looked at him, reaching for his hand again, but he pulled away at the last second. She looked hurt for a moment, but she hid it well, concern evident in her eyes again. "Come home. You belong here with us, so we can look out for you."

"See, that's exactly what I'm talking about." Ian tries to keep his voice calm. No need to give them more reason to question his stability. "I don't want anyone looking out for me, taking care of me, or telling me what to do. I left Brian because he wanted to run my life. I'm not coming home so you two can do the same thing."

"That's not how it is, Ian. You know that. We just want to help." Lip sounded hurt.

"I know that, Lip, I really do. I know you guys don't do it on purpose, it just happens that way. And I can't do it anymore. I need to stand on my own two feet. I need to be the one in charge. I need this. You guys understand that, right?" he looked over at his older sibling, silently pleading with them not to fight him on this.

He had to rebuild himself from scratch. And he had to do it on his terms.

"Okay, Ian. Okay." Fiona finally spoke after a long stretch of silence, the three of them just staring at each other. "You do whatever you think is best. And we'll support you. Just promise me one thing." she reached for his hand, and he let her take it this time.
"Don't keep this shit from us ever again. Don't suffer silently. Don't think we'll doubt you or think less of you. I'm sorry you ever felt that way to begin with. You didn't do anything wrong. Brian is a prick and an abuser. People like him are pathological liars. Tell you what you wanna hear, say and do all the right things, and when you're finally hooked they turn the tables. He had us fooled too. I knew he was a stuck up ass, but I had no idea he was this cruel. You are not to blame."

Ian could feel tears welling up in his eyes. He blinked furiously trying to keep them at bay.

"I feel so stupid." he said sadly.

"Don't." Lip said. "I was the one that told you to give the guy a shot. I thought it would be good for you to date him. He puts on a good front. The money, the class. He did nice things for you in the beginning, and when you came to me I told you to go for it. So he fooled me too. I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault." Ian replied immediately.

"Not yours either, kid." Fiona said, pulling him into a hard hug. "I'm just glad you're safe now." she mumbled into his neck, not pulling away an inch.

"Yeah, Fi, me too." Ian replied softly, finally letting the tears fall.

--------------------------------

"You need to go see them." Jack says for what feels like the hundredth time.

Mickey shakes his head, like he has every single time Jack's said it.

"Nah, man. Yev's better off without me." he doesn't need to look at Jack to see the glare he's sending his way.

They are sitting on the couch in Jack's apartment. It's much later now.

Jack had slept through most of the day. It was Saturday, and for once Mickey hadn't worked. So he'd just sat alone in the apartment drinking until Jack had stumbled out of the bedroom to find Mickey on the couch, beer bottles littering the coffee table.

"Listen, Mick. I know I'm not one to give advice on life, we both know I'm a hot fucking mess." Jack smiles. Mickey laughs. "But, I see what you are doing, and it's only gonna make shit worse. You think I don't notice you've been working 60 hour weeks. My dad thinks your are some kind of carpentry android. He's amazed with your work ethic, thinks you're great. But I know you better than that. You're trying to distract yourself from all the chaotic bullshit going on in your life. But if you ignore it, it's just gonna fester inside you til you can't take it anymore and kill some asshole with a ball peen hammer for looking at you cross-eyed."

Mickey laughs again. He forgets sometimes how well Jack knows him. He thought he'd been keeping his shit on lock pretty well, but apparently he's a god damn open book with this prick.

"Spill, kid. Or do you want me to get Lauren on the phone to school your ass long distance?" Jack poked Mickey in the side.
"No, dude. Don't get L involved. She will tear me a new asshole. I promised her I wouldn't shut down when I got back here. Promised her I wouldn't let this place break me again."

"Well, if you don't want me to call her, you better start talking. I mean, she's not wrong, Mick. You were doing so well down there. I never knew you to be so happy or carefree. And you were doing okay up here for a minute. But first the shit with the red head who shall not be named....." Jack trailed off. Mickey grimaced. Fucking Jack. "And now this shit with your ex-wife and your kid. And instead of talking about it, or dealing with it, you are trying to work yourself to death so you don't have to face any of it. But this shit ain't going nowhere, Mick, and the longer you ignore it, the bigger the mess will be. And the harder it will be to clean up when it all blows up in your face."

Mickey sighed. He ran a hand down his face, turning to face Jack. "I know." is all he says.

"And I mean, you don't have to talk to ME about it. I mean, I know it was easier on the inside, when we never thought we'd see each other again. We spilled our guts about everything to each other. But I get it if it's different for you now. I know it's not the same." Jack dropped his eyes.

"Hey." Mickey says, pulling Jack's face back up to look him in the eye. "It's not that. I do trust you. Just as much as L or Javi, or even Mandy. You're my friend, Jack. One of the best I ever had. It's just an old habit for me to push that shit away. Shove it down til I don't feel anything. I know it ain't healthy, and I've been working hard for a long time to stop doing that shit. But being back here makes it hard. Like all that work was for nothing, I'm still some weak ass pussy."

"You're not a fucking pussy, Mick. Christ." Jack punches Mickey in the arm, personally offended by Mickey's self deprecation. "You've had a shit life. People let you down, constantly. You never had a proper friend til my fine ass walked into your life. You've been dealt a shit hand. It's not easy, what you've done. You turned that shit around. It's to be expected that you'd fall apart a bit when shit gets tough. We all do. I mean, look at me. Does it look like I've got life all figured out? For fuck's sake, I'm a junkie that can't get clean, living off his parents in his twenties. But I am trying. That's all you can do. But you gotta at least try. You're not trying. You're just ignoring it all." Jack put his hand on Mickey's thigh, staring straight into his eyes. "You're better than that, Mickey. Whatever it is, you face that shit. And the people that love you will be there to get your back when you falter."

"Still ain't used to that shit. Always had to do it on my own.” Mickey mutters, looking at Jack's hand on his leg.

"Well, those days are long gone. You've got me now. And L and Javier. And your sister. For crying out loud, Mick, you could have your son too. You just gotta make a move.” Jack squeezed Mickey's thigh and got up off the couch. "I'm gonna go in the bedroom for a bit. Call your ex-wife then come get me. After, We'll go see Mandy ." and he walked out without waiting for Mickey to reply.

Because Jack knew Mickey well enough to know he'd do just that.

He picked up his phone off the coffee table, and dialed Svetlana's number.

-----------------------------------

"Ian." Mandy sighs. Her eyes are wet, and she's trying really hard to hold it together. "What you are describing is rape."

"I know, Mandy." Ian isn't looking at her. They are sitting on her bed at the Milkovich house,
sharing the joint Iggy left for him earlier in the day. His plan to share it with Lip went to shit after the
conversation he ended up having with his siblings. After the emotional confrontation, Ian had to get
out of there. Promising to return for family dinner this week, he made his exit not long after. He
couldn't breathe in there, with them staring at him like that. Pity and anger and disbelief all wrapped
up together.

It was easier here, with just Mandy. She understood him in a way no one else did. She never pressed
him or pushed him. She just let him be. However he wanted to be. It was refreshing.
"You at least gonna tell Caroline?" she asked, puffing the joint and raising her eyebrows
expectantly.

"Yeah, I'll tell her at our next appointment. She's going to be pissed."

"She's not gonna be pissed, Ian. You did nothing wrong. She's there to help you understand yourself
better, not to beat you up for your mistakes." she said, passing him the joint.

Ian nodded his head, taking it from her and putting it to his lips. He took a long inhale, holding it in
his lungs until they burned. He let it out slow, feeling the calming haze of the high settle over him
like a blanket. He sighed.

"So, you promised to tell me about what happened with Mick. I told you my whole sob story with
Brian. Bared my soul and all that shit. So get to it. How is he here? What happened?"

"You didn't google that shit, Ian?" Mandy teased.

"Nah." he shook his head. "I wanted to hear it from him. But now that I know that's not going to
happen, I wanna hear it from you."

"Ian, Mick and you will talk someday. You have to know that." Mandy put the joint out in an
ashtray on her nightstand and laid down, pulling Ian down with her.

"I don't know, Mands. He's a whole new person now, from what little I saw. Maybe we're too
different now."

Mandy laughed so hard at that she started to cough. She had to sit up and pound on her own chest.
She looked at Ian like he grew a second head. Tears streaming down her face from laughing so hard.
"You must be really fucking high to say some backwards shit like that, Ian."

Ian looked over at her, unconvinced. "He looked happy. Never saw him so happy."

"And you know that shit ain't true, either." she replied.

"Just give me something. Please, I gotta know. It's driving me nuts."

"Alright, alright." she gave in. She laid back down and let Ian wrap an arm around her. Both of them
staring at the ceiling as she began to speak. She was gonna tell him everything she knew, starting at
the beginning.

"So, you saw Jack, right?"

"This was a stupid fucking idea." Mickey said, smoking what must have been his fourth cigarette in
the past twenty minutes. He was pacing back and forth in front of some high class Italian restaurant a few blocks from Jack's apartment. "We should just get out of here," he made a move to start walking back the way they came, but Jack stopped him with a hand on his arm. Mickey went to shake it off, but Jack just held tighter, giving him a stern yet sympathetic look.

"I know it's gonna be weird, but you gotta do this Mick. You're going to regret it if you don't."

Mickey sighed, leaning back against the building. He brought his cigarette back to his mouth, hoping futility that the nicotine would calm his frayed nerves.

He knew why he agreed to meet Svetlana here. He knew he wanted to at least try to be part of his son's life. He hadn't spoken to her or Yev since he was locked up. When he had been in Mexico, he had tried to contact them, but her number was disconnected, and Mandy swore high and low she had no clue where they were.

Of course, now Mickey knew that was a big fat fucking lie.

But he wasn't mad. He understood. He had been a fugitive. Svetlana was an illegal immigrant. It was dangerous for her and Yev to be in contact with him during that time.

But things had certainly changed since then.

He was surprised Svetlana had agreed to meet him at all. Surprised she answered his call. Surprised she agreed to meet him without her dentist husband in tow.

He was all around shocked that this was even happening.

Jack had offered to tag along, knowing Mickey was petrified of meeting the woman alone, but would never say that shit.

"You didn't need to come. I can take care of my own shit." Mickey reiterated his own thought, eyeing the street for any sign of his ex-wife.

"Mick, I'm not letting you do this shit alone. Besides, I've been dying to meet this bitch since you told me that story of her and the strap on. She sounds incredible." Jack laughed. Mickey pushed him, hard.

Just as they were starting to really pick up some steam in the shoving match, Mickey heard someone clear their throat behind him.

He turned slowly, like he was trying not to startle a wild animal. And there she was.

In all her feral cat glory. Her hair was pinned high on her head. She was wearing a tight red dress, underneath what looked like a mink stole. Her stiletto heels were so high, she towered over both Mickey and Jack. She wore a stern expression.

She looked exactly the same, uptown makeover or not.

"You came." she says by way of greeting.

"I called you. Why would I not come?" Mickey asked, irritated for no reason.

"You say a lot of things, do very little." she replied coolly.
"Oh, come the fuck on." Mickey groused.

Jack took that opportunity to step around Mickey and offer his hand to Svetlana. "Hi. I'm Jack, it's nice to finally meet you."

Svetlana eyed the proffered hand with disdain. Jack retracted it, running it through his messy hair and dropping it back to his side.

"This the replacement for Orange Boy?" Svetlana smirked.

"For the love of fucking god. Can we go inside?" Mickey turns on his heels and stalks into the restaurant without looking to see if they were following.

They did.

---------------------------------------------

"So, what you're telling me is that Mickey made a life for himself in Mexico, he has friends that he loves, and he's doing better than you've ever seen him. He has no boyfriend, but he fucks around with his friends.....He has a legit job, makes good money, and is trying to make contact with Svetlana so he can be in Yev's life. That's what you're saying to me right now?" Ian's voice came out hushed, like he was sharing a secret.

"Uh, yeah, that's pretty much the gist of it, Ian. You okay?" Mandy asked.

They were still laying on her bed. The whole story had taken over an hour to tell, Ian listening to every word, stunned into silence until the very end.

"I, uh, don't know what I expected." he replies. He really didn't know what he thought Mandy was going to tell him. He wasn't about to admit to Mandy that he'd been certain Mickey wouldn't be able to be happy without him. He wasn't about to say he was jealous of Mickey and his life now. That he wanted to be part of it, but didn't know how to approach him anymore. That he felt like he didn't know Mickey at all. "He's happy." he says instead.

"Yeah, I mean, he seems it. But I don't really know. It not like we have heart to hearts all the time Ian. You know my brother." Mandy replies.

"I used to." Ian says sadly.

"What do you want here, Ian? Do you want to be friends with Mick? Do you want him back? Do you just want him to be happy? Do you want him out of your life? I mean, why are you asking? Just curious?" Mandy was still laying on Ian's chest, running her hand up and down his arm, soothing him. She could feel the tension radiating off him in waves.

"I don't know what I want. I guess I wanna know what he wants. Does he miss me too? Does he forgive me for all the shit I pulled? Does he want to kill me and scatter my parts down by the river?" he laughs a little, shaking his head.

"Ian." Mandy sighs. She puts her hand under his chin, turning his face down to look her in the eye. "My brother would never hurt you. If anything, I'd be afraid of you hurting him. I know what went down with you guys back in the day. I know it was fucked up, and you both did fucked up shit. But I've never seen Mick as broken as he was when you dumped him. When he was first in jail they had to put him on suicide watch. He didn't eat, he fought anyone that looked at him sideways. He took me off the visitors list for six months. He was a fucking mess. If it wasn't for Jack, I don't know if he would have made it."
Ian looks away, ripping his face out of Mandy's hands. He's angry with himself for abandoning Mickey like that. And he's angry that another man was there to pick up the pieces when Ian shattered Mickey's heart. It's ridiculous, really. Being angry at someone for helping Mickey when Ian couldn't be bothered to care. He should be happy someone was there to keep him safe, to comfort him. How can he be jealous, when he was the one to walk away?

"What is it, between them?" Ian hears himself ask. Like the question popped out of his unwilling mouth without his consent.

"I really don't know. I know they are not dating. But they are more than friends. Like Mickey was with Javier down in Mexico. He hasn't had a real boyfriend since....." she trails off.

That bit of information soothes Ian a bit. Not that it should. Ian shouldn't be happy Mickey hasn't been in a relationship since them. Ian's had plenty of boyfriends since Mickey. He has no right to be happy Mickey's stayed single. But he is.

"Listen Ian, this is the last I'm going to speak on this subject. You want to know about Mickey, you ask him yourself. But you go to him, and you listen to what he has to say. If he doesn't wanna talk, don't push it. I know how you can be with him. Don't bully him into baring his soul, okay? Let him do it in his own time. He'll come around. I think you and I both know how he feels about you. He's just a little gun shy right now. Can you blame him?"

"No, I know you're right. I'm glad I haven't gone to him yet. I'm not in the right frame of mind anyway. I gotta deal with all my baggage from Brian first. I am still pretty fucked up about it. Don't want to open up all those old wounds when I'm still spiraling from the other shit. But it's killing me, Mands. Knowing he's here, so fucking close. It was easier to not think about him when he was gone."

"And that's the problem, isn't it? You have an 'out of sight, out of mind' mentality when it comes to Mick. But he's not like that. You are always on his mind, Ian. I haven't talked to him once in the past four years without him asking about you. Before and after the escape, he always had to know, were you okay, were you happy. So, if you're going to try and be in his life, you better be all in. Don't fuck him over again. Don't flake on him. If he lets you back in, don't abuse his trust. He's been through too much, he doesn't deserve that shit."

Ian was taken aback by Mandy's words. He'd always knew she loved her brother, but she'd never defended him so fiercely before. Ian wondered how much damage he'd done to Mickey to have Mandy warn him so sternly.

A lot.

He'd done a lot of damage.

"Okay, Mands. I promise." he replies dumbly. Not nearly the reassurance he wanted to give her, but he didn't know what else to say.

"Alright, fuck, enough of this shit. Let's watch Netflix. I'm so stoned right now." she laughs, hauling herself off the bed and pulling Ian with her.

Ian follows her into the living room, falling backwards onto the couch. He let her pick the movie, and sat there silently watching with her. His mind was far away, though.

He had to find a way to approach Mickey. Some way that wouldn't scare him off, or make him mad. He had to do this right.
He couldn't fuck up again.
It was too important.

"You wish to be father now? That's what you say?" Svetlana's voice was calm, but her eyes were hard. "Now that I have husband who loves me and Yevgeny. Now that I am legal citizen. Now that David wants to adopt Yevgeny, be real father. Now you choose to be father." she crossed her arms over her chest, her dinner untouched.

Jack shifted uncomfortably in his seat. He came for moral support. Now he understand why Mickey needed it in the first place. This chick was terrifying.

"Svet." Mickey says, rolling his fork around in his chicken picatta. "I know I was a shit father. And a shit husband. We both know why." His eyes shot up and met hers over the table. "But a lot has changed since then. And I'm not trying to fuck up your shit. I don't want to mess up your marriage or even stop the adoption."

Jack looked at him then, surprise evident on his face.

Svetlana looked equally shocked.

"Then what? You do not wish to ruin my marriage. You do not wish to take my son. What do you want?" she asks.

"I just wanna know him, Svet. Mandy says he knows about me. That you tell him things sometimes. I just wanna be able to see him once in a while. Be part of his life. Be the father he deserves. I'm sorry I couldn't before. But I can now, and I want to." Mickey held her gaze, even though he desperately wanted to look anywhere else. He felt so vulnerable in that moment. Practically begging his ex-wife's permission to see his own son.

His son.

Svetlana huffed out a harsh laugh. She leaned over across the table, looking right through him.

"If I let you into Yevgeny's life, you stay in. You do not disappear with rainbow boy and forget my son. You make him priority. Soccer games, birthdays, Christmas, school plays, all of it. You are in it. Or you are not. No middle ground, no compromise."

Mickey sighed in relief, excited eyes flashing to Jack's smiling face.

"Yeah, Svet, I'm in it. I'm doing real good now. I don't fuck around with illegal shit anymore. Got a good job, doing better than ever, honestly." Mickey rubbed the back of his neck with his hand, always nervous about talking about how much he's changed.

"It is good you are no longer dumb fuck, Mikhalio." she smirked. She knew he hated it when she used his full name. "If you want to be father, I will let you be father. But David is father also. You can not replace him or try to turn Yevgeny against him. We will all be parents. Understand?"

"Yeah, Svet, I get it. I don't wanna replace the dude. I just wanna know my kid."

"Is good." she says, pulling her purse onto the table. She takes out her wallet and fishing around in
the front til she finds what she's looking for. "I bring this for you." she says, putting the small item in his hand. He looks down at it.

It's a picture.
A school picture.

His son, sitting in front of a blue backdrop. He's wearing a red and brown plaid shirt, his blond hair a little darker than the last time Mickey saw a picture of him. He's smiling brightly, one of his front teeth missing.

Mickey can't believe he's been a father for five years. And he's got nothing to show for it. No memories, no stories, nothing. Those few short months when Mickey and Svetlana shared the house with Ian are all the memories Mickey has of his son.

It was a weird time for him, but oddly, he cherishes the memories. Oddly domestic and almost happy. That's what they were.

Ian had been a good parent to Yevgeny back then. Before he got sick, Mickey had thought it would be Ian that made him want to be a father to Yev. Mickey would never admit it, but he wanted to do those things with Ian. Raise his son.

He didn't think he'd do it with anyone else.

But here he was, getting ready to take up the three way parent role with Svetlana and another dude again.

Certainly not the way he envisioned it.

"Cute kid." Jack remarks, pulling Mickey out of his head.

"Yeah." Mickey breathes, still reeling a bit.

Svetlana takes some money out of her wallet and puts it on the table as she stands.

"Yevgeny has soccer game next Friday. Five pm. James Maddison Field. You know it?"

Mickey shakes his head, but Jack pipes in. "Yeah, I know it."

Mickey raises his eyebrows at him curiously. Jack just shrugs.

"Be there. I will let you see him. We will start small. You do not fuck it up, we will see about more, yes?"

"Uh, yeah, sure. That sounds good." Mickey stutters. This went better than expected.

She nods once and makes to leave the table.

Mickey's hand shoots up and he grabs her wrist. She looks down at his hand, then up into his eyes.

"Thank you, Svet." is all he says.

She nods again, and walks away.

"Well, that went well." Jack laughs. "She's very pleasant."
"Sarcastic fuck." Mickey mutters. "Pay the bill and I'll bring you to see my sister."

"What about you-know-who?" Jack asks. He takes out his wallet and leaves a fifty dollar bill with the check.

"Shut the fuck up with that shit. I am not going to avoid my own house because Gallagher's there. He said he didn't wanna see me, not that he'd spontaneously combust if we were in the same room. We're going to see each other once in a while. We don't have to make amends or have a blowout. We're both grown ass men." Mickey says, opening the door to the restaurant and heading out onto the street. Jack follows right behind him.

"Who you trying to convince Mick? Me or you?" Jack asks.

Mickey doesn't say anything to that.

-----------------------

Ian is laying in Mickey's room, lights off, phone in his hand, scrolling through twitter for no real reason when he hears the door open.

He's being a coward, he knows that.

Mandy had gotten a text about twenty minutes ago from Mickey, letting her know he was coming by with frozen yogurt. With Jack.

Ian had quite an internal freak out at that, jumping off the couch and yammering about work the next morning and needing his rest.

Mandy had rolled her eyes, knowing all too well what Ian was doing.

He was avoiding Mickey.

Even though not being around him was becoming physically painful. Even though all he wanted to do was talk to him. Maybe touch him.

Defiantly touch him.

He wanted it so bad. All of it. Everything Mickey had, he wanted.

But he had to do it right.

And trying to talk to him, with that dude listening, while he was completely and utterly wasted was not how he wanted it to go down.

So he retreated. Like a bitch.

Hey lays there in the dark, straining to here what's going on in the living room....feeling a bit like a creeper, and a lot like an idiot....

---------------------------------

"Mick!" Mandy screeched, hopping off the couch and pulling her brother into a tight hug.
"Hey Mands, what the fuck? I just saw you. Is this how it's gonna be every time we get together from now on? You're super clingy now." he chuckled.

She shoved him, smiling. "I'm just happy to see you. You haven't started getting on my nerves yet." she giggled.

"You're stoned." Mickey smirked. He walked further into the house, looking around. Jack trailed behind him, holding the bag from the yogurt place.

"A little." Mandy concedes, taking the bag from Jack. "Hey you." she smiled at him. "Nice to see you again. How can you stand to be around this grumpy asshole all the time?" she motioned over her shoulder at her brother.

"He grows on you." Jack said. "Like a tumor or something."

"Hey, fuck you." Mickey calls back. He sits on the couch as Mandy and Jack filter into the room. Jack puts the bag on the counter and starts pulling out containers.

"Cotton candy for you." he hands a container to Mandy. "Double chocolate for Mick here, pralines for me, and peanut butter cup for.... what the fuck, Mick, why did we have an extra yogurt?"

"I uh, got it for Gallagher. It used to be his favorite. Didn't know he'd be asleep already. It's not even 9...." he trailed off. They both just looked at him knowingly. "Oh, fuck off, it would have been rude to not get him one. Gimme it, I'll put it in the freezer."

Mandy just nodded, smirking.

"Not a word. Mandy." Mickey says, walking into the kitchen.

Jack turns to Mandy, handing her a plastic spoon. "How long is this shit gonna go on for?" he asks, mouth full.

Mandy shrugs, taking a bite of her own. "They've been dancing around each other for years, Jack. I hate to see them like this, but you can't force it. Ian's got a lot going on right now, and so does Mick. Just gotta let it be for now."

"Just seems like a waste to me. They obviously have a lot of history, Mick's told me alot..."

"Mick's done what now?" Mandy asked, shocked.

"Uh, yeah, we've been friends for years, Mandy. We talk about shit." Jack replied, like it was obvious.

"Jack, I know you know Mick now, better than almost anyone. But you gotta understand, it's weird for the rest of us, who have known him his whole life, to hear that he talks to anyone. He spent more than half of his life shut off from everyone. Even me. Nobody could get through to him. It took Ian years to break down his walls. So for us to hear that he openly talks about his feelings, it's a bit of a mind fuck."

"I don't know what to say to that, Mandy. I don't know you that well yet, and I don't know Ian at all, just what I heard. But I do know Mickey, and he wants to fix shit with Ian. Even if he won't admit it yet. And I think the sooner they work it out, however it ends up, the better it will be for all of us. Cuz I think you know as well as I do, unhappy Mick makes the world a shitty place."

Mandy laughed loudly at that.
"What the fuck is so funny?" Mickey asks, coming back into the room and flopping down on the sofa between them.

"Nothing, Mick." Jack laughs, giving Mandy a little smile.

Mandy smiles back. She likes this kid.

"So tell me about what happened with Svet?" Mandy asks, and the conversation turns to Mickey and his hopes about a relationship with his son.

---------------------------------------------------------
If Ian thought he was a creep before, he's really outdone himself now. Sitting on the floor by the closed door, listening to every word coming from the living room. He may feel like an asshole, but he can't bring himself to regret it. He's learning a lot.

He learned that Mickey has indeed changed a lot since he ran away to Mexico. He's the best version of himself, if Ian's hearing what he thinks he is. He learned that Mickey has finally started letting go of all the toxic shit his father filled his head with for years. He isn't afraid or ashamed anymore. Ian feels a swell of pride in his chest. This is all he ever wanted for Mickey. He just wanted to be there to see it happen.

He also learned that he may still have a real chance to fix things. Even if they haven't talked yet, even if Ian is petrified of the conversation. Of having to own all his mistakes. Of having to dredge up the past and dissect it. Of having to forgive and be forgiven.

But he knows he wants it.

Listening to Mickey talk to his sister and Jack about Yevgeny, and his hopes for a future with him in his life. Listening to Mickey talk about work and life and the stupid shit he and Jack do on their time off. He realizes he's not jealous of Jack. Not like he thought he was the first time he saw them together. Listening to Jack talking to Mandy, it sounded like he was more a concerned friend than an dejected lover. Whatever is going on between Jack and Mickey, it's not a committed relationship.

Not that Ian has any right to be jealous. He and Mickey haven't even had a proper conversation in years. If anything, he should be surprised Mickey doesn't have a boyfriend. In Ian's mind, he's always been the total package.

But from what he heard Jack say in the living room, Ian himself is the reason that Mickey hasn't moved on.

The thought does two things to Ian.

It makes him happier than he's been in a long time.

And it makes him like Jack just that little bit more.

He stands up off the floor, and tucks himself into bed.

He falls asleep with a smile on his face. Eavesdropping has never been so fruitful.

Maybe things aren't has hopeless as he thought.
thank you to the small handful of people that are reading this. i'm really enjoying the ride. i hope you are too.
Ian and Mickey run into each other again, but it's not what either of them anticipated.

Ian's plan to talk to Mickey has hit a snag. Namely, he can't bring himself to do it.

No matter how much he talks himself up, or goes over the pros and cons with Mandy, or does dry runs of the conversation in his mind, he can't for the life of him take the first step.

He's had Mickey's phone number for a week now. Mandy gave it to him the Saturday night of the frozen yogurt incident. But he's been too chicken shit to use it. He wants their meeting to happen organically. Like they just run into each other on the street, like some gay romantic comedy. He knows he's being ridiculous.

But he can't help himself. He wants their reunion to happen perfectly, like he sees it in his mind. He knows he's probably setting himself up for failure. But he's always been a hopeless romantic, especially where Mickey is concerned. He's had all these fantasies about the other man for years. Now that he's back, and really free for the first time ever, Ian can't help but feel the pressure of those fantasies weighing down on him.

He could have everything he ever wanted.
If he could just not fuck it up.
And that was the problem, wasn't it?
He shook his head, now really wasn't the time to be doing this.

He looked over at Sue, driving the ambulance, singing along to Fall Out Boy of all things.

Ian laughed lightly. Sue was a trip.

It was Friday afternoon, and he was working the 3-11 shift with her tonight. Fridays were always chaotic, but Ian had a weird feeling about tonight. Something just felt off. It was never a good way to start a shift.

He tried to ignore his anxiety. He's probably just wound up from all this stressing over Mickey. He needed to put that shit aside for now. Lives were depending on it.

He needed his head in the game.

"He's good." Jack says. He's got one hand up, shielding his eyes from the sun, his phone in the other, recording.

"He's five. There's not much too it. They're pretty much just running around screaming." Mickey replies, not wanting to let on how proud he really is. It's a foreign feeling to him, still. He doesn't know how to express it.


Chapter Summary
"Why are you even recording this shit?" Mickey asks instead of replying.

"Promised L and Javi I'd send it to them. They've been dying to see the little man in action since we told him about you and Svet coming to terms. They already love him. We all do." Jack bumps shoulders with Mickey, continuing his recording.

Mickey blushes. They are seated in the little stand of bleachers at Yevgeny's soccer game. They are up near the back, away from the other parents. Mickey knows he sticks out like a sore thumb, but having Jack with him helps a bit. He may be a strung out junkie on probation, but it doesn't show. He's still a rich north-side fuck, and it's obvious he belongs here.

Mickey, not so much.

He's sees Svetlana sitting down in the front, the dentist with her. They are both cheering Yevgeny and clapping like maniacs.

Mickey feels even more like an outcast.

But then Svetlana turns, locking eyes with him. Her expression softens immediately, a small smile on her lips. She turns to her husband and whispers something in his ear. He turns as well. He waves at Mickey like he's an old friend. Mickey throws an awkward hand back in response.

He's not what Mickey expected at all. He's not really sure what he expected, but the tall, lanky dude with a turtle neck and tortoise shell glasses was not it. He looks like a complete tool.

Or a dentist. The dude looks like the embodiment of a dentist. But the gaudy gold chain he's wearing around his neck brings him down to Mickey's level for some reason. In his mind, it's something a new money dude would wear. So maybe he's not so out of his league here.

The game passes by way too fast for Mickey's liking, and he's sorry it's over so soon. He find that he really likes watching Yevgeny play. Kids a natural, even this young. Got the only goal of the game. Mickey finds himself really proud of him, and he doesn't even really know the kid yet. He wonders if that kind of thing is hardwired into your DNA, being proud of your kid.

Then he thinks of Terry and he knows that's a load of bullshit.

He doesn't know the reason he's so proud of his son. Other than the fact that he's pretty damn awesome at soccer. And that's reason enough for Mickey, for the time being.

The kids make their way over to the sidelines, and the parents start filtering down to collect them.

Mickey stand quietly to the side with Jack as Yevgeny comes running full speed at his mother.

"Mama!" he yells. "Did you see my goal?? Did you see it??"

Mickey's heart stops at the sound of the kid's voice. He's never heard him say a word before. Never heard him do anything but cry. And here he is, walking and talking and being awesome in all kinds of ways. It makes Mickey feel so good and so bad at the same time.

His son is amazing.
And he doesn't know him at all.

That point is driven home harshly when the child turns to him and Jack, and instinctively reaches for his mother's hand. Like you do when you are near strangers.
He eyes Mickey dubiously, then looks up at his mother.

"Zhenya, this is your father, Mickey. Do you remember? From the photo in your bedroom?" Svetlana says, stooping down to be eye level with the little boy. "Remember, I told you he was far away, but now he's home?"

Yevgeny looks at his mother, then at Mickey. Back and forth a few times before he takes a step closer to Mickey, looking up at him.

"You are home?" he asks quietly. He takes another small step forward.

Mickey takes the initiative to kneel down too, so he can see him better. He looks a lot like Mandy, that's his first thought. He looks like Mickey too, it's so painfully obvious in that moment.

Blond hair or not, this is his kid. He kicks himself internally for ever denying him.

"Yeah, I'm home. Not going anywhere any time soon. I was thinking, maybe me and you could hang out some time soon." he looked up at Svetlana, who was now standing with her husband, his arm around her shoulder and matching smiles on their faces. "If that's okay with your mom and David." he adds as an afterthought. It's really not his decision.

Yevgeny looks over at his mom and step-dad, eyes wide, smile spreading on his little face. "Mama, can I? Can I?"

"Okay, Zhenya. We will talk to Daddy-Mickey and set up a time. Would that please you?"

"Oh yes, very much, Mama. Wait til I tell Andrew and Seth my daddy is back!!" he jumps up and down a few times on the spot, then barrels right into Mickey, wrapping his tiny arms around his legs. "My daddy's back." comes the muffled cry from between Mickey's knees.

Mickey lets out a surprised laugh, looking over at Jack. He's got the fondest look on his face, it's so earnest Mickey has to look away. He makes eye contact with Svetlana, who smiles and rolls her eyes. That's more like it. Her hard sarcasm is much easier to take than Jack open admiration.

"Call me some time this week, will set up play date for you and baby." Svetlana says, pulling Yevgeny away by his shoulders.

"Mama, I'm not a baby." he protests, reluctantly letting go of his father and standing next to his mother.

Mickey laughs at that too. "He's not wrong, Svet, he's a big boy now." Mickey says, trying his best not to tear up. This is way more emotional than he had anticipated.

Yevgeny beams at his father again.

"Always will be my baby." Svetlana replies easily. "Call me." she calls over her shoulder as they walk away. Yevgeny turning every few steps to look back and wave. Like he needs to make sure Mickey's really there.

Mickey knows how he feels. He and Jack don't move an inch until Yevgeny and his family are in their car and driving away.

"You did good, Daddy-Mickey." Jack laughs.

"Fuck off." Mickey says, no real bite in his tone.
They start the short walk back to Jack's apartment.

"Seriously, though, you did good. You're a natural, Mick."

"Kid's just excited that that tool's not his real dad. You see that guy? Stiff as a corpse, didn't say a word."

"Well, if I were that dude, I'd be scared of you too, Mick. Imagine the shit Svetlana's told him." Jack laughs.

Mickey has to agree, dude was probably scared out of his mind. But he's got nothing to worry about anymore. Not that Mickey will tell him that. Let him be scared. Better he know not to fuck with Mickey's family.

"Now, let's go home. I need food, drugs and sex with your fine ass." Jack smirks, pushing Mickey with an open palm.

Mickey rights himself without losing step. "And beer, Jack. Don't forget the beer."

"Of course, Mick. I'd never forget that shit."

They walk back to the apartment slowly, closer than necessary on the wide sidewalk. Mickey doesn't mind. He has a feeling Jack would like to take his hand right now, but he doesn't.

Mickey's not sure what they are doing anymore. He knows he's got feelings for Jack, and he suspects Jack feels the same way. But Jack won't stop with the dope. And even though Mickey's been indulging with him occasionally, he knows he can't date Jack for real, when heroin is his first and only true love right now.

So he tries to keep his distance, as best he can while living with him.

It's also kind of the reason he didn't bother to introduce Jack to Yev. He doesn't want to upset the delicate balance he has just acquired with his ex-wife and her husband. Not to mention he doesn't want his kid thinking Jack's always gonna be with him, when odds are he's gonna end up back in jail or rehab some time in the future.

The whole situation makes Mickey feel helpless, but what else is new these days. There's not a single damn thing in his life he can control. He needs to keep reminding himself of that fact, if he wants to make it through all this shit with his sanity intact.

"I'm dying!!! I'm going to die right here, right now." the man screams.

Ian does his damndest not to roll his eyes.

"Sir, look at me. You are not going to die. It's a fractured wrist." Ian says, as Sue speeds toward the hospital. "Can you tell me how you injured it?" Ian asks as he assesses the injury. The break is obvious, but thankfully not compound. There is no bone poking through the skin. The area around the break is swollen, already deeply bruised. The man winces as Ian rotates the arm to get a better look at the injury.

"Fell off the step ladder. Put my hand out to brace my fall, fucking stupid." he lays his head back and tries to breathe, like Ian instructed him too.
"Okay, alright, I'm going to give you something for the pain, then I'll put a brace on it. They can give you an X-ray at the ER and you'll find out if you need surgery or not."

Ian prepares a syringe of fentanyl for the man, glad he seems to have calmed down a bit.

It's been a crazy night, just like Ian predicted. It's only been a couple hours and already he's had an elderly woman with a broken hip, a young kid who choked on his dinner and lost consciousness, a woman with a broken eye socket, courtesy of her husband, and now this guy, with the fractured wrist.

Ian's glad for the busy night. It helps keep his mind occupied, and off the one thing he can't seem to let go.

Mickey.

Ian shakes his head, focusing on the task at hand, he puts the syringe in the IV he started for his patient, watching the drugs take effect as the man passes out almost immediately.

Ian's grateful for the quiet, even if he knows it's short lived. He takes deep breaths as they speed toward the hospital. Three hours down, five to go.

He sets about wrapping the broken wrist, focusing only on the job he's doing.

Now if he could just shake that uneasy feeling he's been having all night, he'd be all set.

"Come on, Mick, I'm gonna make you feel so good." Jack purrs. He's straddling Mickey's waist on the couch, rocking in his lap. He's trying to seduce Mickey, but not the way Mickey's used to.

"Why the fuck we gotta shoot it? Getting high is getting high. You wanna get high and fuck, I said okay. Now you wanna change the rules and stick a needle in my arm. What the fuck, Jack? I don't even like you doing this shit to begin with."

"Oh, come on, don't be such a buzz kill. It's a million times better than snorting it, and the sex is incredible. Let me show you, just this once. If you don't like it, we never have to do it together ever again." Jack pleads. "Just wanna make you feel good, baby." he mumbles, licking a fat, wet line from Mickey's collar bone all the way up to his hair line. He runs his tongue over the shell of Mickey's ear. "When have I ever steered you wrong? You're gonna love it. I'm gonna rock your world." he punctuates his words with a slow rotation of his hips that has Mickey arching off the couch, chasing the contact.

"Fuck, okay." he breathes, "Just this once, Jack. You gotta slow down with this shit, promise me."

Mickey doesn't really know why he says yes. It's a bad idea, he knows it is. It's crossing a line Mickey's never even dreamed of crossing in the past.

But getting high with Jack is nice. Nice doesn't really feel like the right word, but Mickey doesn't know how else to describe it. It's like the drugs quiet the constant noise in his brain and he can just not think for a few hours.

And Jack is right, the sex is always mind blowing. Even though they never even come. He has to wait til the next morning to blow his load. But the whole thing is always like this insane sex dream, that he can't even believe is real when it's over.

Mickey doesn't know what he's doing, saying yes to Jack like this. He hasn't been thinking clearly for a while now, and seeing Yev and Svet just fucked him up more.
And when he's confused or overwhelmed, he makes shit decisions. Mickey's sure this will go down in history as one of his shittier ones.

But he says yes anyway, and Jack smiles at him, kissing him hard on the mouth. His tongue snakes it's way past Mickey's and they make out almost violently for a few minutes. Mickey is hard and aching under Jack's grinding hips. He lets out a long breath as Jack finally gets off him.

"Promise Mick. I'll cool it on the dope, if that will make you happy." he makes a crossing motion over his heart to seal his promise. "Just let me do this for you, you'll love it."

Mickey eyes him for a minute, fighting with himself, then give a slight nod.

Jack beams at him, having won.

"Be right back." he says over his shoulder, heading for the bedroom.

Mickey sits on the couch, reaching toward the coffee table for his beer. He tries not to think to much about what's happening right now. Or the implications of what he's doing.

He's being fucking stupid.

Before he can talk himself out of it, Jack is back, his little red junkie bag with him. Jack told him not too long ago that all junkies have one. They keep their 'kit' in it. All the tools required to shoot heroin. Mickey had no idea it was so complicated.

Looks like he's about to find out.

Jack wanders back into the room and settles on the floor in front of the coffee table. He's got the red bag in his hands, setting it on the table next to Mickey's beer. It looks like one of those rectangular shaped pouches Mandy used to keep her make-up in.

Jack flashes Mickey a quick smile as he unzips the bag. He takes out a spoon, a few small baggies of what must be heroin, some q-tips, and a shoe lace. And the needles, of course. Mickey's not stranger to needles, they were littered all over the south side for as long as he can remember. But it's different to see them up close. New and clean and ready to be stuck in his arm.

His arm....

There's a bottle of water on the table and he pulls that close too.

"Okay, just gimme a sec. I'll set 'em both up, do you, then me, then you again." Jack winked, pleased with himself for the stupid joke.

Mickey rolled his eyes, trying to make light of the situation too.

But he felt uneasy. This just didn't feel right.

He shook off the thought. He's been so stressed out lately, he needs to relax. This shit usually helps, what does the delivery system matter?

Mickey watched Jack set up the shots. He's never watched someone prepare heroin before. He was really young when his mom OD'd, but he can vaguely recall her shooting up in their living room, but he was too young to recall the logistics of it.

It seems like a simple enough procedure, water, powder and heat. Mickey doesn't watch too closely, it's not like he needs to remember this shit for later.
Jack's finished pretty quickly, and he grabs one of the needles and the shoe lace and sits next to Mickey on the couch. "Ready?" he asks, huge smile on his face.

Mickey can't help but feel that Jack's a little too excited for this.

"Yeah, dude, just do it." he replies, putting his right arm out.

Jack pulls it a bit closer to him, sets the needle on the couch for a minute to tie Mickey off. He puts the string around his arm and pulls it tight. "Hold this." he says to Mickey and he takes the string in his other hand, holding it so it cuts off his circulation, making all the veins in his arm pop out. Jack goes for the obvious one in the crook of his elbow, the one they always use in the movies. He taps it a few times, like a doctor, then when he's pleased with the state of it, he picks up the needle.

Mickey's not sure he wants to watch, but he can't seem to look away. Jack's tongue is poking out, like he's concentrating really hard. He brings the needle to Mickey's arm, eyeballing the vein one more time before pushing into Mickey's arm. The pinch is minimal, and Jack hits his mark without having to poke around too much. Mickey sees a bloom of blood mix in the syringe with the light brown liquid. "Bingo." Jack whispers, and starts pushing down on the plunger.

The first thing Mickey notices is the taste. He can actually taste the heroin in the back of his throat. It's an odd feeling. The next thing he notices is the warmth. A wave of heat passes through his whole body, starting in his extremities and congregating in his head. He feels light and soft and far away. And good.

He feels so fucking good.

It's unlike any high he's ever felt. He can understand why Jack's hooked.

Fuck.

He hears himself sigh, but he doesn't remember doing it. He can't even tell how much time has passed, but he looks down and sees the needle's no longer in his arm. Jack's smiling at him again, that dark, hungry smile that always means trouble. He brings his lips down to Mickey's arm and licks off the blood that it trickling out of the injection site. "Fucking sexy." he murmurs.

Mickey lets his head fall back against the couch while Jack does his own shot. He doesn't want to watch. He's already feeling weird about this whole thing.

After a minute he feels Jack next to him again. "Feel good, baby?" he asks, pulling Mickey close to him, kissing his neck again.

"Yeah, man. Really fucking good." Mickey says. Because it's the truth.

"Betcha I can make you feel even better." Jack laughs. He bites down gently on Mickey's collar bone, eliciting a sharp gasp out of the other man.

"Watcha want tonight, Mick? Wanna fuck me? Want me to fuck you? Wanna get out the toys? Whatever you want, baby, Imma give it to you...." Jack's hands wander all over Mickey's body, up and down his chest, along his thigh, finally cupping over his crotch, massaging with light pressure.

"Jesus, man." Mickey sighs. He finally lifts his head up and captures Jack's mouth with his own. The kiss is uncoordinated and sloppy, their high minds unable to be anything but messy right now. "I want you inside me." he manages to say between grunts. "Need that shit tonight."

"I was hoping you'd say that." Jack says, pulling Mickey to stand and dragging him toward the
bedroom. They stumble a bit, too wasted to be graceful.

Mickey pulls his t-shirt over his head on the way and drops it on the floor in the hallway. He's unzipping his jeans by the time he gets to the bedroom, finding Jack already in his underwear on the bed.

"Took you long enough." he smirks.

Mickey flips him off.

He drops his jeans and kicks them off, crawling onto the bed and on top of Jack. He cages him in with a hand on either side of his head and goes in for another kiss. This one is more gentle, calmer. He explores Jack's mouth with his tongue, biting and sucking his lips. Jack moans quietly in the back of his throat. Mickey smiles into the kiss.

Mickey starts grinding his hips down against Jack's, out of his mind with desire. His hard dick straining in his boxers, precum staining the fabric.

"C'mon." he practically whines. "Need it now."

He pulls at Jack's underwear, almost ripping them as he gets them down low enough for Jack to kick them off. He grabs his shaft and starts pumping it. Jack hisses, thrusting up into Mickey's hand. "I'm ready, c'mon." Mickey says.

"I know you don't feel shit right now, but I still gotta prep you, or you're going to be sore as fuck tomorrow." Jack states. He sits up and reaches for the lube sitting on the bedside table.

Mickey just nods in agreement. He's not thinking clearly. He never fucks without prep, rookie mistake.

Jack pushes Mickey onto his back, pulling his boxers down slowly. Mickey lifts his hips up to help him. Jack throws them over his shoulder with a flourish and Mickey laughs. "Dork."

Jack's never rimmed Mickey before. Not in all the times they've hooked up, in or out of prison. It seems a bit personal, even for them. But Mickey's so fucked up, he doesn't even think about it. He feels Jack's tongue dart out and tease his hole. He pinches his eyes shut, not used to the feeling anymore.

Nobody's rimmed him since Ian.

Mickey would usually berate himself for thinking of Ian during sex with another man, but he's too high to care. He lets the thought come and go. It doesn't bother him right now. Right now all he can think about is the hot tongue in his ass.

Jack makes slow circles around the outside of his hole, then pushes his tongue past the rim. It feels fucking amazing. He pulls back and spits on it, going back in to lap up his own mess. He drags his tongue all the way up, a fat stripe from Mickey's perineum to the base of his cock and back again. Mickey's at a loss, groaning and twitching like a mad man.

"Fuck man. That's good." Mickey grunts.

Jack sits up a bit to coat his fingers with lube. "I sure hope it's good. Or else I'd be wasting both our
time." he jokes. He leans forward again, taking Mickey's forgotten erection in his mouth, while he
circles his loosened rim with his fingers.

Mickey arches his back, his cock hitting the back of Jack's throat at the exact moment he breaches
Mickey with two fingers.

"Motherfucker." Mickey cries. It's too much and not enough at the same time.

Mickey doesn't know how much times passes, Jack's warm mouth wrapped around his dick, two
fingers pumping in and out of his ass. He feels him everywhere, but it's not like normal sex. He can't
tell if it's better or not, though. They're none of the sting of the prep, none of that exquisite pain that
comes with being full. It feels good, but numbed somehow.

Jack sits up finally, or too soon, Mickey doesn't know. He looks gorgeous. Flushed, heaving chest,
sweat glistening on his skin. Mickey looks in his eyes and see the tell-tale sign of heroin: his pupils
are minuscule, none of that blown out lust look that turns Mickey on so much.

Mickey shakes off the thought, pulling himself back to the moment. Jack runs a hand down Mickey's
face in an intimate gesture that doesn't really match what they are doing, but Mickey curls into it
anyway, rubbing his face into Jack's open palm, enjoying the contact.

Jack removes his hand from Mickey's face and uses it to guide his swollen erection towards Mickey's
stretched out hole. He pushes in, watching Mickey's face for any sign of pain.

Of course there's none. Mickey feels no pain. Just the stretch and the heat and the fullness.

Exactly what he's looking for.

"Shit." Jack groans. He doesn't move at first, just rests inside of Mickey, looking down at him.

Mickey squirms, rocking his hips up. "C'mon, man. What the fuck?" he asks.

"Sorry, you're just kinda beautiful like this." Jack smiles. Before Mickey can come back with a smart
comment, Jack pulls out and slams back home.

"Fuck." Mickey cries out. His hands fly up to Jack's shoulder blades, his legs wrapping around his
waist on instinct.

Jack is relentless, setting a brutal pace. Slamming into Mickey hard enough that they end up
crunched against the headboard twice and have to shimmy back down to the middle of the mattress.

It goes on for what feels like forever. They switch positions a few times. Mickey on top, doggy style,
side by side. It's an endless loop of pleasure that has no end.

Finally, Mickey puts a hand on Jack's hip. He's laying behind him right now, curled into Mickey's
side, rocking into him slowly, because neither of them have any damn energy left. "Dude, I gotta
take a break. My ass feels like it's bleeding." Mickey sighs. He's sore and he's tired, and even though
he knows now that the heroin will keep him up for hours, he needs to rest.

Jack pulls out immediately. He presses a tender kiss to Mickey's shoulder and sits up. "You're right,
my dick feels like ground hamburg right now."

Mickey laughs, reaching behind himself to swat at Jack. "Idiot." he says, smiling.

This kid is really growing on him.
Jack grabs one of their discarded t-shirts from the floor, wiping off the copious amount of lube off his dick, then handing it to Mickey so he can clean up his ass.

"Gonna get a drink. You want anything?" he asks, pulling on some boxers and making his way toward the bedroom door.

"Sure, man. A beer would be great."

"You may have drinking problem, Mick." Jack laughs.

"Says the dude who shot me up not two hours ago." Mickey deadpans.

"Takes one to know one." Jack calls over his shoulder as he leaves the room.

Mickey lays back on the bed, thinking.

He knows Jack's just kidding about him having a drinking problem, but the shit he did tonight was not smart.

He knows Jack would never purposefully put him in a dangerous situation. But Jack's gauge for dangerous isn't really normal.

Mickey knows he has to talk to Jack about this shit. It's getting out of hand. What started as an easy way to forget about his shit and relax after a long day is turning into something else entirely.

All the shit he's been working so hard for will go right down the tubes if he gets hooked on dope. Look at Jack's life.
Mickey loves the kid, he has a good heart. But if it weren't for his parents enabling him, he'd be living on the streets sucking dick for twenty dollars.
Mickey doesn't want that. For Jack or him.
Mickey runs a hand down his face. He probably fucked up tonight.
He definitely fucked up tonight.
He looks at the clock on the nightstand.
10:30 pm

How long does it take to get a beer? Jack's been in the kitchen for like 15 minutes.
Mickey grumbles and scoots to the edge of the mattress. He pulls on a pair of boxers off the floor and heads back out into the living room.

"Jack? What the fuck, man? I thought you were......."

His words catch in his throat.

Time stops.

He braces himself on the wall, taking in the sight in front of him.

Jack's on the floor, on his back. It looks like he was sitting on the couch when he fell out.
The needle is still buried in his arm. There's vomit on his mouth and running down his bare torso.
He's a little blue, and Mickey can't tell if he's breathing.

He's overdosed.

Fuck. Shit. No.

Mickey runs over to him, dropping to his knees and pulling Jack's head into his lap. It lolls to the side
lifelessly as Mickey grabs him.

"Jack? Jack? What the fuck? What did you do?"

Mickey is freaking out. He doesn't know what to do. He was stupid, so fucking stupid. He should have known this was going to happen. This is what happened to his mom. He should have known.

Mickey wipes the puke off Jack's chest with his hand, then runs the hand through Jack's hair. He has no idea what he's doing.

"Don't die. Fuck, don't die."

He's gotta call 911. He can't just sit here in his underwear while his best friend dies in his arms. He gently lays Jack's head back on the floor and scrambles back to the bedroom for Jack's phone. He dials and waits. He falls back to his knees, hovering over Jack's body.

"Chicago 911, what's your emergency?" the lady on the other end is calm.

Mickey feels like he's losing his mind.

"My friend OD'd." he gasps. "Heroin."

"Okay, can you tell me, is there a heart beat?" she asks. Mickey puts a finger against Jack's neck. He feels it, a faint pulse.

"Yeah." he replies, tears in his eyes.

"And is he breathing?" the lady asks.

Mickey puts his head on Jack's chest, feeling the slightest rise and fall. "Fucking barely." Mickey's voice is rough, he's desperately trying to hold it together.

"Okay, that's good, hun. I've got the ambulance on the way. Just sit tight."

"Uh, okay." Mickey says. It dawns on him in that moment that he's still on parole. He just got back to Chicago, just got back in Yev's life, and now he's here, in his best friend's house, watching him die, waiting for the EMT's to show up.

Do cops come to overdoses? He doesn't know.

Suddenly he feels the overwhelming urge to run. He's gotta get out of there. Now.

But he can't leave Jack. He can't leave him alone.

He looks around wide eyed until he sees the fire escape. Shit. He scrambles to his feet and runs to the bedroom. He throws a pair of sweats and a hoodie on, toeing on his sneakers and running back to the living room and throwing the window open. He crawls out onto the fire escape, glad it's not winter right now.

Mickey has never been on to believe in god. Not with the way he grew up, or with the shit he's had to endure in life. But in that moment, as he closes the window behind him and backs up against the brick wall so nobody can see him, he prays to every god he can think of to please let Jack be okay.

'please, just don't let him die.' runs on loop in his head until he looks down and see the ambulance pull up in front of the building. He lets out a shaky breath, relieved they are finally here. He can't hear anything from out on the fire escape, so he'll have to wait for the ambulance to pull away before
he can go back inside.
He bides his time by crying silently and screaming at himself in his head for being such a stupid fucking asshole.

'please, just don't let him die'

-------------------------------

It's close to the end of Ian's shift when their final call of the night comes over the radio.
Ian's playing candy crush on his phone and Sue's doing a Sudoku puzzle when the radio crackles to life.

"23, come back?" the voice echoed over the space.

Sue picked up the radio. "Yeah, this is 23."

"You've got a male, unknown age, unresponsive. Suspected opiate overdose, low pulse, low respiration. Witness on scene, 14 West Elm Street, apartment 28."

"Ten-four. On route." Sue responds. She puts the radio back in it's cradle and starts the ambulance, pulling out into traffic. She immediately picks up speed as they weave through traffic. Ian flips the sirens and the loud wailing fills the air.

They are close enough that it only takes them a few minutes to get to the apartment complex.

As soon as the bus is in park, Ian jumps out and runs around the back, pulling out the bag. He grabs one end of the gourney and Sue grabs the other.
They rush through the door and into the lobby. Ian whips his head around, finding the service elevator by the front desk. He sees the lobby assistant sitting at the desk.

"We have an emergency in apartment 28, how do we get in?" he asks.

"Service elevator, do you need the master key?" the woman asks, visibly shaken by the situation.

"Can you accompany us to the residence?" Sue asks from behind Ian.

"Yes, yes." the woman says, stumbling from behind the desk and lurching toward the service elevator.

They make their way up to the apartment, time going in slow motion. Ian always wants to get to his patients as soon as possible, and taking an elevator always feels like a waste of time. But it's the only way to get there.

It's surreal, listening to instrumental jazz while the elevator creeps toward the 8th floor. He always feels a prickle of nervous energy down his spine on calls, and this music clashes with that feeling like nails on a chalkboard.

They finally reach their stop and Sue and Ian follow the attendant down the hall. The door is open, so they don't end up needing the key.

Sue turns to the woman. "Wait here. Do not come inside." she says firmly. Sue hates rubberneckers.
Ian does too.

The woman nods, silent.

"Hello?" Sue calls into the apartment. "Chicago EMS. Is there an emergency here?"

They are greeted with silence. Ian's confused. Dispatch said there was a witness on scene.

He follows Sue into the apartment. The lights are on, and there's music playing from another room, but he doesn't see the patient or the witness.

"Ian! Over here." Sue calls from the living room. Ian enters the space to see Sue crouched down in front of the coffee table, an unconscious man on the floor. He's in his underwear and Ian can see the drugs on the coffee table, a used needle on the floor. He drops to his knees and opens the bag, pulling the narcan inhaler from the front pocket. It will counteract the heroin, and hopefully this guy will wake up and they can take him to the ER. Most overdoses don't require CPR, if they catch them in time.

Ian takes the inhaler and gets ready to administer the antidote when he finally lays eyes on his patient's face.

He stops, frozen.

"Gallagher, what the fuck?" Sue barks. She holding Jack's head still, waiting for Ian to dose him.

It's Jack.

Mickey's friend.

The friend Mickey's been staying with.

The pieces fall into place quickly, but Ian feels like the slowest idiot on the planet. This is Mickey's Jack. White as a ghost, covered in vomit, blood running down his arm. But this is him. Mickey must have called 911 and fled the scene.

Ian feels sick, but he steels himself, putting his fingers under Jack's chin and pushing the inhaler deep into his nasal cavity. He squeezes once, waits ten seconds, does it again. Sue's got a blood pressure cuff on Jack's arm when he starts to come to.

His eyes blink open slowly. He looks around, confused. He tries to sit up, but Sue holds him down. "Easy, tiger." she says kindly.

"Mick?" he mumbles.

Ian flinches.

"Where's Mickey?" Jack asks again. He still hasn't noticed Ian. He's given up trying to sit up, laying back down on the floor, hands at his side.

"Is that the friend that was here with you?" Sue asks.

Jack, for his part, starts to catch on.

"No. no, I don't remember who was here. But it wasn't him." he mutters. At that exact moment, he locks eyes with Ian. Recognition flares in his eyes as him and Ian stare each other down.
Ian looks away first. His mind is going in a million different directions. Where is Mickey? Did he leave his friend here to die? Would he do that? Is he overdosed too?

"You need to tell us. Is there someone else here? Could they be in trouble too? Is he safe?" Ian yells at Jack, surprising himself and the others with his tone. Sue gives him a confused look, but Jack just continues staring at him.

"I don't know what the fuck you're talking about." he says. "Do I have to go to the hospital, or am I cool to stay here?" he sounds like he's irritated with them, for saving his life.

Ian wants to punch him.

He doesn't.

"No. You have to at least come with us to the hospital, have a doctor check you out. It's protocol." Ian says coldly. He's not trying to be rude, but he's so confused and angry about Mickey being mixed up in this, he can't help himself.

"You gonna call the cops on me?" Jack asks, finally sitting up. He realizes in that moment he's practically naked, pulling a blanket off the chair to cover himself.

"We should." Ian spits.

Sue gives him a glare that should knock him on his ass.

"No. That is not protocol. What's your name, kid? Anyone you wanna call to meet you at the hospital?" Sue says. She being much kinder than Ian, much more professional.

Ian doesn't care. He feels out of control and a little bit lost. He can feel Mickey in the room, like he just missed him. It's disconcerting.

"My name's Jackson Cauldwell. Jack." Jack replies, looking directly at Ian, even though Sue is the one talking to him. "I don't want you to call anyone. I'll call a friend when we get to the hospital. I still don't think I need to go," he says, waving off Sue's proffered hand when he heaves himself off the floor. "Can I get dressed?" he asks, already heading to the bedroom.

"He's pleasant." Sue remarks, placing their tools and supplies back in the bag. She stops midway through winding up the blood pressure cuff to gaze at Ian. He has a hard expression on his face, lips in a tight line, eyebrows knitted together. "You okay, Gallagher? You've been off all night."

Ian shakes himself out of his daze, looking over at his partner. "Yeah, Sue. I'm good. Just wish these junkies would be a little more grateful when we save their lives." he says bitterly.

"Ian!" Sue looks toward the bedroom where Jack is still indisposed. "You can't say shit like that about patients. Especially not when they could here you. What's the matter with you?"

Ian knows she's right. He's being cruel. Unprofessional and rude. He feels shitty.

"Just seen it a lot growing up." he's not really lying. But that's not why he's angry.

Ian knows this kid is bad news. And he's got Mickey all mixed up in his shit.

This just may be the catalyst Ian was waiting for. There's no way he's not going to talk to Mickey now.

Jack comes back from the bedroom, dressed in sweats and a Bulls hoodie. He pulls a black beanie over his messy hair.
"Lead the way." he says blithely.

You gotta get on the gurney, kid." Sue says, pointing to the low bed sitting in the middle of the room.

"Let me guess," Jack laughs. "Protocol." he drops his body down on the gurney, laying on his back and looking up at Ian. He laces his hands behind his head, smiling. Acting like he didn't just almost die.
Ian shakes his head. Fucked up circumstances aside, he can see why Mickey likes this kid.

------------------------
Mickey waited for the EMTs to head into the building before climbing down the fire escape. He stood by the front of the building, holding back tears, smoking a cigarette, waiting for them to come back down with Jack. He had to be okay. There's no other way. Mickey doesn't know what he'd do if he lost him. Shit. He's not sure how much time goes by, doesn't even think to look at his phone. Too lost in his morbid thoughts.

Soon, though, he sees them coming back out. He's too far away to make out much, can't even see Jack on the gurney, but who else could it be? He knows they've got to be heading to Northwestern Memorial. It's the closest hospital to the apartment. He can walk there in ten minutes. He waits until they pull out and heads down the street.

The entire journey to the hospital, his head is spinning. He feels stupid for getting high with Jack. He feels guilty for not being a better friend, trying to help him stop instead of looking the other way. He knows he can't stop Jack from getting high, but he sure as hell didn't have to help him normalize it, or enable him. He's just as bad as the kid's parents. He feels like shit. Not to mention how it could fuck up his own life. He just got all his legal shit sorted, just saw his son for the first time in years, just fixed his relationship with his sister. And he almost just threw it all away. For what? A few hours of numbness.

He shakes his head, taking out another cigarette. He hates himself in that moment. So careless. So selfish. Not anymore. That shit's done. It never should have gotten this far. Lauren's going to kick his ass. He makes it to the hospital before he's done his second cigarette. He tosses it into the street and walks through the automated doors. He looks around the hall wildly until he sees a sign for Emergency Medicine. He turns left and heads toward the double doors.

He slides up to the desk and bangs a tattooed hand on the counter. "Hey!" he barks. "Hey, I need some help."
A short, fat older lady in scrubs waddles over to the desk, giving him a bored glare. "Can I help you?" she asks.

"I'm looking for someone who just came in on an ambulance. Jackson Cauldwell. He, uh, he was unconscious." he looked down at his hands, wringing together on the counter top.

"Um, well, are you family?" she asks, glancing down at her computer screen.

"No, he's a friend. But I'm kinda all he has right now. Please, just tell me he's okay?" Mickey begs.

"Sir, you have to understand, federal HIPPA laws prevent me from sharing that information with anyone but family." she spoke like she was reciting from memory, reading a script like none of this shit mattered.

"Listen lady, you better tell me where he's at or I'm gonna tear this place apart looking for him." He slammed a hand down on the counter, his voice raising to a shout.

"Sir, if you don't calm down, I'm going to have to have you removed."

"I'd like to see you fucking try." Mickey growls.

The woman made to pick up the phone, no doubt to have security tackle Mickey and throw him outside, when she was interrupted.

"It's okay, Celia, I'll take it from here."

He was standing right behind him, breath fanning down his neck. So close you could feel his body heat.

Mickey turns on the spot, jumping backwards. His back slams into the counter. There's hardly any space between them.

"Ian." he breaths.

"Hey Mick."
Confrontations & Concessions

Chapter Summary

Ian and Mickey come face to face.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"What the fuck are you doing here?" Mickey asks. This night couldn't get any more fucked up.

"I was the responding medic on the call, Mick. That was you at the house, right? Jack's friend he suddenly didn't remember being there?" Ian asks. He wants to ask so much more.

'What are you doing with this guy?'
'Why are you throwing away your second chance?'
'Do you love him?'

But he says none of these things, just stares at Mickey's stunned face, waiting for his reply.

"It's none of your fucking business if I was there or not. Just because you happened to be there doesn't mean you know shit about what happened."

Mickey's being defensive. Ian knows that means he's hiding something.

"Just tell me he's okay." there's no bite in the words, no malice. He sounds genuinely scared.

"Yeah, Mick, he'll be alright. This time. He's lucky whoever was there called us in time." Ian gives him a knowing look. Mickey looks away.

"You wanna go back? I can bring you. Celia at the desk owes me a favor." Ian shrugs, thumbing over his shoulder in the direction of the exam rooms.

"Uh, yeah, that would be good." Mickey finally looks at him. He looks grateful. Ian smiles, relieved that Mickey is willing to let him do this for him. He wants to help.

Ian nods at Celia behind the desk and she pushes a button under the counter. The door buzzes and Ian opens it, leading Mickey through it and down a long white hallway.

Ian hates hospitals, which is ironic, given his chosen line of work. He just can't help the spike of anxiety he gets when he's surrounded by that stale chemical smell and the sounds of machines keeping people alive. It's unnerving.

Ian stops outside a darkened room. He leans against the wall motioning with his head toward the room. "He's in there." he says. "Can't shut the door, he's still being observed. I'll stay out here, give you some privacy or whatever." he doesn't know what the fuck he's doing here, why he's compelled to stay. He just knows it doesn't feel right to leave Mickey right now.

He's done enough of that shit.

"Uh, thanks." Mickey looks like he's just as confused as Ian feels. He goes into the room without
Ian isn't sure what it is about Mickey that's turned him into some creepy stalker person, but he kneels down against the wall, setting in to eavesdrop on their entire conversation. He doesn't feel the least bit guilty.

Mickey feels like he's in a nightmare. Like this is one of those dreams he has where his worst fears come to life.

Seeing Jack laying in that bed. He looks so small. He's gotten skinnier in the short time Mickey's been home. He's pale, dark circles under his eyes. He's got oxygen tubes going up his nose, and IV in his hand, and a pulse monitor on his index finger. He looks like he's sleeping, but Mickey knows better.

"You motherfucker." Mickey whispers.

"You found me," he says. "Knew you would." he pats the mattress next to him and Mickey goes to him without a thought.

"I had to run all the way from the house, chasing your ass. What the fuck were you thinking? You weren't high enough already?"

"You wouldn't understand, Mick." Jack mumbles, barely audible. "I need it to sleep. I need it to do anything."

"You're right, I don't fucking understand. It's gonna kill you, Jack. You need help. You need to go to detox or rehab or something." Mickey puts a hand on Jack's shoulder, but Jack shrugs him off.

"You gonna fix me, Mick? I'm broken now? A charity case for you to work?" Jack spits.

It's like a slap in the face to Mickey, hearing those words. It's the worst kind of deja vu, and Mickey thinks maybe he's got a type after all.

Broken assholes that refuse to get better. Guys he loves but shouldn't, because they don't fucking want him to.

"You're not broken, man." Mickey says sadly. "There's nothing wrong with you, you're amazing. But remember when you asked me why we could never be more than fuck buddies? What did I tell you?" he gingerly puts his hand on Jack's thigh, over the thin knit blanket.

Jack averts his eyes, playing with his IV instead of looking at Mickey.

Mickey continues regardless.

"I told you we could never be together, cuz you love heroin more than anything or anyone. I can't do this. Just being your friend is sucking the life outta me. Watching you kill yourself every day, and now you got me doing it too..."

"I didn't make you do anything, Mickey. No one can make you do shit." Jack throws Mickey's hand off him. He looks like he'd walk away if he wasn't tethered to the bed with tubes.

"I didn't mean it like that." Mickey replies. He pulls Jack close to him again, wrapping an arm around
his bony shoulders. "I like it, doing that shit with you. It's fun."

Jack looks at him skeptically, eyebrows raised.

"And that's the problem. I don't wanna end up strung out. I am just starting to get my shit together. You saw Yev. I wanna know him, Jack. I have a fuck ton of shit I wanna do in my life, and I can't do it if I'm spending all my time sticking a needle in my arm. It's a dangerous game we're playing Jack, and you almost lost tonight."

Jack laughs. "That's some cheesy shit, Mick."

Mickey smiles. "But it's the fucking truth. I don't wanna lose you man, but I can't keep doing this shit. And if you're gonna keep it up, I can't be around you. I'm sorry. You know I love you, but I can't risk it."

Jack sighs, leaning into Mickey's touch. Mickey pulls him closer, squeezing him tightly with both arms. "I don't know how to get better, Mick." he whispers.

"If you're willing to try, I'll help you, we'll figure this shit out together, okay? Detox or rehab or methadone, whatever. Meetings, counselling. Whatever works, man."

"You'd help me with that shit?" Jack asks, burying his head in Mickey's shoulder.

"Of course, man. What the fuck are friends for?" Mickey smiles through watery eyes. He almost lost him tonight. The idea turns his insides to ice.

"Maybe I should call my dad...." Jack says. "He could pay for rehab."

"I'm sure that's the one time he'd be willing to write a check without complaining for two hours first, cheap prick." Mickey laughs. Jack joins him. They dissolve into a mess of incoherent hysterics. Laughing together like maniacs as the gravity of the situation finally catches up to them. Jack's cackling morphs into pained sobbing, leaning on Mickey as an endless stream of tears falls from his eyes. His whole body is wracked as he cries and cries. His shoulders shake and his breath hitches.

"Hey," Mickey says, rubbing soothing circles on Jack's back. "You're okay, man. It's gonna be okay."

Mickey's not sure how he's gonna make it okay. But he knows he's gonna fucking try.

This is a new low, even for Ian, who has been eavesdropping on important conversations since he was in kindergarten. He shouldn't be listening, but he couldn't stop himself if he tried.

Not that he would try....

Ian is again struck dumb by how much Mickey has changed. He can hardly believe the man talking on the other side of the closed door is the man he's loved since he was 15 years old. Gone is the fear, the bitterness, and the anger. Replaced by patience, kindness, and love. Ian doesn't really know how to process the change. He feels like he doesn't know Mickey at all anymore.

It makes him wonder what Mickey sees when he looks at him.

Ian has changed a lot since Mickey's been gone. It started well before his escape. Looking back, it all
stems from his diagnosis. He knows he has a handle on it now, but it changed him in ways he didn't even realize until recently. His relationship with Brian is the most glaring example of how far Ian has fallen. He lost himself completely. Ian wasn't sure how long it was going to take to feel whole again. But he had a feeling Mickey was going to be a big part of his journey back from this darkness.

That's assuming Mickey even wants to be part of Ian's life.

He never thought he would question his relationship with Mickey. Even when he was gone, after they said goodbye for what Ian was sure was the last time, Ian was always positive Mickey would love him til the day he died.

But this new person, this new Mickey, Ian knows nothing about. What if he's grown so much, is so happy with his new life, his new friends, his new outlook, that he feels no desire to explore the past with Ian? What if he sees Ian as a part of his history he'd rather not revisit?

Then Ian would have to accept the fact that he lost his chance. He would have to come to terms with it and try to move on too. Hopefully Mickey would at least be open to being friends, because Ian's not sure how he would handle having Mickey so close and having no contact whatsoever. He suddenly doesn't understand how he's survived the past three years. Or the years before that, when he could have had Mickey, but convinced himself he didn't need him...

Ian did that. He cut off the contact, so sure he was better off.

Now he knows he has never been more wrong.

He just hopes it's not too late.

He can't hear the voices on the other side of the door anymore. Maybe Jack's asleep, or maybe Mickey's just holding him. Ian tries not to grimace at the thought. It's not fair of him to be angry.

He has no right.

He has to get out of there for a minute. He head down the hall, desperate to put some distance between himself and the two men. He needs a breather. Quick steps lead him down the hall and through a set of doors. He comes to the cafeteria and walks to the counter. He orders two coffees from a tired looking attendant, paying with his debit card and thanking her. He takes the piping hot beverages over to the side table where the cream and sugar is.

He's positive there's one thing about Mickey that will never change: the disgustingly sweet way he takes his coffee....

The thought makes Ian smile.

Ian is standing outside the room, suddenly unsure of himself, vacillating between knocking and abandoning the whole idea.

He hasn't been this scared to talk to Mickey since he was a teenager. When everything about Mickey was as exciting as it was terrifying. Ian had been so drawn to him. Mickey had been a walking contradiction. A hard, dangerous, homophobic criminal one minute, and a soft, scared, gentle boy the next.

Ian had been so intrigued, which had lead to infatuation, then love.

Now, Ian feels like he is in that same position, half scared, half excited, all in.
He takes a deep breath, and knocks on the door.

He hears a muffled "Yeah." from the other side.

He closes his eyes for a moment, steeling himself, and walks in.

Mickey is sitting on the edge of the bed, feet hanging over the side, looking down at a sleeping Jack with a worried expression on his face.

He looks tired.
He looks completely broken.
Ian thinks he looks beautiful.

Mickey still hasn't looked up. "Did you call his dad? He said you may need to call more than once...." he trails off when he sees Ian standing there. "Thought you were the nurse." he says dumbly.

Ian gives him a weak smile. "Want me to get her?" he asks. 'Idiot.' he thinks.

Mickey ignores his question.

"Ian, what are you still doing here? How did you even know we were here to begin with?" Mickey looks confused.

"I, uh, we took the call. The overdose. I was the EMT on scene, Mick." Ian feels stupid, standing there, holding coffees, like he belongs there.

The look on Mickey's face says he doesn't.

"You were there?" Mickey asks, looking down at Jack again.

"Yeah, and I think you were too...." Ian ventures. He's not sure if he should push it, but he needs to hear Mickey say it. Even though he knows it all already.

"Yeah." Mickey sighs, looking pained. "I shouldn't have left him. But I'm on parole. I got scared." he laughs bitterly. "All this time and I'm still a fucking pussy."

"Mick." Ian sighs, walking toward the other man. But Mickey looks up at him, and his stare stops Ian in his tracks.

"Why did you come here, Ian? This part of your job? you visit all your patients in the ER."

Ian steps forward, coffee outstretched in his hand. Mickey eyes it warily, but relents, taking the cup and sipping from it immediately. He sighs, small smile on his face.

Ian tries not to grin.

"I remembered him from Mandy's party." Ian nods in Jack's direction. "figured you were the friend that was with him. The one he wouldn't tell us about. I just had to come and make sure you guys were okay."

"That's real nice and all, but as you can see, we're fine, so thanks." Mickey says dismissively. Ian's heart sinks.

"Please don't be like that, Mick. Don't push me away."
Mickey gapes at Ian, stunned silent for a second. He looks at Jack's sleeping form before grabbing Ian by the arm and pulling him out into the hall.

"Are you fucking kidding me right now, Gallagher? Me, pushing you away? You were the one who left. Over and fucking over. And now that I have my shit together, you wanna waltz back in with fucking coffee like nothing happened."

Ian just listens. He knows he has to hear this. Even though he wants to tell Mickey he knows he does not, in fact, have his shit together, if he's shooting heroin with the kid passed out in the next room. But he keeps his mouth shut.

"Remember when we met on the docks, before Mexico. You said you had your shit together, and you had a boyfriend? Remember that? You told me you moved on, your life had moved on since I was locked up."

Ian nodded, blinking back tears.

"How's it feel?" Mickey asked.

Ian shook his head, unable to respond.

"How's it feel, to just want to be included in someone's life, to not be left out, and for them to tell you to fuck off? Feel good?"

"No." Ian whispers.

Mickey backs up, leaning against the white wall of the hallway. He reaches up with a hand, pulling at his hair in frustration.

"You can't do this shit, Ian. You can't rip my fucking heart out, disappear from my life, then come back and expect me to just welcome you with open arms. I can't do it." Mickey's eyes are glossy and his voice is trembling. "Not again."

Ian can't take it anymore. He tosses his coffee cup in a nearby trash, grabbing Mickey's and doing the same. He doesn't think, he just grabs Mickey and pulls him to his chest. Mickey resists at first, struggling to get free, but Ian just holds tighter. He can tell the exact moment Mickey gives in. He lets out a shaky breath and crumples in Ian's arms.

"I'm so sorry Mick." he whispers. "About tonight, about Jack. About jail and Mexico. Fucking all of it. Pleas, you gotta understand. I'm so fucking sorry."

Mickey finally pulls away. He presses the heels of his hands to his eyes, like it would stop his tears. "What fucking good is sorry? What does it change?" he starts to pace the hall, but Ian grabs him by the wrist, pulling him back to his chest. It feels so right, having Mickey this close. He wraps a hand around the back of his neck, using the other to tip his face up. Ian stares down into Mickey's face. He looks older right now. And so damn tired. It breaks Ian's heart. "It doesn't change anything, cuz it's just words." he concedes. "But I wanna show you. I'm different now. I know we've both changed so much. I just can't keep going like this. Knowing you're here, in Chicago, and I can't see you. Please, Mick. Can't we at least be friends?" Ian's pleading. He knows he sounds desperate.

Because he is.

Mickey eyes Ian skeptically. Then he sighs, his whole body deflating. He falls back into Ian's arms, resting his head on Ian's broad shoulder. "Friends, huh? Were we ever just friends?" Ian just looks at him, tilting his head to the side, eyes pleading. That look always made Mickey cave. He sighed, his
eyes holding Ian's hostage while he seemed to ruminate on the merits of a friendship with Ian. Mickey knew it was for show the whole time, he never could say no to Ian. "Okay, Gallagher, we can try that."

Ian's sure it's supposed to sound annoyed, but Mickey just sounds beaten down, exhausted.

Ian's actually a little surprised it was that easy. He has a niggling fear in the back of his mind that Mickey is just too worn out and sad to fight Ian on this, saying whatever he thinks Ian wants to hear in the moment, to get Ian to shut up. But he pushes that shit down, choosing to hope in the moment that Mickey is serious.

They stand like that for a moment, Ian's arms wrapped tightly around Mickey's waist, Mickey's head on Ian's shoulder. It feels so right to Ian. It feels like coming home.

Eventually Mickey pulls back. He looks up into Ian's eyes, giving him a ghost of a smile.

"I gotta get the nurse to call Jack's dad. I think they're gonna keep him overnight."

"That's probably good, Mick. He needs to be monitored for a bit longer." Ian says. "He got lucky tonight." he adds as an afterthought.

Mickey nods, averting his eyes.

Ian knows there's more going on than Mickey's telling him, something happened tonight and Mickey's not telling him.

But he doesn't expect him to open up about it right now. Ian doesn't have his trust yet.

He knows he has to earn it back. He's willing to wait, and do the work.

Mickey nods again, backing up out of Ian's grasp. Ian feels the loss deep in his bones. He watches Mickey walk over to the nurse's station. While he's indisposed talking to the nurse, Ian decides to check on Jack.

He doesn't know why he does it. Maybe it's because he saved his life tonight. Or maybe it's morbid curiosity about this unknown part of Mickey's life. But he does it regardless.

He pushes the door open and walks into the darkened room. The TV is on, some late night reruns of a sitcom from the 70's playing lowly. Ian's sure Jack's asleep when he walks over to the bed, checking his vitals on the monitor.

"Did he pick up?" Jack mumbles, rolling over. His eyes fall on Ian's form, looming over him. He scrambles back on the bed."What the fuck?"

"Uh, hi." Ian says dumbly.

"Ian?"

Ian is thrown off by Jack saying his name. He knows the other man knows of him. Certainly Mickey has talked about him. But to hear him call him by name is confusing and uncomfortable.

"Yeah." he says. He stands awkwardly by the bed, looking down on the other man. He takes him in, trying to figure out what about him is so special that Mickey would want him as a friend. He's cute enough, dirty blond hair and grey eyes. He's skinny in a way only drugs can make you. He's got track marks running up and down his arms, in the crook of his elbow, along his wrists, even in his
hands. It creeps Ian out. What does Mickey see in this kid? He doesn't get it.

Suddenly he feels anxious, not sure about what to do. He's been caught, and he's got no good reason for being in the room right now.

"You here for Mickey?" Jack asks, visibly relaxing, laying back against the pillows, pulling the blanket up around his waist.

Ian doesn't know how he can be so chill. Ian feels like he's crawling out of his skin, and he's not the one who almost died tonight.

"No, I'm not here for Mickey." Ian half-lies. "I, uh, was on the call tonight, at your apartment. I recognized you from Mandy's party. I knew you were a friend, and I, uh, I just wanted to make sure you were okay."

Jack laughs lightly at that. "That's awfully compassionate of you, man. So the stories are true then."

"What stories?" Ian asks, confused again.

"Oh, you know. The endless stories I've heard about you. Good and bad, man. I probably know more about you and your life than you remember." Jack is smiling now, and it makes Ian even more uncomfortable. He feels open and exposed under the other man's appraising eyes.

"I heard you've got a bit of a hero complex, and you never know when to quit. Obviously, I've heard right..."

Ian doesn't say anything, he just stares at the man. Laying there in the hospital bed he should look frail, but he looks anything but. He looks like he's got Ian right where he wants him, and Ian doesn't know what to do with that.

"Look, Ian, I know why you're here. I may not know you personally, but I know enough to know what's up. Mick may be in denial. Hell, you probably are too. But if you came here to check on me, it means you give a shit. About him. About things and people he cares about. And if he saw you here tonight, and you didn't get your ass handed to you, I think that tells us both all we need to know about how he feels about you."

Ian is flabbergasted. He stands there, slack jawed as Jack continues speaking like this is the most normal conversation in the world.

"I really appreciate you helping me out tonight, even though it's your job." he laughs. "But if you come in here trying to get in good with Mickey, and you shit all over him again, I'm not the only one who will be raining hell down on your ginger ass. Mick may have been alone all his life. He may have only had you for a while there. But shit is different now. Mickey's got an army of friends who love him to death, and we will end your giant ass in a heartbeat if you fuck him over again. I may not look like much right now." Jack waves a hand over his prone form for emphasis. "But I think you know as well as I do, Mick don't associate with people who can't hide a body. We clear?"

Ian is so shocked, it takes him a moment to work up to the appropriate level of righteous indignation warranted for such a outburst.

His body is hot and his ears are ringing. He opens his mouth to tell this junkie prick to fuck off when the door opens and Mickey walks in.

He looks between Ian and Jack, raising an eyebrow in confusion.
"What the fuck is going on here?" he directs the question to Jack, but keeps his eyes on Ian.

"Nothing, Mick." Jack waves him off dismissively. "I was just thanking Ian here for single-handedly saving me from myself tonight. He's a real hero." Jack waggles his eyebrows at Ian.

Ian grimaces. 'This fucking guy.'

"Well, like I said before, we're good here, so you can go now." Mickey shoos Ian with his hand and Ian flushes bright crimson.

He's not wanted here.

"Oh Mick don't be such an asshole. Ian is being nice. I like him." Jack smiles at Ian again. Ian's not sure if he's being genuine or fucking with him. "Did you get ahold of my dad?" he changes the subject.

Mickey walks back over to the bed and sits on the edge, running a hand through Jack's messy hair. Ian feels like an interloper. He shouldn't be here. He shouldn't have come.

"Yeah, he's on his way right now. Wants to see you're alive with his own eyes." Mickey laughs lightly, but Ian can tell it's strained.

"Well, you better get outta here, then. Don't want you to see me getting scolded by my father like a rebellious tween, Mick." he gives Mickey a fond look laying a hand on his thigh.

Ian tries not to cringe.

"Ian, will you take Mick back to my apartment?" Jack asks him. "You wanna go home, Mick, or you wanna go to Trumball?" Jack asks Mickey, almost as an afterthought.

Ian hates the way Jack says 'home', like Mickey belongs at his apartment. Like they belong together, like they have a home together. Ian's pretty sure he didn't mean it like that. Ian is probably reading too much into it, as usual. But he can't help how he feels. And the familiarity between Mickey and Jack makes Ian uneasy in a way he can't quite explain.

"I dunno, man. Don't really think I should be there if you're not home." Mickey replies.

"Bullshit. You live there just as much as I do. Ian, take him home, yeah?"

Ian feels put on the spot, stammering for a moment. "Uh, yeah, sure, I mean, if that's what Mick wants...."

Jack gives Mickey a look that Ian can't decipher. Mickey just nods, hanging his head. Ian's never seen Mickey defer to someone so fast in his whole life. It's just another immensely confusing thing to add to the list of crazy shit that has happened tonight.

"Sure, man, okay," he says, getting up off the bed. He grabs his hoodie from the chair by the bed, pulling it over his head. He then does something that stops Ian's heart for what feels like the hundredth time that night.

He leans over the bed and kisses Jack, square on the mouth. No tongue, no real passion, just a kiss between friends.

And it totally fucks Ian up.

If he was wondering before if he knew Mickey anymore, that shit right there pretty much sealed the
This man was a stranger.

The Mickey he knew didn't casually kiss anyone. Certainly not friends. Not that he had any friends to speak of back then.

Ian feels sick. He wants to go home and lay down. Put this nightmare of a night out of his mind forever.

"Okay, man. Nurse says you'll be released in the morning. Talk to your dad about that shit we discussed. I'm gonna call L and Javi and tell 'em what happened. Don't be surprised if she takes the red eye down here to stomp your scrawny ass into the ground." he ruffles Jack's hair once more and makes his way to the door.

"Please, Mick, don't sick Lauren on me." Jack whines. Mickey gives him a look that shuts him up, though. Jack smiles one last time, turning to Ian. "Thanks again man, seriously."

Ian just nods.

"Be good." Jack says to no one in particular, but Ian's sure it's another warning for him.

Mickey's got himself a pack of rabidly protective people. Ian feels immense pressure to do this right.

Not that he ever does anything right.

He sighs, shoulders slumped as he follows Mickey down the hall toward the elevator.

This is going to be awkward. This is going to be weird. This is one of the worst ideas Ian's ever had, and it just keeps getting worse and worse.

-----------------------------

Jack's been pushing Mickey to talk to Ian since he got home. Ever since the incident at Mandy's party, Jack will not let up about it.

'You obviously still care, Mick.'

'You at least need closure.'

'He looked like he was dying to touch you.'

And of course, Mickey's been doing his best to shut that shit down.

It's ironic that it would be Jack to bring them together, albeit accidentally, and in the worst way possible.

But he did it, just the same.

Mickey is leaning up against the wall in the elevator, as far away from Ian as he can. Ian is not looking at him. Instead he is staring at the buttons on the panel, watching them descend to the ground floor.

It is not tense in the elevator, per-say. It's more like the atmosphere is clouded with emotion so thick
that it's hard for either of them to breathe.

Mickey is still reeling from his close call with Jack tonight, and Ian is probably confused and drained. Mickey can't fathom where his head is at right now, walking in on that shit show tonight.

Mickey knows Ian knows. He knows Mickey and Jack were getting high. He knows Mickey and Jack were fucking. Mickey knows Ian knows all this, just by the way he's not looking at him. Not so much judging him, but trying to figure him out. Mickey's not sure what he's doing, so there's no way Ian can know.

Mickey hates this. This weird limbo he and Ian have been in since he came back to Chicago. He doesn't want it to be this way. He doesn't really know what he does want, but it sure as fuck isn't this.

So he's gotta man up and do something about it, because if he leaves it up to Ian, they'd silently stare into space for the rest of the night.

Mickey follows Ian out of the lobby and into the parking structure. Ian leads him to a blue Honda, a newer one.

"This your car?" he asks, standing by the passenger side, waiting for Ian to unlock it.

"Nah, it's Sue's, my partner from work. She let my borrow it after I got off shift tonight, I told her I had something important to do." Ian shrugs, hitting the button and opening his door. Micky follows suit, opening his door and sitting down.

"Seat belts, Mick." Ian says as he starts the car.

Mickey gives an exasperated sigh, but does as he's told. "Fucking boy scout." he grumbles.

Ian smiles, pulling out of the parking lot.

"So, you wanna go back to Jack's?" Ian asks, preparing to turn left towards Jack's apartment.

"Nah, Gallagher." Mickey replies, reclining his seat and putting on the radio. Classic rock fills the space between them. "Take me home."

Ian looks over at him, shocked, but doesn't question him. He turns right and heads toward the south side. Toward Mickey's childhood home. Towards a past they share, that they both fought desperately to leave behind.

They make their way home silently. There's still tension in the air, but Mickey can feel the ice around his heart thawing. Jack's words ring in his head as he stares out the window, watching the south side fly by.

'You obviously still care, Mick.'

Mickey sighs.

Obviously.

Chapter End Notes
i really appreciate all the comments and kudos. this story means a lot to me, and the fact that anyone besides me is interested in it means more than i could ever explain. so thanks for the continued support.
Starting over, or going backwards?

Chapter Summary

One step forward, two steps back?

It's a little after 1 am when they finally get back to the Milkovich house. Mickey's is exhausted. The events of the evening finally taking a serious toll on him. He follows Ian up the stairs and watches him unlock the door, thinking about how unreal it is that they lock the door at all. Mickey had lived in that house his whole life and never had a key.

Shit's different now, he supposes.

They walk into the living room, stripping off their coats and shoes. Mickey walks around Ian, who's still fiddling with his work boot laces, and heads directly for the kitchen.

"Beer?" he calls out, head in the fridge, like he still lives there.

"Yeah." Ian calls back, finally tugging the boot off and tossing it on top of the pile of shoes by the door. "The light ones in the crisper are mine."

Mickey pulls a beer from the top shelf, then opens the crisper to grab one of Ian's nasty light beers. He takes them both and wanders back into the living room, handing one to Ian as he falls down on the sofa. Ian accepts the bottle, dropping down next to Mickey.

Mickey pats his pockets for his cigarettes, realizing he'd left them at the loft in his rush to get to the hospital.

"Fuck." he mutters, taking a sip of his beer. He turns to Ian, who's flipping through channels on the TV, avoiding Mickey's gaze. "You, uh, got a cigarette man? I'm fucking dying here."

Ian finally turns to him. His face is blank, unreadable. He nods once, putting his beer down on the table and pulling his pack out of his pocket. He takes two out and hands one to Mickey. He lights it for him before lighting his own, then picks up his bottle and takes a sip.

They sit like that for a half hours or so. Mickey knows Ian wants to talk some more. He always wants to talk. He'll want to know all about Jack, the drugs, everything Mickey's seen and done since they parted ways. And Mickey knows he'll tell him. Eventually.

But not tonight.

He feels like he's been put through the wringer tonight, and he's not going to add a Gallagher heart-to-heart to his list of stressors.

He finishes his beer and puts it on the coffee table. He looks at Ian again, who's still ignoring him. "Um, what's the sleeping situation gonna be?" he asks, feeling dumb. This is his fucking house, why the hell does it feel so awkward?

"I've been staying in your room." Ian says softly. He's still refusing to look at Mickey. "You can have it. I can sleep out here." he motions at the couch they were sitting on, keeping his eyes on the
"Bullshit." Mickey replies. This gets Ian's attention. He finally looks over at Mickey. Mickey is taken aback by how worn out he looks. Like the events of the evening are weighing heavy on him too.

Mickey's not sure what to think about that.

He wants to wipe that beaten down look off his face. He wants to tell him not to worry, that everything is going to work out. That he's not strung out, and this thing with Jack is casual. That things between them don't have to be so strained. That he doesn't want that. That he won't push him away or force him to do anything. That he wants to make it better, to be better.

But he doesn't say any of that.

"Don't make it weird, Gallagher." he says instead.

He stands up and starts walking toward his old bedroom.

"We've shared a bed a million times before. I'm not going to leave your lanky ass out here on the couch."

Ian stays sitting on the sofa for a few minutes, but Mickey hears a quiet 'fuck it' from the redhead, and footsteps heading down the hall.

Mickey allows himself to smile for a split second, but then schools his face as Ian enters the room.

Their eyes meet, and they just stare at each other for a moment.

Ian is the first one to look away, walking over to the dresser and pulling out two t-shirts and two pairs of grey sweats.

"I like what you've done with the place." Mickey says, desperate for anything to fill the silence.

"All your stuff was gone." Ian says, handing some clothes to Mickey. "It was weird in here, like, it didn't feel right." he shrugged. "Felt like you had been erased." he added. He turned his back on Mickey so he could unbutton his work shirt, peeling it off and tossing it in the laundry basket.

Mickey felt a twinge of sadness, that after all they'd been through together, they were here again. At a point where it felt wrong to even undress in front of each other. Wanting to respect Ian's privacy, Mickey turned around too. He pulled his hoodie and then his t shirt over his head, dropping them to the floor. He pulled the clean shirt over his head. He then kicked off his jeans and pulled on the sweats. They were obviously too long, pooling around his feet. It reminded him of when he and Ian shared all their clothes. When Mickey would walk around in Ian's too big sweats, secretly loving how the smell was always around him, comforting him in a way on Ian could do. He ran a hand down his leg, feeling the fabric, lost in memories that felt more like dreams now.

He was drawn back to the moment when Ian moved again. He walked toward the bathroom, leaving the door open as he went inside.

Mickey walked over to the bed and sat down. It wasn't his old twin bed, it was a newer queen size. He wondered if it was Ian's, if Ian brought anything with him from that assholes apartment when he left.

That's another thing he was desperate to know about. What the hell happened with the boyfriend? As much as Mickey knew Ian was dying to know about his life over the past three years, he himself had
a million questions about Ian's life now. So much he wanted to find out. He didn't like feeling like he no longer knew Ian, no longer understood him.

He could hear the water running, so he settled against the headboard, taking his phone out of his pants pocket on the floor. He had to tell Lauren and Javier about Jack. His group of friends were very close, even though they were always spread out wide across the continent. They didn't let the distance erode their relationships. But it was late, here and there, so he decided to text now, call in the morning. He opened his phone and hit Lauren’s contact.

me: Jack had an accident today. OD. he's okay. i'll call 2mrw and tell you all abt it.

He set phone on the nightstand and started pulling down the blankets. His phone pinged before he even got the sheets untucked. He grabbed it and opened the home screen again.

L: WTF?? jesus mick. plz call asap. we luv u.

me: will do. luv u 2

He put the phone back on the nightstand and settled against the pillows, lacing his hands behind his head and staring at the ceiling. This was the last place he expected to end up when he started his day that morning. In his childhood home, getting ready to share a bed with Ian, of all people. He felt oddly calm, the angst that always accompanied being in his childhood home had faded, after so much time away. The fact that Terry's abusive ass was six feet under didn't hurt, either. It was still somewhat of a foreign feeling to him, not being scared all the time. Not being so full of anxiety and rage that he had to expel it through violence or drugs. To be content in his own skin, to be almost happy.

But never truly happy.

That shit was elusive as fuck, and Mickey didn't know if he'd ever have it. Or if it even existed. Actual peace, a life where things weren't always fucked up or going to shit. He'd almost had it, in Mexico, but not really. And he didn't know if he'd be able to find it back home, either. Because no matter where he went, all his baggage followed. He couldn't outrun himself.

He sighed, how the fuck does he keep getting so pulled into his own head? He needs to chill the fuck out.

As he was silently berating himself, Ian finally emerged from the bathroom. He waked over to the nightstand and plugged his phone in. "Uh, I think we use the same charger for our phones, so if you wanna, you can plug yours in in the morning." he mumbled, not really meeting Mickey's eyes.

"Thanks man." Mickey replied. The room felt tense again. That was the last thing he wanted.

"Look, Ian..." he started. Ian looked over at him from where he was now standing by the edge of the bed. "I know we talked about trying to be friends earlier. I want that. I'm sorry if I was a fucking dick earlier. I just had a really bad night." he sighed, running a hand down his face. "I wanna be your
friend. I want to do that. I miss you, always have, you know that.” he paused for a moment, trying to rein in his emotions. He didn't want to lose it again tonight. He was so drained, he didn't know if he even had the energy to cry anymore. "I wanna tell you shit. Everything. And I wanna hear your shit too, when you're ready. But not tonight, okay? I just really, really need to sleep right now."

"I get it, Mick. And I want that too. And I want to do it right. We never really had a chance to have a regular, healthy relationship, friendship or otherwise. I wanna fix that. I want you to know I'm serious. I mean it." Ian was still standing by the edge of the bed, hovering over Mickey awkwardly.

Mickey rolled his eyes, sliding over on the mattress. "Come the fuck on, firecrotch. There's plenty of bed for the both of us."

Ian laughed lightly, finally crawling into the bed. He laid flat on his back, hands folded on his stomach, staring at the ceiling. He reached a hand over and turned off the lamp on the nightstand. They laid there in the dark for a while, listening to each other breathe.

Finally, Mickey couldn't take it anymore. He rolled over and tried to find the outline of Ian's face in the dark. He was shocked to see Ian was already staring at him.

"Tonight was fucked up." he whispered. "I thought I lost him."

He couldn't see Ian's face, so he couldn't gauge his reaction.

"You care about him." Ian said. "A lot. I can tell. And he cares about you."

"Yeah, he's my best friend." Mickey admits. "It was fucking scary."

"So, you were there..." Ian said, even though he already knew the answer.

"Yeah." Mickey sighed. He shifted on the bed, a little closer to Ian. He could feel Ian's body heat. That warm, comforting feeling. So close. He scooted closer again. "But can we talk about that when we talk about all the other bullshit?"

Mickey was so close now he was practically on top of Ian. He hadn't even realized he was inching closer and closer until Ian moved his left arm up and wrapped it around Mickey's shoulder.

"Is this okay?" Ian asked shyly. Mickey smiled into the darkness. Ian being all tentative was actually really cute.

"Yeah, it's nice. Don't make it weird, Gallagher." Mickey said softly. He snuggled into Ian's side, inhaling deeply now that he was close enough to get the full effect of Ian's scent.

Ian huffed out a quiet laugh, squeezing Mickey tightly before letting his arm go lax around him.

"It is fucking nice." Ian agrees."I'm glad you're here, Mick."

"Me too." Mickey replies, yawning. "Now go to sleep, asshole."

Ian didn't reply, just squeezed him to his chest once more. They drifted off to sleep like that, tangled up in each other. It felt right. It felt like home.

Mickey didn't know what was going to come of any of this, or how he was going to process all the damage they had done to each other. But he knew he wanted to try. Because lying in that bed in the dark with Ian... that was the closest thing to 'home' that he's ever felt. And he's not ready to give it up again.

Not this time.
Mickey woke up as the sun beat through the blinds of his childhood bedroom. It was almost like a rift in time for a moment, he and Ian wrapped up in each other, the sounds of Iggy and Mandy moving around the house filtering through the thin walls.

But all too quickly, reality settled over him, as the events of the previous night crash back down on his consciousness like a nightmare. What the actual fuck was he thinking? He groans, astounded by his own stupidity. He really is an asshole sometimes.

He shuffles to the edge of the bed, mindful to not wake Ian. It's Saturday, and the guy didn't say anything about being up early, nor did an alarm go off, so Mickey's gonna let the fucker sleep. He scoots off the bed and heads to the bathroom. It's strange to be in this room, in this house, when he'd tried so hard to sever the connection. But he's here now, and as hard as he wants to deny it, it still feels like home. He steps into the bathroom, shutting the door as silently as possible. He pisses real quick, and goes over to the sink. He remembers in that moment that his toothbrush and all his other shit is at Jack's apartment. He sighs, running a hand through his hair. It's greasy. He's also covered in a layer of sweat and filth, a reminder of the debauchery he was engaged in the previous evening. A foreign feeling swells up inside him. It's not shame. Maybe regret? He feels bad for what happened to his friend, but not responsible. Jack's a big boy, and he was getting high long before Mickey ever met him. He was in jail for that exact issue when they'd met. He needs to shut down these irrational emotions, it will only fuck him up more.

He sheds his sweats and t shirt, stopping to stare at himself in the mirror. He had dark circles under his eyes, which were red and swollen from crying all night. He let his eyes wander across his naked torso, taking in the sight of his cover up tattoo. He cringed internally, knowing sooner or later Ian would see it, want to know the whole sad story. His eyes caught on his arm. In the crook of his elbow was a faint bruise, a tiny red bump that shouldn't be there.

He did let himself feel a bit of shame over that. He'd given in to the pressure to forget. He'd pushed all his common sense aside and let Jack shoot him up with fucking heroin. He'd been getting high with him for weeks, but crossing that one last line was really the catalyst of his decision to cut the fucking shit.

That garbage killed his mother. It almost took his best friend last night. No matter how good it felt, how amazing the sex was, or how easy it made it to forget all his fucked up shit and just BE..... he couldn't do it again. Never. The bruise on his arm, that physical reminder of his fuck up, cemented it in his mind. It was done.

He hopped in the shower, turning the water on when he was already behind the curtain. He didn't want to spend any more time in front of the mirror, reminding himself of all his regrets and fuck ups. The water started out cold, causing Mickey to sharply inhale, a full body shiver wracking his body. As he stood under the spray it gradually got warmer, but never hot. He rushed through his shower, washing his hair and cleansing his body of the evidence of last night. His body was sore, like he'd put himself through hell, although he doesn't remember a second of pain. He sighs, berating himself again for being so stupid. Like he needed a reminder.

He was rinsing his back when he heard the door open.

"I'm fucking in here." he called out, annoyed.

"I can see that, Mick." Ian chuckles. Mickey can hear his rustling around in the medicine cabinet, taking his pills, Mickey assumes. He feels a nostalgic feeling of relief and happiness flow over him.
Ian is taking his meds, Ian is healthy. Ian is doing okay. It saddens him that Ian didn't want this when they were together, but he's ecstatic nevertheless that Ian got there. That's all Mickey ever wanted for him.

"What are your plans for today?" Ian asks. Mickey can hear the water turn on, and he feels the temperature difference in the shower.

"What the fuck, Gallagher? I'm in the fucking shower! Now the water's all cold and shit." Mickey growls. He finished up quickly and turns the water off. He almost pulls the curtain back when he realizes he doesn't want Ian to see him naked. That uncomfortable feeling washes over him again. He hates this shit. Things were never supposed to be so awkward. Not with Ian.

"Sorry Mick, just brushing my teeth." Ian mumbles around his toothbrush. "I'll leave you to it, sorry to intrude."

Mickey can tell in that moment, he's not the only one who feels the strained tension between them. He makes a decision in that moment. He's not going to let this shit get any weirder than it already is. If he and Ian want to be friends, they've got to stop being so fucking stupid.

He pulls the curtain back, staring a dumbfounded Ian right in the face. He smirks as Ian's eyes bug out of his head, desperately trying not to look down over Mickey wet, naked torso.

'Still got it.' he laughs in his head. "Hand me a towel, asshole. Or you just wanna stare all fucking day?"

Ian flushes bright red, his eyes on the tattoo on Mickey's chest. Mickey had forgotten, in that moment, Ian hadn't see the cover up yet. Ian tears his eyes away from Mickey's chest and whips around, turning so fast he almost loses his balance.

"Sure, sorry." he grabs a towel blindly and throws it over his shoulder.

"Thanks man." Mickey smiles, wrapping the towel around his waist and finally stepping out of the shower. Ian walks out of the bathroom, leaving Mickey to stare at himself in the mirror once more. He looks more alive and vibrant than he did before his shower. He could credit it to the rejuvenating powers of lukewarm water, but he knows the real reason for his change in demeanor just stalked out of the bathroom like an embarrassment tornado.

That fucking guy. He can still make or break Mickey with just one look.

-------------

Ian leaves the bathroom, berating himself for making it weird again. How is it that he becomes such a fucking idiot with Mickey now? He used to be so confident, used to be able to keep pace with Mickey. Now He stumbles over all his words, keeps getting caught staring like a stalker. He feels like a fucking loser. No chill whatsoever.

And what the fuck was up with Mickey's new tattoo? Occupying the spot that once held a mangled, misspelled version of Ian's name, was a glorious, beautiful heart. Like out of a science book, an old time illustration of what a real heart looks like, the muscles and veins under Mickey's ribs. It was kinda beautiful.
He walks into the kitchen, heading straight for the coffee. Mandy always has it made before he wakes up, even on the weekends. Just one more thing he loves about her. The woman in question is sitting perched on the kitchen counter, sipping her own coffee out of a hot pink mug that has "badass bitch" stenciled across it. It brings a smile to Ian's face.

"Morning, stud." she giggles, handing Ian his own coffee before he can even make it over to the machine. He smiles gratefully.

"What are you talking about? Stud." he asks, eyeing her over his coffee mug.

"You got some hot young thing in your room, I heard you talking in there." she smiles.

Ian flushes hot. He can tell he's blushing, avoiding his best friend's curious stare.

"Nah, Mands, it's not what you think." he starts. He's not sure what she's going to say when she finds out who's in his room right now.

"It's none of your fucking business is what it is." Mickey calls out from the hallway, strolling into the kitchen like he owns the place. Like this is still his home. Like it will always be his home.

"Mick?" Mandy balks, eyeing her brother and best friend in disbelief. "What the fuck is this?" she demands, coffee cup forgotten in her hand.

"It's nothing Mandy." Ian assures. "We ran into each other last night..." he started, trying to come up with a believable story.

But Mickey interrupted him.

"Jack OD'd last night. I was there. Gallagher showed up in a fucking ambulance, saved his life."

Ian and Mandy turned to face him, both staring in disbelief at Mickey's outburst of honesty.

"What?" he asks "It's the fucking truth." he shrugs, moving around his stunned sister to get to the coffee maker.

"What the fuck, Mickey? You're going to fuck up your parole." she yells out angrily.

"No I'm fucking not." he replies calmly. "Nobody knows except me and Jack, Gallagher here, and now you. So don't fucking worry about it. It's done. Jack's going to rehab I think. So I don't know where I'm going to stay now." he busies himself pouring sugar and milk into his coffee, not looking at his sister or his ex.

"Shit, Mick. I'm glad he's okay. Kid's a fucking idiot, screwing around with that shit." Mandy replies, sipping her coffee. "He's lucky he didn't die."

"No shit." Mickey replies. He knows how close Jack came to losing his life last night. He suppresses a shudder, not wanting to show his sister or Ian how affected he was by it.

"So, obviously I couldn't go back to Jack's, cuz he was kept overnight for observation, Ian said it'd be cool if I crashed here." he shrugged again. "If I had known I was gonna get the third fucking degree, I'd have slept on the L."

"Oh come on, Mick. You have to admit, seeing you coming out of Ian's bedroom is a little jarring." Mandy smirked.

Mickey gave her a glare that shut her up quick.
Ian shifted uncomfortably against the counter. He didn't want to be part of this tense conversation between the siblings. Things between Mickey and Jack were none of Ian's business. Although Ian had to admit, it was none of Mandy's either.

Ian wanted to know. He wanted to ask about Mickey's relationship with Jack, and how involved he was with Jack's drug problem. But he knew he'd have to wait for Mickey to come to him. Prying would only push him away, and that's the last thing Ian wants.

"Well, I was gonna talk to Ian about this later, but since it sounds like you're out of a place to stay, now would be as good a time as any." Mandy starts, swinging her legs out into the small space from her spot on the counter. "A girl I work with in the office has a brother." she starts, sipping her coffee.

"You are not trying to set me up again." Ian groans, glaring at her over his own coffee cup. Mickey glances between his sister and Ian, not sure he wants to hear the rest of this conversation.

"No, you idiot. We both know you are going to need some serious time to recover from that Brian bullshit." she gives Ian a meaningful look that Mickey can't place. It makes him uncomfortable, like there is something dark there that he doesn't know yet. But what could be darker than the shit he witnessed at the party? He probably doesn't want to know. Mandy continues when she gets a slight shrug and a nod from Ian, his eyes still averted. "He owns some apartment buildings in boystown. He knows I'm kinda in a bad spot right now, and I told him about me and you moving back here." Ian gave her an unimpressed glare. "I didn't tell him about why you were back here. I only told him my own shit. You know me better than that, Ian. I wouldn't go spouting off about your personal shit to some stranger." she glares right back.

Mickey gives a nod from his spot at the kitchen table. He kind of shoe-horned his way into this conversation, even though it has fuck all to do with him. But he has the undeniable urge to be part of it. To be privy to his sister's life for real, for the first time in years. And he wants to be part of Ian's too. He wants to know the reason for his odd glances at his sister, the cause of his suddenly bleak expression. He wants both Ian and Mandy to trust him with their shit. Like they used to. Like he thought they used to, anyway.

"Anyway," she continues with lilt of irritation in her voice. "It's an amazing building, right in the heart of boystown, two bedroom, nice vintage touches everywhere. All that gay shit you homos love," she giggles. "We can totally afford it, me and you, and then Mick can move back here. You know, cuz Jack's going to a halfway house or whatever...." she trailed off, unsure if this was a topic the two men were ready to discuss openly.

Ian perks up almost immediately. Mickey's not sure if the idea of having a place with Mandy, or the idea that Mickey won't be living with Jack that has him so excited, but Mickey can tell for whatever reason, Ian's very into the idea. He only confirms Mickey's suspicions when he speaks.

"No fucking way! Mandy that's amazing. I would love that. Tell me all about it." he gushes like a girl, causing Mickey to roll his eyes at Ian's unbridled enthusiasm. Mandy starts to tell Ian all about their prospective apartment, when Mickey's phone goes off in his pocket. He looks between his sister and Ian, seeing them so engrossed in their conversation they don't even notice him take his coffee and head toward the living room to take the call.

"Hello?" he says, sitting on the couch and putting his feet up on the coffee table. He takes a sip of his coffee and rests the mug on his stomach.

"Mick." Javier's voice comes over the line. Mickey instantly relaxes. He was dreading calling them this morning, telling them about the nightmare he just endured. But now that Javier's voice is filling his ears, he can't remember why he was worried. He feels nothing but relief. "Please, we're dying
Mickey sighed. He wasn't really ready for this conversation. He had told Lauren he'd call them. He should have known they wouldn't wait. Probably too worried to put off the call. Mickey could understand that. He sipped his coffee, trying to put his thoughts in order before he spoke.

"So we were partying at Jack's place. It was late, I was in bed already. Jack didn't come back from the kitchen, so I went to see what was up. Found him on the floor, out cold. Overdosed."

Mickey heard Javier gasp on the other end of the line, but he didn't speak. He waited patiently for Mickey to continue. So he did.

"The real fucked up thing is I called 911, obviously, right? And Ian fucking shows up, saved his fucking life. Can you believe that shit?" Mickey laughs, even though it's far from funny.

"You know what this is, don't you?" Javier asks ominously.

"What what is?" Mickey asks back, confused.

"This is fate, Mickey."

Mickey huffs out an irritated laugh at that. "What the fuck are you talking about, Javi?"

"You and the Red Devil. You can not escape each other. You are drawn together over and over, despite circumstances and you own will. It's amazing."

"It's infuriating is what it is. Javi, I know I told you a lot. But there's no way you can know what it feels like. I'm not sure I'm ready to have him in my face 24/7. It's a lot."

"Mikhalio." Javier sighs. "I'm not saying you must marry the man. Not even that you have to take him back. Just be open to the idea that you belong in each other's lives. es el destino."

"Whatever dude. You and your esoteric bullshit." Mickey wants to sound annoyed, but he knows it comes off way too fond for that.


"Ian?" Mickey replies, confused.

"No, idiota." Javier laughs. "Jack. What is he going to do? He must do something different if he doesn't want to die, right? What's his plan? I know you were getting mixed up in his shit, saw enough on my visit. You want him to get well, right?" Javier phrases the words as to not hurt Mickey's feelings, but it's not use. Mickey feels like a shit friend, and all his flaws are on display for everyone to see.

"Yeah man. He's, uh, gonna go to rehab I guess. Talked to his dad about paying for it. I hope he's serious this time. He's been doing this song and dance for years. Gotta get him in somewhere before he changes his mind." Mickey rubs his forehead with his unoccupied hand, feeling a stress headache coming on.

"Well, I am sure with all his father's money, they can find him a nice place to convalesce." Javier laughed, trying to lighten the mood.

Mickey smiles. "Yeah, one of those club med places for junkies. Sounds like a sweet deal." he says it even though he's sure it's a lie. Sure there is nothing easy about getting clean.
"Well, you will keep us updated? I hate being so far away from you. No way to help or comfort you." Javier sounds sad, like he really wants to comfort Mickey. It warms Mickey’s heart, that never-ending love this man seems capable of.

"I'll let you know as soon as I do." Mickey confirms. "And thanks man. You always have my back."

"Always will. We love you." Javier replies. Mickey can hear the smile in his voice.

"Love you guys too. Tell Lauren for me?"

"I will." Javier replied. "She on a date right now. Beautiful girl. I'm a little jealous."

"Oh Javi." Mickey says, unsure of what else to say. He knows Javier has been waiting to find someone special. Mickey feels sometimes like he sucked up a lot of Javier's time, when he could have been with someone who could have given him what he deserves. Mickey doesn't say any of that, of course. Never does.

"Anyway. Keep us posted. Talk soon?" Javier changes the subject, ready to get off the phone apparently.

"Will do. Te amo." Mickey say. Because does. He loves Javier very much.

"Te amo, Mick." Javier replies quietly. Then the line goes dead.

Mickey sighs, still smiling, as he takes another sip of his coffee and rests his head on the back of the sofa. He's taken aback by how comfortable it is. Iggy's girl bought it, replaced the old beat down one. The one that held all Mickey's nightmares in it's stained fabric.

A cold chill runs down Mickey's back at the memory, as he tries to push it from his mind.

Just then Ian wanders into the living room. He sits down in the chair on the other side of the room, placing his mug down on the coffee table. He looks over at Mickey and Mickey can just tell by his eyes that he want to talk about something heavy. Mickey sighs, giving Ian his full attention. When will all this bullshit be over? He feels like everywhere he turns these days he's faced with someone's emotional, life-altering crisis.

"What, Gallagher? Spit it out." Mickey says. It comes out angrier than he intends, so he gives Ian a small smile, waving at him with his coffee cup in a 'proceed' gesture.

"I, uh, overheard you talking to Javier." Ian starts, eyes on his hands that are entwined in his lap. Mickey doesn't like to see him so unsure, so folded into himself. He blames the ex, mentally reminding himself to ask Ian about that shit later. But instead he goes with something else for now.

"You're an eavesdropping little prick, you know that?" he laughs. "You get all your info from spying on people conversations?"

Ian gives Mickey a genuine smile. It warms Mickey's heart while breaking it at the same time. He misses this shit. Something as simple as a real smile from Ian can turn Mickey inside out in a nanosecond. "I wasn't eavesdropping, Mick. You were literally talking like three feet form me."

Mickey shrugs. "Fair enough." he says. "Go on."

"So, I heard you telling Javier that Jack needs a bed at a rehab."

Mickey glares at him for a moment. He feels exposed. It's been less than 24 hours, and it's still really
raw, what happened with Jack. And it still feels really strange to be talking to Ian about it. but he bites his tongue. He'll hear him out. "Yeah." he says "And?"

"Well, do you remember when we met on the docks, and I told you I had a boyfriend?" Ian asks.

Mickey is taken aback by the question. "What the fuck does that shit have to do with Jack? What the fuck, Ian?"

"No, Mick, hear me out, please." Ian begs.

Mickey shuts his mouth, taking a sip of his coffee to stop himself from saying more.

"The guy, Trevor...." Ian starts.

"The trans one? Yeah, I remember. The one you were so desperate to bottom for." Mickey spits. He knows it's a low blow, but he's confused and angry that Ian is bringing this up, especially since Mickey's got so much else going on right now.

Ian spins around to look into the kitchen. Mandy is gone. Must have gone to her room when Ian came into the living room. "Mick." he says, "Can we not with that shit right now? You're sister is like right there."

Mickey nods, still irritated.

"Anyway. He works with LGTB kids and adults. He's part of a team that manages shit like drop in centers and homeless shelters. He finds placement for kids that got kicked out of their houses, or are running from their pimps. He has a lot of connections in the community."

"Ian." Mickey sighs, angry with Ian for talking up this asshole. Is he trying to hurt Mickey's feelings? Trying to remind Mickey of how much better this dude is than him, in every way, apparently. "Why the fuck are you telling me this shit?"

"I just thought I could call him, you know, see about getting Jack a bed at one of the houses he's affiliated with." Ian mumbles, suddenly feeling like it was a really stupid idea. "I just thought I could help." he trails off dumbly, staring at his hands again.

Now Mickey feels like an ass. Here he is thinking about himself and all his stupid insecurities, and Ian's only trying to help. To help a friend of Mickey's that Ian obviously doesn't even like, if their interaction at the hospital the night before is any indication. Ian wants to help because he knows it's important to Mickey. And Mickey's being an asshole.

What else is new?

Mickey looks over at Ian, who is still not looking up. "Ian." he says, trying to get his attention.

Ian looks up, giving Mickey a look that says he's prepared to get his head ripped off. It makes Mickey feel even worse. "That would be really great. Nice of you to offer. Thank you."

Ian does a comical double take, and Mickey has to call on every ounce of self control he has not to laugh in his face. "Really??" he balks.

"Did you just offer to be the nice guy? Or are you serious? Cuz it's not really a nice thing to fuck around with..." Mickey trails off, succeeding in keeping a straight face, although it's hard. It's not nice to fuck with Ian like this, but it sure is satisfying to see him floundering.
"No, Mick, no. I would never fuck around with something like this." Ian sounds so serious, Mickey feels like an ass for toying with him. "I know it's important. To you, I mean."

"Ian." Mickey lets the smug smile fall from his face. "I mean it. It would be amazing for you to ask your ex to help my jailhouse fuck buddy get into rehab." and then he's smiling again, trying to bring some levity back into the situation.

Ian smiles, his big, genuine, goofy ass smile, and Mickey feels like he's won some kind of prize. "And you're right, it does mean a lot to me. Don't want the stupid asshole dying." He's serious. He doesn't know what he would do if Jack went and accidentally killed himself.

He'd be heartbroken.

"Okay. Yeah." Ian says, almost to himself. "I haven't talked to him in a while." he looks over at Mickey as he says that. "But he lives for this shit. I'm sure he'll wanna help." he's nodding mindlessly, lost in thought.

Mickey nods too, deciding he didn't trust himself to speak in the moment. He doesn't know how he really feels about this guy helping Jack. He doesn't really like Trevor. Doesn't really understand him either. The transgender thing baffles Mickey. But he knows enough about homophobia and about not being accepted for who you are at your most basic self. He knows enough not to judge someone else, no matter how much he doesn't understand it. And if this dude, Ian's ex-boyfriend, wants to help Jack, then Mickey can find no fault in him at the moment.

------------------------

Ian walks away then, grabbing his phone off the coffee table and walking out onto the porch. He realizes only after he closed the door behind him, and he's sitting on a rickety metal chair in the bright morning sunlight, that he hasn't talked to Trevor in months, that they really hadn't parted on the best terms, and that calling him out of the blue to ask him for a pretty monumental favor was going to be harder than he'd let on to Mickey.

When Ian had gotten back from his trip to the border with Mickey, Trevor had been pissed. He had felt betrayed, and angry, and like he'd been taken for a fool. Ian understood what he had done wasn't fair, to Trevor or Mickey. His innate Gallagher selfishness had taken over and he had hurt people he cared about. After Monica's funeral, Trevor had tried to give Ian another chance. They had tried to start over. But Ian's heart was no longer in it, and he felt like he was mourning the loss of Mickey all over again. Trevor had no desire to play second fiddle to a ghost, and staying friends had been too hard at the time.

Right before Ian had met Brian, he and Trevor had just started to tentatively step back into 'friend' territory. Ian would show up at the Teen Center and help out on movie night, or they'd grab a drink at some posh gay club Trevor had heard about through his insanely huge circle of friends. It was a bit strained at first, felt forced, but they had gotten past it, making it back to the easy friendship they had while they were dating, just without the sex.

But then Brian happened. And it made sense to tell Trevor no, he couldn't hang out. It wasn't fair to his new guy, to hang out with an old ex, even if they had been friends longer than they ever dated. Trevor had understood, albeit reluctantly, and had stopped calling Ian all together. Assuming Ian would reach out to him, not wanting to rock the 'new relationship' boat.
So they had fallen out of touch, and Ian knew that was on him. And now, out of the blue, he's going to call and ask Trevor to do him this massive favor. For a friend of Mickey's, of all people. Trevor had never been shy about his disdain for Mickey, utilizing every given opportunity to slander his name and tell Ian how much better he was than the Milkovich kid, how he was a better person now that Mickey was gone. And Ian had let him. He let Trevor pet his ego, telling him all the things he was desperate to hear. That he was the victim, and Mickey had hurt him, and he never did anything wrong. That Ian was perfect.

Such bullshit.

Trevor blamed Mickey for all the problems they had had in their short relationship. But Ian knew better. It just wasn't that serious, the shit between them. And Mickey would always come first. He couldn't lie to himself about that fact anymore. So he was going to put Mickey first. Swallow his fears of rejection and facing his own past mistakes, and put Mickey's well being in the forefront of his mind. He could handle a passive aggressive non-argument with Trevor if it meant helping Mickey. He looked at his phone for a long, silent moment, then sighed long and loud, before hitting Trevor's contact and putting the phone to his ear.

This was it.

Ian leaned his head back against the faded, dirty brick of the house, staring into the empty space across the street as the phone rang. It was early for a Saturday, but if Ian knew Trevor at all, he knew he'd been up for hours already. Either trying to save the Gay World, or still up from a night of drunken debauchery. The odds were even. Finally, after what felt like an irregularly long time, the line connected.

"Ian? Is that you?" Trevor's perky voice rang through the line. He sounded giddy. Drunken debauchery it is...

"Uh, yeah. Hi Trev. You, uh, you busy right now?" Ian stammered, feeling increasingly nervous, unsure how to go about this conversation.

"Well, my friends and I are about to head out for some much needed nourishment after a long night of drunken gyrating. But I doubt you give a shit about any of that." Trevor chuckled lightly. "You need something? Everything okay?" his tone changed from playful to serious, as the ambient sound around him disappeared, like he had closed himself into a room.

"Well, I know it's fucked up of my to call you out of nowhere..." Ian started.

"Yeah, it really is." Trevor cut him off, snarky and irritated. It was hard to talk to him when he was drunk, he went form jovial to irate in a heartbeat, and it was nearly impossible for Ian to keep up.

"Trev, I didn't call to hash out our shit." Ian cut him off. "We can do that if you want, another time. I know I have a lot of explaining to do. But I just can't right now. I know I'm in no position to ask you any favors."

"Damn right you're not." Trevor bit out, sighing audibly, like the conversation was offending him on a deeply personal level. "What do you want?"

"I have a friend. He's real fucked up. Heroin. He almost died last night, and he wants to get into treatment. Half-way house, rehab, whatever. His dad has money, he'll write a check. I just thought, you know, you've got connections in that world. You could help us, maybe?" Ian felt the blush
creeping along his neck, always so uncomfortable asking for help. Even if it wasn't for him.

"Your friend, is he gay?" Trevor asked. "Cuz the programs I am connected to usually only help gay youth." Trevor reminded him. Like it was something Ian would forget.

"Yeah, man, he's gay. I wouldn't have called otherwise. I remember." he ran a hand through his hair, trying to relax. Trevor probably wasn't giving him shit, it was most likely his own anxiety speaking.

"You fucking him?" Trevor blurted out.

Ian sat there for a moment, stunned. What the fuck did that have to do with anything? Maybe he wasn't being paranoid about Trevor's curt tone...

"Um, no. Not that it should matter." Ian replied slowly.

"Shit." Trevor sighed. "No, no, you're right. It doesn't matter. I'm sorry. I'm still a little drunk, and you know how I get. I'm sorry."

Ian pressed his fingers into the skin above his left eyebrow, trying to ease the tension there. "It's okay, Trev. I know we have shit to discuss. I know you're probably still really fucking pissed at me for disappearing again. And I'll tell you all about it. I promise. But right now I gotta find a bed for Jack. If you can't or won't help me, I gotta start making other calls." Ian said. He didn't know who else he'd call, but he did know that he wasn't gonna stop at one 'no."

"Nah, man. I can probably find a bed for your friend. It won't be today, just so you know. He'll probably have to go home and wait for a bed to open up. Or he could go to a holding if he's homeless. That's like a shelter for addicts, but on lock-down." Trevor explained.

"No, that's okay. He's got an apartment. He just needs a program bad, man. I don't know how much longer he's gonna last. It's pretty fucking bad." Ian's mind flashed back to Jack's apartment, his sallow skin, non-existent heartbeat. He shuddered.

"Good, good. At least he has somewhere to go, and he's got support from family and friends. That will go a long way towards his recovery." Ian could hear the smile in Trevor's voice. This shit was his calling. Helping people nobody else wanted to help.

"Yeah, he's got a lot of people who care." Ian replied, almost bitterly. He didn't want to think about how much Mickey cared about this kid. How Mickey may even love him. He just couldn't go there right now.

"So, it's Saturday, and I can't do much til Monday, but I'll get right on it when I get to the office at the beginning of the week, and I'll call you as soon as I get him on the appropriate wait-lists. Maybe I could meet him? You know, just so I have a sense of who he is, where he would fit best, among the houses I'm affiliated with?"

"Yeah, man. We could probably do that. Call me when you know more, and we'll go from there."

Ian was smiling now. This went better than he thought it would.

"Sure thing. And Ian, it was really nice to hear from you. I'm glad you called me with this." Trevor said.

"I appreciate it, man. A lot. Talk to you soon." Ian beamed.

"Yeah, bye." Ian replied. He ended the call and leaned back in the chair, pleased with himself for doing something to help. Mickey would be pleased.

Oh shit.
Mickey.
Ian didn't tell Trevor he was doing this favor for Mickey's friend. He was doing this favor for Mickey.
Fuck.

Mickey's still sitting on the couch when Ian comes back inside. He's pretending to watch the news, while surreptitiously eyeing Ian over his coffee cup. He watches as Ian walks in front of the television and goes back towards his room. (Mickey's room, it will always be Mickey's room to Mickey) He doesn't look upset or angry, but Mickey can only assume that things with his world-saving superhero ex-boyfriend didn't go so well. He huffs out an annoyed breath. He knew he shouldn't have gotten his hopes up. He needs to head to the hospital to pick up Jack soon anyway, and now it looks like he needs to find a way to break it to his friend that he doesn't have a plan to help him get better. Jack didn't expect Mickey to find him placement, but Mickey was hoping to surprise him. Looks like he failed. Again.

Just as Mickey is indulging in his intense self-loathing, Ian reemerges from the bedroom, fully dressed and looking like he's ready to go out. Mickey tries not to be too disappointed, just because he and Gallagher talked about being friends last night didn't mean they were going to go back to the way they used to be overnight. Mickey needed to keep his expectations low.

Sure.
Like that was even possible when Gallagher was concerned.
Fuck.

Gallagher's probably got plans with some uppity asshole. Brunch or an art gallery or something equally as faggy. Things Mickey could never do for him. Not that he wouldn't try, if given the chance. He figured out a long time ago, he'd do anything for Ian.

'fuck off with that shit, you idiot.' Mickey scolds himself. Not even a full two months back in the presence of the guy, and Mickey's already falling apart at the seams.

"Hey." Ian breaks him out of his revelry with a hand on his shoulder. How did he get so close?

Mickey must have really been zoned out there. He blushes, looking up at Ian, like Ian could read his thoughts.

Maybe he could. Mickey could never tell.

"Yeah?" he asks, putting his coffee cup, now empty, down on the coffee table. He takes in the view in front of him. Ian is always hot. He was hot this morning in his white t shirt and grey sweats. And he's hot now, in his black skinny jeans and green plaid button up. The black leather jacket helps a lot too. Suddenly Mickey feels under-dressed in his grey khakis and black v-neck, navy blue zip up hoodie resting loosely on his shoulders. He runs a hand through his hair self-consciously, always feeling like a total scab when he's next to Ian.

"You going to get Jack this morning?" Ian asks, almost shyly. Mickey's still not used to seeing Ian so unsure of himself. Part of him likes it, seeing Ian all flustered around him. But another part of him
just wants Ian to be IAN again, and stop walking on eggshells around him.

"Yeah, that's the plan." Mickey replies.

"Well, I was thinking maybe you'd want some company? I could maybe talk to him about Trevor and the programs he knows of? I mean, if that's cool with you. Unless you wanna be alone. I could totally understand that, and I don't want to pry...."

"Ian." Mickey cuts him off sharply. "You're rambling."

Ian blushes, running a hand through his hair. "Yeah, sorry." he mumbles.

Mickey stand up form the sofa and walks toward the door, grabbing his jacket from the hook. "It's cool if you wanna come, and I'm sure now is a good a time as any to spring the idea on Jack. I'm not sure if giving him too much time to think on it is a good idea. He'll probably talk just talk himself out of it." He looks over at Ian, just standing there, gaping at him again. "Or did you just ask me thinking I'd say no again? You gotta quit with that shit." and he walks out the door before Ian can respond.

Ian follows, of course.

-------------------

The ride over to the north side hospital on the L was silent. Mickey didn't know what to say, and it seemed that Ian didn't either. They barely looked at each other. Mickey wasn't sure if it was tension between them that was making things weird, or if it was the fact that they were going to see Jack. Mickey hadn't really told Ian anything about Jack, or the relationship he had with him. If Mickey had to guess, he'd say Ian was probably pretty fucking confused.

But Mickey couldn't be bothered to worry about Ian's feelings right now. He only had room in his head to worry about one asshole right now, and that asshole was Jack. He was nervous about bringing up rehab with Jack, unsure if it was even his place to suggest it. But he knew he couldn't just do nothing. He had to at least try to help. Or else he would hate himself. He just couldn't stand by and watch his friend kill himself. Not anymore.

They made it to the hospital in about a half an hour, the train working slower than normal on a Saturday morning. The disembarked and started down the sidewalk, still silent. Mickey wasn't sure if the silence was awkward. It didn't feel like it to him, but he was shit at judging these types of situations. He chanced a look at Ian. He didn't look angry or stressed out. Maybe he just didn't have anything to say.

No. Ian always has something to say.

"Hey man, you okay?" Mickey asks as they get in the elevator. Mickey hits the button for the 3rd floor and leans up against the back wall as the elevator starts ascending.

"Yeah." Ian replies, shoving his hands into the pockets of his jacket. "Just got some shit on my mind."

"I know the feeling." Mickey replies. He never anticipated this shit when he first started fucking around with Jack all those years ago. Never thought he'd even see the guy outside of prison walls,
never mind staying with him, or almost watching him die for that matter.

But he couldn't honestly say he regretted it. Any of it. It may be fucked up right now, but Jack was one of his best friends, and he's not the type of guy who shits on people he cares about. He hasn't been that guy in a long time.

It's strange to think of how going to prison was one of the best things that ever happened to him. If you had told him then, when he was in processing waiting to walk into prison to start his 15 year sentence, that it would end up this way, that he would be eternally grateful for getting locked up, for how it had shaped his life he would have laughed in your face, then punched you.

But it did. It changed him on a deeply personal level. It brought him Jack, Lauren and Javier. It brought his sister back to him. Hell, he's even getting his son back in his life. Not to mention he's with Ian right now. Something he gave up hoping for a long ass time ago.

It wasn't perfect. Mickey was certain his life would never be anything even remotely close to perfect. But it was good. And maybe even getting better. He got lucky.

Isn't that a mindfuck?

He chuckles to himself and Ian gives him a strange look. He covers his mouth and fakes a cough. Ian rolls his eyes.

'Smooth, Mickey.' He shakes his head at his own raging inability to play it cool just as the elevator doors open up and Ian steps out onto the floor. Mickey follows him. It's only a short walk to Jack's private room.

The door is slightly adjar and Mickey can hear raised voices coming from the room. He stops short of going in, straining to hear what's being said.

It sounds like Matt, Jack's dad and Mickey's boss. Mickey curses under his breath. If Matt is pissed about this, Mickey could lose his job. Which would violate his parole, and send him back to finish his sentence.

Fuck.

Ian comes up behind Mickey, too close for Mickey's comfort, and it seems as if he's listening too. Ian always was a creeper, eavesdropping on anyone he could. Asshole.

Mickey gives Ian a pointed look, and Ian takes a step back, hands up in surrender. Mickey nods at him, giving him a look like 'yeah, you better step back.', his eyebrows high on his forehead. Then he turns back around to continue surreptitiously listening.

Raised voices travel over the space, muffled but easily comprehensible.

"Jackson Alexander Cauldwell, you better be fucking listening to me. This is the last time I do this. The last time I come to the hospital, thinking you are dead or dying. Your poor mother can't even bring herself to come anymore. She's at her wit's end. We love you, son. We'll do anything to help, but this can't continue."

"I know, Dad. I'm sorry."

Mickey feels like an asshole now. This shit is obviously a private family matter. But he already came down here, dragged Ian with him. And he may be able to help. So he swallows down his nerves, and knocks on the door.
"Yes." Comes Matt's exasperated reply from inside the room.

Mickey shakes himself off once more, preparing himself for this heady conversation. He shoots Ian one last look, and walks in.

-------------------

Ian feels incredibly uncomfortable. He's cursing himself in his head over and over for wedging himself into this. He knows Mickey doesn't want him here, only agreed to Ian tagging along because he had something to offer his friend.

His "Friend". Ian scoffs internally. There is obviously way more to Mickey's relationship with this kid than he's letting on. Ian knows Mickey promised to tell him. Tell him everything. He said it himself.

But Ian doesn't want to wait. He doesn't want to spend this whole day watching Mickey interacting with this strung out mess, wondering what the hell it is between them. And Ian knows, in the rational part of his brain, that he has no right to be jealous of their friendship, or relationship, or what-the-fuck-ever it is between Mickey and this kid. But he can't help himself. It just doesn't feel right.

He does't like it. At all.

He follows Mickey into the room, even though he wants to tell him they should probably wait til the yelling stops. He doesn't say anything, though. This is Mickey's thing, he probably knows what he's doing.

He walks in behind Mickey and sees Jack again. Sitting up on the bed with his hands threaded together in his lap. There is another man standing by the window, Ian guesses it's his father. He's tall, has the same dirty blond hair, same build, obviously more muscle, because he's not an IV drug user, Ian guesses.

They both look over when the door opens.

Ian freezes, feeling like an intruder again. He's been feeling like that a lot lately. He tries to make himself small, sliding against the wall as Mickey saunters into the room, confident as ever. Or so it seems to Ian.

"Mick." Jack breathes, putting his arms out. Ian flinches. He can't help it. The level of familiarity between the two men sets his teeth on edge. The ease with which Mickey's nickname falls out of Jack's mouth makes him queasy.

"You motherfucker." Mickey replies, falling into Jack's open arms. They hold each other for an inordinately long time, if you ask Ian, having seen each other the night before.

Jack's father comes up behind them and claps a hand down on Mickey's shoulder. "Hey kid." he says.

Mickey backs up and lets go of Jack, who's hands fall back to the mattress limply. Mickey turns
around in the small space between Jack's bed and his looming father, and puts a hand out. "Matt, how you doing man?"

Matt takes the offered hand and shakes it vigorously. A huge smile plastered on his face, despite the circumstances. He looks happy and relieved to see Mickey there.

Ian stands off to the side, trying desperately to figure out what the hell is going on, and failing miserably.

"I've been better." Matt says, giving his son a pointed glare.

Jack gives his father an apologetic look, then his eye land back on his clasped hands. "Thanks for coming, Mickey, Jack doesn't have any real friends to speak of, you're the only one who doesn't want him for drugs or money." Matt sighs, sitting down in a chair that's been pulled up to the edge of the bed. He grabs at his son's twisting fingers, lacing his hand around them. "He really needs someone like you in his life."

Ian can feel himself flushing, heat crawling up the back of his neck. He's never heard anyone talk to Mickey like that before, praise him and thank him like that. It's so far out, Ian doesn't know what to do with it. He's always known Mickey was a good person, deep down. And it felt like a secret that only he was privy to, Mickey was only that compassionate, caring, wonderful man to him. It made Ian feel special.

And no matter how fucked up it may be, Ian is upset that so many people get to see this side of Mickey now. Everyone knows Ian's most special secret:

Mickey is amazing.

And now Ian doesn't feel special at all anymore.

He feels like an asshole for thinking that way, but it's how he feels, so whatever.

"What are you doing here, Mick? I thought I was gonna call you when I was being released."

Jack trails off, staring hard at Ian. Ian doesn't look away, he stares right back. He's no pussy. "And you brought your friend." Jack says dully, looking Ian up and down disdainfully. "Dad, this is Ian. He's a friend of Mickey's, and he's the EMT that saved my life." Jack looks bitter as he says it. Like he's actually angry Ian didn't let him die. Or maybe it has more to do with who he is to Mickey. Either way, it's uncomfortable.

"Well I'll be damned." Matt booms, walking around Mickey to get to Ian. "Small world." he smiles, grabbing Ian's hand and shaking it while cupping his other hand on Ian's shoulder. "Eh, fuck it." he mutters, pulling Ian into a full body embrace.

Ian is shocked, but goes with it. He's used to family members reacting this way when he saves a life of a loved one. It's part of the job he really likes. Helping families like this. He's never been this personally involved before. It's different.

"Thank you." Matt utters into Ian's ear, voice low. "I don't know what I would do if I lost him."

Ian nods, like an idiot, because he can't think of any way to respond to that.

Matt pulls back and looks Ian in the face. His eyes are glassy, but the tears stay put. "Thank you." he says again, releasing Ian and walking back over to the bed.
Ian glances over at Mickey, who is now seated on the bed next to Jack. They are too close for Ian's comfort, but he has to keep reminding himself that it's none of his business, how close they sit. How close they are.

"You're one luck sonofabitch, Jackson." Matt says, returning to his seat by the bed. "To have friend like Mickey, and to survive yet another overdose thanks to Ian here." Matt motions to Ian, still standing stiffly by the door.

"Yeah, yeah. I get it dad. I'm an idiot. Ian is a hero, and Mickey is perfect. I fucking get it." Jack spits, wrenching his hands together again, avoiding eye contact.

Matt huffs and rolls his eyes.

Mickey puts a hand on Jack's shoulder, and Jack peers over at him, his eyes softening immediately. "Fuck off with that shit, Jack. Your dad is not being a prick. Give him a break, I'm sure he didn't mean it like that." Mickey rubs Jack's shoulder, shaking him back and forth lightly.

Jack sighs, looking over at Ian again. "Sorry man." he mumbles. "I've had a long night. I just wanna go home."

Ian nods again, leaning up against the wall, slipping his hands into his jacket pockets. "It's cool, man."

"So, uh, I kinda wanted to run something by you, and since your dad's here, I think now would be a good time." Mickey says, grabbing Jack's hands in his own and moving his head down to gaze into his eyes.

"What, Mick?" Jack asks, finally looking up at him.

"Well, I was talking to Ian this morning, and he's got a friend." Mickey says the word 'friend' a little bitterly, and Ian knows it's paining him to accept any kind of help from Trevor. "He works in social services or whatever. Shelters and rehabs, shit like that." he pauses and looks over at Matt as he says that.

Ian can see Matt's eyes light up at the word 'rehab'. Ian wonders how many times he's had this exact conversation with his son.

"Mick...." Jack interrupts.

"No, Jack." Mickey cuts in. "Listen to me. I'm only going to say this shit once. Listen, and then you can say what the fuck ever you want, okay?"

Jack looks surprised by Mickey's tone. But he nods.

"Ian's friend told him this morning that he is willing to find you a bed in a rehab. One of those high end halfway houses for fags. It would be like vacation, except no shooting up." Mickey chances a smirk, and Jack returns it.

Ian's confused by their dynamic.

"He's gonna call in some favors or whatever, but he's pretty sure he can get you a bed." Mickey continues, this time looking over at Matt, who looks like he's on the verge of tears again. "But Jack, I gotta tell you man, if you don't wanna at least try to get better, I'm, shit...." Mickey abruptly stops talking to roughly wipe at his eyes. Ian is surprised, yet again, to see Mickey glassy eyed. He must really care about this kid.
Ian feels a little sick.

Mickey clears his throat, grabbing Jack's hand again. "If you don't wanna at least try to get your shit straight, I gotta take a step back, man."

Jack's head whips up and he's staring at Mickey, obviously hurt. "What?" he whispers.

"Jack." Mickey says, pulling him closer and wrapping an arm around his shoulder. "I'm on parole, man. You know that. I just started seeing Yev again for the first time in years. I'm trying to put my shit show of a life back together, and I can't do that shit if I'm worrying about your ass all the time. I can't be around that drug shit, it's gonna get me thrown back in the can." Mickey runs his free hand through Jack's hair, a soft affectionate gesture Ian is thrown by.

"I love you." he says, eyes never leaving Jack's. "But I gotta do what's best for me. Remember when you told me that shit? Well, I'm taking your advice. And you should too, man. Take care of yourself."

Jack is looking at Mickey when tears start to flow out of his eyes. Jack silently cries, leaning his head on Mickey's shoulder.

Ian is trying to follow the conversation, but he's still reeling from how Mickey just told this kid he loves him. So easily, like he's been emoting his whole life.

Ian feels a pang of nostalgic jealousy. He would have given anything to hear Mickey say that shit to him, back when they were kids. He would have given anything to have this version of Mickey back then.

But Ian's never had any luck. So now he gets to stand off to the side and watch Mickey love someone that's not him.

Fuck.

"I wanna help you. Your dad wants to help you. Ian wants to help you. And if you wanna help yourself, I will be there every step of the fucking way. I won't leave you hanging man. I've got you."

he tightens his grip on the back of Jack's neck, pulling him closer so their forehead are touching. Ian is struck by the irrational fear that he's about to see them kiss.

That doesn't happen.

Jack pulls back and put his hands over his face, his breath hitching. "Yeah, fuck. Okay." he stutters. "I'll go."

Matt is up and out of his seat in an instant. He kneels on the bed behind the two men and wraps his arms around both of them. "That's what I'm fucking talking about." He says, squeezing them tight.

Ian just stands there. This shit just keeps getting weirder and weirder.

Matt looks over at him again. "Thank you, Ian. Thank you so much."

Ian nods again, running a hand through his hair before putting his hands back in his pockets. He stands off to the side while the three men embrace and murmur words to each other that Ian can't hear, has no desire to hear honestly. Jack is nodding at something his father is whispering to him, as Mickey rubs small circles on his back. Ian leans against the far wall, tipping his head back to look at the ceiling, desperate to focus on anything besides the emotional display taking place in the room.
Ian stood against the wall while the three men talked amongst themselves for a few minutes. He heard snippets of the conversation here and there, shit about work, something about Jack's cat at his parents house, his mother, a cousin's wedding. He wasn't really paying attention, it was none of his business and frankly he wasn't interested.

His phone vibrated in his pocket. He fished it out and checked the screen.

Trevor.

Huh, that's odd. There's no way he's figured this shit out already. It's impossible to place someone on the weekend.

He swiped his finger across the screen and puts the phone to his ear.

"Hello."

"Hey Ian, you at the hospital now?" Trevor asks. Ian can hear the sounds of the city in the background. Trevor must be walking somewhere.

"Yeah, just waiting on the doctor to sign off and then I guess they're going to let him go home. Just sitting here with Mickey and Jack's dad right now." Ian keeps his voice low, not wanting to interrupt the other men in the room, and also not wanting to draw attention to his own conversation. "Why?"

"Well, I'm in the area, you are at Northwestern Memorial, right? On East Huron?" Trevor asks. Ian hears a car horn in the background. "Ey, fuck off." Trevor yells. Ian can see him flipping off the driver of that car in his mind. He chuckles.

"Uh, yeah. Why?"

"Well, I was coming down there to check on a kid from the shelter, she got beat up by a john last night and she's in the ER right now. I figured if you and your friend are still visiting, I could come up real quick and meet the kid. Jack's his name, right?" I asked around, he's a friend of Mickey's huh? Didn't think that was something I'd wanna know?"

"Um, well, I didn't really think that was pertinent, Trev." Ian says. It's a little bit true. It doesn't really matter how Ian knows Jack, the kid still needs help.

Ian was a little shocked. He didn't expect Trevor to be so interested in helping. He knew when he spoke to him earlier in the day that he'd said he'd make some calls, but Ian honestly thought he'd only said those things to be polite. Ian had thought it was going nowhere, expecting to ask Sue and some of his other coworkers if any of them had an in with a rehab.

But here was Trevor, surprising him. Ian wondered if his motives were really that altruistic, or if he was just taking the given opportunity to see Mickey Milkovich in the flesh.

Mickey had been a thorn in Trevor's side for the duration of the short relationship Ian had had with him. Ian's sure Trevor is desperate to see what all the fuss was about.

Ian sighed. He's not really in the mood for a confrontation, or the drama that constantly hangs around Trevor like a cloud. But if he could help Jack like this, Mickey would be grateful. And Ian's willing to do just about anything to get back in Mickey's good graces. So he agrees.

"Yeah, Jack. Jackson, actually. We're on the third floor. Just ask for Cauldwell at the desk, the nurse will send you back."

"Okay, man. Sounds good. I'll be over as soon as I finish up with Trish." Trevor replied and the line went dead.
Ian pocketed his phone and turned his attention back to the conversation in the room. Jack and Mickey were still seated side by side on the bed. Matt back in his chair, feet propped up on the mattress. The mood of the room felt lighter now, different from when they'd arrived an hour ago.

"I never knew we had the same middle name." Jack laughed. "You never told me." he punched Mickey lightly in the arm.

"Hey, fuck off with that shit." Mickey grinned. "And we really don't, though. Your's is Alexander, mine's Aleksandr- spelled A-L-E-K-S-A-N-D-R, you know, Ukrainian, not English or whatever the fuck your name is."

"Yeah, we're English." Matt smiled. "Our family's been here since colonial times. We still have family in Yorkshire."

"Alright, Dad. Mick didn't ask for our fucking family tree." Jack said, sounding exasperated with his father.

Ian smiled, feeling oddly comforted by the inane conversation, even if he wasn't included in it.

That is until Matt looked over at him. "What about you, Ian, got a middle name you wanna share with us?" he laughed lightly.

"Um," Ian started. But he didn't get very far before Mickey piped in.

"It's Clayton. And it's a long story how he ended up with that one. Family name, right Gallagher?" Mickey smiled slyly.

Ian smiled at that. Not only happy that Mickey remembered his middle name, but the clusterfuck of drama that came along with it. He was also glad Mickey decided not to divulge the reason he had his uncle's/father's name as his middle name. It was funny as an inside joke between them, but he didn't want to air his dirty laundry to these strangers.

"Yeah," he smiled. "Family name."

"Irish, huh?" Matt asked, "You ever wanna go?"

Before Ian could answer, there was a light knock on the door. The three other men in the room whipped their heads around in comical synchronization. Ian suppressed a chuckle.

"Uh, that's probably Trevor." Ian said, striding over the the door to open it.

"What? I thought he was just gonna call." Mickey said, sounding somewhat perturbed at the intrusion.

"Yeah, but he was in the hospital seeing another client, so...." Ian trailed off as he opened the door and stepped aside.

Mickey grumbled something under his breath, looking over at Jack, who looked a little confused and nervous. Matt, for his part, seemed pleased. He probably didn't want to waste any more time concerning his son's recovery.

Trevor walked into the room, making eye contact with Ian. It had been a long fucking time since they had seen each other. They were technically 'friends', but their relationship had been strained for a while. First the shit with Mickey, then Ian's relationship with Brian had pulled them so far apart,
they were now held together by the most tenuous thread.

"Hey Ian, how are you?" Trevor said lowly.

"I'm good, Trev, and you?" Ian replied. This was awkward. Great.

"Good, good, you know how it is. Busy." Trevor said. He put his hand up for Ian to shake. Ian took it, feeling even more strange. He's never shaken Trevor's hand before. It felt way too formal for who they were to each other. But a hug didn't feel appropriate either, so he took the proffered hand and shook it dumbly.

"Uh, Trevor, this is Jack, and his father Matt. I told you about him on the phone." Ian motioned over to them. Trevor took the few steps forward to introduce himself to the men, exchanging handshakes and pleasantries.

"And this," Ian cleared his throat. "This is Mickey." Ian looked over to Mickey, who was avidly avoiding Ian's eyes.

"Ah, the famous Mickey Milkovich. It's a pleasure to finally put a face to all the stories I've heard." Trevor laughed. It was a strained, bitter sound. He put his hand out to Mickey, like he had done with the other men in the room. "It's nice to finally meet you."

Mickey made a face, staring down at the hand in front of him. Ian had a split second's worth of panic, completely positive Mickey was going to knock Trevor the fuck out.

He didn't.

He grimaced, but took the hand in his own and shook it. "Yeah. Whatever. All that shit was probably a gross exaggeration on Gallagher's part. He has a tenancy to bend the truth."

Ian flushed hot at Mickey's comment. This was exactly the situation he was trying to avoid. God fucking damn it.

Trevor laughed awkwardly and retracted his hand. "Well, why don't we get to it, then? I work for an organization that helps at risk youths and young adults in the LGTBQI community get the resources and help they need."

Trevor droned on for a long while, Ian having a really hard time paying attention. He had a bad habit of zoning out when Trevor got into his "Social Justice Warrior" mode. It was cool that he was so passionate, but he often came off as patronizing and condescending when he was talking about this shit. So Ian usually blocked it out. Probably not a good thing.

He perked up and focused back on the conversation when he heard Mickey's voice for the first time since Trevor started talking.

"So, you really think you could get him into one of these places, the programs for fags?" Mickey asked. He was still sitting on the bed, his hand resting on Jack's knee. Ian bristled involuntarily again at their familiarity.

"For the fags?" Trevor balked. "What the fuck?" he looked over at Ian, flabbergasted. "Is this dude for real?"

Ian shrugged, doing his damnedest not to let the smile simmering under the surface break out on his face.
"What?" Mickey asked, standing up. He took the few step necessary to get right up in Trevor's face. "I upset your delicate sensibilities there, kid? Jack's a fag, I'm a fag, Ian over there is a fag." he waved his hand in Ian's general direction. "And you," he looked Trevor up and down, rubbing his upper lip with his thumb. "You get an honorable mention, at least." he shrugged at Trevor's infuriated face. "Nobody here is offended but you. The program is geared towards gay dudes, right? Faggots, homos, fairies. Pretty boys like us, yeah?" he wrapped his arm around Jack's shoulders, ruffling his hair with his free hand. "I just wanna make sure Jack's in the right spot to get better, around people that understand him. Not some meathead homophobic pricks that I'm gonna hafta stab if they fuck with him. You feel me?"

Ian was shocked. Mickey's language is what sent Trevor into a tailspin, the PC asshole he was, but what got Ian was the adoration weaved into all that cussing and derogatory language. Ian knew how to speak 'Milkovich' fluently, and what was hidden under all that seemingly brash, crude language, the message was clear: Mickey wanted to make sure Jack was in a safe space, a place where he would be accepted, and no one would give him shit for being gay.

Mickey was trying to protect him.

"You are incredibly rude." Trevor spat.

"And you're an insufferable asshole. Are we just gonna sit around all day stating facts, or are we gonna talk about getting Jack a bed?"

Ian sighed, tipping his head against the wall he was still leaning on. This is going about as well as he could have hoped, actually. No blood had been spilled. Yet.

At that moment, Matt stood up from his chair, putting a hand on Mickey's shoulder. "I appreciate you looking out for our boy, Mick. It's very kind of you. Let's see what this kid has to say, and we'll go from there, okay?"

Ian was surprised, watching all the anger drain out of Mickey at the older man's gentle touch. Mickey closed his eyes tight and nodded once, walking away from Trevor without another word and sitting back on the bed next to Jack.

Trevor cleared his throat, chancing a look at Ian, who shrugged slightly, his shoulders sliding against the wall awkwardly.

"As I was saying." Trevor grit out, glaring at Mickey, who just smiled at him sickly sweet. "There are a few programs that cater to gay men in Chicago, but I was thinking of one in particular that I think Jack may fit well in, considering the limited history Ian has given me." he took out his phone, fiddling with the touch screen for a moment before handing it over to Matt.

"Victory House?" Matt asked, looking at the website on the small phone screen.

"Yeah, it's on the north side. North Glenwood Avenue. You familiar with the area?"

Matt and Jack both nodded. Ian knew the area too. It was near the water, but not right on it. A suburban neighborhood, away from the hustle and bustle of the city.

"It's got six bedrooms, three bathrooms, big kitchen, big yard with a fire pit. It's nice. The guy who runs it is a friend of mine who owes me a favor." Trevor eyed Ian as he was speaking. "It's as gay friendly a house as you're going to find in Chicago. All the men in the house are gay or trans. The recovery there is good, they have a decent success record, less relapses than other houses in the city. It's a good program." Trevor ran a hand through his curly hair and looked over at Jack. "Does that
sound like something you'd be interested in?"

"Uh, yeah, sounds good." Jack mumbled, looking over at Mickey, who nodded minutely.

"How much is that going to run us?" Matt asked. He didn't sound like it would be a problem either way, just curiosity in his tone.

"Oh, nothing." Trevor replied easily. "The state pays for this rehab." he looked over to where Matt was seated next to his son's bed. "But a donation to the foundation that runs the house would be appreciated, of course."

"Well, that's amazing, isn't it?" Matt replied happily. "I'll be happy to write a check, just send me the information. Here, give me your number and you can just text it to me, yeah?"

Ian was shocked, to say the least, at how easily the conversation had gone. When he had the idea to ask Trevor to help Jack, he thought either Mickey or Jack or both would have shut it down immediately. But it looks like Ian misjudged them, and Jack's desire to get better.

He had never been happier to be wrong in his life.

He wanted this for Jack, and for Mickey. He wanted to be able to help. And he was glad that it all seemed to be falling into place.

The three men talked for a bit longer, about the house and recovery in general. Ian wasn't really paying attention. He was staring out the window, thinking.

What in the actual fuck was he doing?

He was floundering to find himself after his disastrous break up with Brian. It had only been a little over a week, but he feels off in a way that makes him nervous. Not bipolar, just lost, like he has no idea what he's supposed to do now. He knows Mandy's looking into getting them that place in Boystown, and that will be a good start for Ian to get his life back, but there is more to it than that.

Ian is not stupid, he is not in denial.

It's Mickey.

Mickey is the thing that feels so off.

But what about him? What does Ian even want from Mickey?

Ian knows now what he's been avoiding for the past three years. He still loves Mickey. He still wants Mickey.

But he's not ready for another relationship. Not after what Brian did to him, what he put him through. He still hasn't even talked to Caroline about what happened the night of their break up. Ian's been too distracted with this Mickey shit, and now with Jack and Trevor. But he knows he has to talk to her soon, or all this pent up pain and anxiety will manifest as his disorder, and the delicate balance he's achieved will go to shit.

So no, he's not ready for another relationship, with Mickey or anyone else. He needs to focus on himself.

And Ian's almost positive Mickey's not ready to let him back into his life like that anyway. Understandable. Ian really fucked Mickey over, even if he hadn't meant to, even if he never wanted to. He led Mickey on, let him believe he was going to follow him to Mexico, even though he knew
all along he wasn't going to go.

He was just selfishly trying to suck up any and all final moments he could get with him, positive at the time that they'd never see each other again after the border.

And now here he was, staring at Mickey again, in the flesh, wondering how he ever let him go, how he ever walked away from him.
Mickey was never perfect, but he was perfect for Ian. He'd never felt this way about anyone else. And fuck knows he tried. I just didn't work that way. Mickey understood him better than anyone, never read his mood wrong or assumed the worst. He was supportive and kind and never pushed him to do anything except get his bipolar under control. And even then, he never forced Ian to do anything. He loved him through all his ups and downs. Literally.

But none of that cheesy, romance novel, 'soulmates' bullshit makes a lick of difference right now. Neither of them were ready to go there. If they ever were going to be again, Ian didn't know.
All he knew is the thought of life without Mickey in it had no meaning to Ian any longer. He just had to be near him.
That would have to be enough for now.

Ian was roused out of his revelry by a knock on the door. His head shot up as a young doctor walked in. He was short, but handsome. Dark hair and caramel colored skin. He reminded Ian of Javier.

Damn it.

Everywhere he looks these days he's seeing guys Mickey fucks.

Shit.

Trevor pushed himself away from the wall as the doctor made his way into the room. "I'm gonna leave you guys to it, then. I'll be in touch." he shook Matt's hand and gave Ian a curt nod. "I'll see you around, Ian."

"Yeah." Ian said, waving a little. "See ya."

Trevor waved back, shooting one more glare in Mickey's general direction, before opening the door and disappearing down the hall.

"Hello gentlemen, my name is Dr. Martiez, I was the attending physician when Jackson was admitted last night."

Matt stood immediatly and shook the doctors hand. "Hello, I'm Matt Cauldwell, Jackson's father. I can't thank you enough for saving my son's life." he vigorously shook the doctor's hand, nodding his head dumbly.

"Well, we did the best we could to stabilize Jack once he got here, but it was really all Ian." the doctor said, giving Ian a bright smile.

Ian knew Martinez had a crush on him. He hit on Ian any time he came into the hospital. It had never gone beyond casual flirting, but Ian couldn't help but feel like this was the worst timing possible. "He's quite impressive, we are lucky to have him." the doctor said, smiling still.

"Thanks Sam." Ian said lowly. He could see Mickey staring at them out of the corner of his eye, but didn't dare look over at him.

"Anyway, Jackson was in dire condition when he came in, due to acute opiate intoxication. Low
respiration and low heart rate were our key concerns, but due to Ian's quick thinking with the narcan, he was stable and out of the woods in enough time to avoid any permanent brain damage or other life threatening effects." he looked down at his notes and looked back up at Jack. "But you should know, once you've overdosed once, it makes you more susceptible to them in the future. Your tolerance for narcotics has gone down, and your heart muscle is weaker now. Do you understand what I mean? You can overdose again, with an even smaller amount of narcotics. You can accidentally kill yourself with a dosage you used to be able to handle."

Jack nodded, fiddling with his sheets.

"And you have no idea what kind of drugs you are really getting from these street dealers, there are strains of heroin going around now that are purely synthetic, and a tenth of a regular dose is killing people left and right. We had two overdose deaths here just last week. Do you understand me, Jackson?" the doctor looked down to make eye contact with Jack, who gave him a curt nod.

"Very well then. I hear from your nurse Tamara that you have decided on an aftercare plan? Going into treatment?"

"Uh, yeah." Jack replied, looking over to Mickey, who just nodded, slipping his hand over Jack's intertwined ones in his lap. "I guess I'm gonna have to."

"That's wonderful, Jackson, I'm very happy to hear you are going to take this accident as an opportunity to help yourself. Only you can do it, no one else can get you clean." Martinez was laying it on thick, and Ian fought an eye roll. He was a good doctor, but kind of a pretentious ass.

"Okay, well, Tamara can get your paperwork together and you can be discharged. Good luck, Jackson." the doctor shook Jack's hand once more. "It was nice to see you Ian." he smiled wide, perfect white teeth in stark contrast to his caramel colored skin.

"Yeah, Sam, you too." Ian waved awkwardly as the doctor left the room.

Once the doctor left the room, Matt stands and runs a hand over his head. "Well, that's that then, isn't it? You going back to your apartment?" he looks over at his son, who nods, throwing the sheet back and putting his bare feet on the floor. Jack stands also, taking a canvas bag off the floor.

"These my clothes?" he asks his father, who nods in response.

Ian remembers quite clearly what Jack was wearing when he arrived as his apartment last night.

Boxers. Jack had almost died in his underwear.

"I just grabbed some stuff you had laying around our house, didn't want to go to your apartment, wasn't sure what I'd find there." Matt's not looking at Jack as he speaks, but Jack's not looking at him either. Ian can feel the weight of the unsaid words.

'I don't want to see the evidence of your addiction."
'I can't handle the physical proof that you almost died."

"Thanks Dad." Jack mumbles. He looks over at Mickey then, an expression on his face Ian can't read. "You coming home with me, or are you gonna...." he jerks his head in Ian's direction.

Mickey seems to startle at the implication.

"Hello no, I'm going home with you." he says simple. "Told you I would, didn't I?" he almost seems hurt by the assumption that he would choose Ian over Jack.
Ian winces slightly. It wouldn't have been so strange before. Mickey chose Ian over everyone.

Ian keeps having to remind himself, that this isn't that Mickey anymore. Just like he's not that Ian anymore. So much shit is different now.

Ian shakes his head slightly. Here he was all day, thinking he and Mickey could start over, make amends, move forward.

But seeing the look on Mickey's face, he can see what the other man thinks of the idea. Mickey thinks it's going backwards. And he doesn't want to do that. Mickey wants to move on. Ian can see it in his eyes. He feels stupid. For coming here today. For inserting himself into Mickey's life. For thinking he could fix this, make it better. He's an idiot.

Ian pushes off from the wall abruptly. He runs a shaky hand through his hair and rolls his shoulders. The other men in the room look over at him. Mickey looks at him like he's just remembering he's there at all. Ian feels dizzy, like he's about to have a panic attack.

He doesn't belong here.

"I, uh, gotta go." he stammers, making his way toward the door.

"What?" Mickey asks, standing from the bed, like he's going to go to Ian, but Jack reaches out and puts a hand on his arm, instantly stopping Mickey's forward motion.

Mickey doesn't shake him off.

That makes Ian feel even worse.

"I gotta go." Ian repeats.

"We're all going. Let me drop you at home." Matt says, shrugging his own jacket on.

Jack is in the corner of the room now, shamelessly changing out of his hospital gown in front of everyone. It makes Ian feel like a voyeur, watching Jack strip down in front of him. It increases his panic exponentially.

He doesn't belong here.

"No, that's fine. Thanks." Ian says quickly.

Mickey's full on staring at him now, mouth slightly open, like he wants to say something but doesn't know what.

"I'm glad you're going to be okay." he mumbles to Jack on his way out the door.

"Gallagher." Mickey says, standing up and taking two steps toward Ian, who's hovering by the door, one hand on the knob.

Ian looks over at him, but Mickey doesn't say anything.

Mickey looks confused, and a little hurt. But Ian doesn't see any of that in the moment. All he sees is
Mickey and this kid, and he feels like if he has to watch any more right now, he's going to burst into tears.

Ian gives Mickey a brittle smile, and walks out without another word.

As he's descending to the ground floor in the elevator, his mind is spinning.

What the hell is he doing?

What does he even want from Mickey? What does he really expect?

Yes, he realizes now that he still loves him, but does that even matter anymore?

They are both so different right now, and even though Ian can still feel that soul crushing pull to the other man, he's not sure if you can make something new with someone so tied to your past.

He hits the ground floor and starts running. Out of the lobby and onto the street. He runs and runs until his lungs burn and his legs are screaming. He doesn't realize he's crying until he stops at a crosswalk to let a bus pass and feels the cold wetness on his face.

What the fuck is he doing?
It had been two weeks since Jack's overdose. And Mickey was starting to get anxious. He hadn't heard a word from Ian since he fucked off from the hospital, and it was weird.

Ian had told Mickey that he wanted to try to be friends. He had said he wanted to help Jack. He had said he was sorry and he wanted to make it better. But he freaked out, for whatever fucking reason, and ghosted again. Like he always does.

Mickey feels like and idiot for even entertaining the idea that Ian would really stick around. Mickey should know better by now.

Mickey shakes his head to rid himself of his spiraling thoughts. He can't afford to be distracted while he's using fucking power tools.

It's quiet in the house. He's out in the sticks today. Well, at least to Mickey it feels like the sticks. He's about an hour and a half outside of Chicago, in Buffalo Grove (what kind of name is that for a town, anyway?) The house is huge. Six bedrooms, six bathrooms, a gym, game room, huge back yard, with a fucking tennis court of all things. The kind of place Mickey would rob in a heartbeat back in the day. He's there with Matt and Benji, another contractor, working on the floor in one of the three living rooms. Mickey balks at this kind of money. Why the fuck do you need more than one living room? How much living are you really doing? But whatever, he's getting paid, so he keeps his opinions to himself.

He's using the giant floor nailer to affix some dark wood boards over the sub floor. He's sweating and grunting and he's so fucking tired. He just wants to go home.

Matt swears and drops the board he was holding. "God fucking damn it!" he yells, cradling his right hand in his left. "I thought this fucking exotic shit didn't have splinters." he grumbles.

"Just cuz it's expensive doesn't mean it's not wood, dumbass." Mickey laughs.

"It's Macassar Ebony." Benji interjects from his spot on the opposite end of the room. "From Southeast Asia. Shit's like fifty bucks a board foot." he shakes his head in disgust. "Fucking waste of money."

Mickey nods in agreement. He can't wrap his head around spending that much money for something you're going to fucking walk on.

"Whatever." Matt shrugs. "I'm going to grab the first aid kit outta my truck and try to dig this hundred dollar splinter outta my finger. You guys get your shit together, we're calling it a day. Gotta get home to Lexi before she puts out a BOLO on my ass." he chuckles at his own joke, walking out of the giant room and back toward the front of the house.

Benji immediately drops his hammer and goes about cleaning up his extensive mess. Mickey is doing the same when his phone goes off in his pocket. He grumbles to himself, placing the floor nailer back in it's case before reaching into his pants pocket to grab his phone.

He wants it to be Ian. Like a bitch, he's been waiting and hoping, to no avail. Waiting for Ian to explain why he ran again. Why he took off with no explanation, no reasoning. Like he's done so many times before.
This time is no different.

It's Jack.

Mickey feels like a dick when disappointment wells up inside him. He shoves it back down, chiding himself for being stupid, yet again.

He swipes a dirty finger across the touch screen, leaving a greasy smudge in his finger's wake.

"Hello." he puts the phone to his ear, waiting for Jack to respond.

"Hey Mick. You still working?" Jack replies.

"Yeah. We're just finishing up actually. I'll be back in the city by about six. Why, what's up?"

"I was just thinking we could go out tonight? I mean, it's Friday. And I've been hold up in this fucking house all week. I'm crawling up the walls, man."

Mickey sighs, running a hand down his face. He doesn't want to go out. He wants to sit on the couch and drink some beers, watch some fucking TV.

But he knows Jack probably needs this. He's been trying really hard to not get high. He's cut down a lot, as far as Mickey can tell. He hasn't gone cold turkey, too afraid of the withdrawals. The pain and the sickness. But he's trying his best. And Mickey thinks he deserves a reward for that shit.

"Sure, Jack. Sounds good. I'll be back at the apartment in an hour and a half, but you gotta let me shower and shit first. I ain't going out smelling like fucking sawdust."

Jack huffed a laugh over the phone. "Awesome sauce, Mick." he was quiet for a beat. "And thanks."

"Don't thank me yet, asshole. You're buying." Mickey laughs before hanging up.

He was going out tonight. And he was gonna drink for free.

-------------------------------------------------

Ian doesn't know why he does this to himself.

Why he puts himself through this shit.

It's been two weeks since he helped Jack with the rehab thing.

Two weeks since he stormed out of the hospital like a fourteen year old girl that didn't get asked to the Valentines Dance by her crush. Two weeks of radio silence from Mickey, even though Ian is pretty sure it's on him to make the first move, after his epically stupid hissy fit.

But he's petrified. Scared to death that Mickey will tell him to go fuck himself. Tell him that he's going to try and make something work with his junkie boy toy instead of giving Ian another chance. Worried that he's fucked up one too many times.

Even though Ian is certain he's not ready to date. Anyone. Even Mickey, who he's loved since he was 14 fucking years old.

Shit with Brian really fucked him up. He still hasn't told Caroline what happened. He's seen her once since the incident, and he clammed up. He wanted to tell her, but the shame and sadness mixed in with the guilt and disgust kept him quiet.
He knew he had to tell her at some point, if he wanted to protect his stability. He has an appointment on Tuesday. He has five days to prepare himself to open up and put it all out there. Even if it's only to his shrink for now, it still scares him a bit to be that vulnerable. To own his mistakes and really talk about the abuse he suffered at Brian's hands. But he knows he has to do it, he can feel the anxiety building inside him, bubbling under the surface, and if he doesn't get this shit out now, he's going to explode, decimate all the things he has been painstakingly rebuilding since he walked out of Brian's apartment.

He's come a long way in the past few years, and he won't let a slip (that huge, life altering, earth shattering slip) fuck up all his progress.

Shit's going to be different this time.
He's going to be different this time.

And Ian supposes that shit starts with honesty. Being honest to Caroline about what happened to him. Being honest with his family, at some point, about the gritty details about what he's been through. He's never really done that with them. Told them about his life, what he's endured, or what he's done to others. He keeps most of his shit locked away in his head. Never really trusting anyone enough to let his walls come down.

But he needs to. Nothing good has ever come from him keeping his secrets. When he was younger, it felt so amazing, doing things nobody else knew about. Fucking nameless men in clubs or high end hotels. Screwing the high school's best running back in the locker room after track practice. Nobody knew. Nobody knew Ian could make these strong, virile, masculine dudes beg and keen like bitches in heat.

It was a heady power trip.

But now, looking back at it all, none of it was real. The power. The mystery. The intrigue.
It was all lies.

Those men were using Ian. None of them ever gave a shit about him or what he wanted. He was a means to an end. A fuck toy.

There's no power in that.

And the lies and dishonesty really took a toll on Ian. The sneaking around, the hiding from wives, the alibis and cover stories he could never keep straight.
It was exhausting.

So Ian's going to do his best to be as honest as possible from now on. With Caroline, with his family, with Mandy and Mick. And Trevor.

Trevor deserves the truth, which Ian never really gave him all those years back when they broke up. So that's how he ended up here, at The Chicago Diner, on North Halstead, sitting across from Trevor, picking at his veggie burger, watching Trevor shovel his pad thai salad into his mouth, dressing dripping down his chin. In another life, Ian probably would have thought that was cute, but now he's just embarrassed for him.

"You, uh, got some...." he trails off, pointing at his own face.

"Shit." Trevor says, wiping at his mouth with his free hand. "Did I get it?"

"Yeah. You did." Ian says. He grabs his burger and takes a bite. He is pissed at himself for letting
Trevor convince him to meet up at a vegan restaurant. It's not that he hates vegan food, but he would really like some actual meat in his meal.

But he's trying to make nice with Trevor, so he keeps his mouth shut and shovels some sweet potato fries into his mouth. Those are tasty, at least.

"So, I got the call today. Jack will have a bed at Victory House by beginning of next week." Trevor says, stabbing a piece of tofu with his fork. "I tried to call Jack, but he didn't pick up. You think he's gonna flake? Cuz I had to call in some huge favors to get him that bed." Trevor looked over at Ian, eyes hard.

"No, Trevor, I do not think he's going to flake. I hope he's serious about getting clean. It's really sad, seeing him struggle like that." Ian says, surprising himself with his honesty.

Trevor looks equally shocked. "Can I ask, why the fuck do you care if this kid gets clean or not? I mean, isn't it weird for you to be helping your ex-boyfriend's new boyfriend? Or is that the angle you're working? You wanna be the hero, so you can swoop in at the perfect moment and steal him back?"

Ian gaped at Trevor. So this is how it's gonna be.

"No, Trev. Is that what you think of me? Really? That I can only do something nice when I have something to gain from it?"

"I don't know you at all, Ian. I don't know if I ever really did. Did you ever even like me? Or was I just some rebound to help you get over that trashy prick? What did you ever even see in him anyway? He's rude and crass and so fucking mean. Jesus."

Ian shook his head, resisting the urge to defend Mickey. It's the last thing Trevor wants to hear right now. Or ever, really.

"Trevor." Ian sighs, picking up his water and taking a long sip. "I know that you blame Mickey for our breakup. I get it. It is easier to blame Mickey for all the shit that went down back then. But if we're going to be honest here, and try to work through this shit to maybe be friends again, you have to know that it was all on me." He put his water down and picked up another fry, stuffing it into his mouth while he mulled over what he wanted to say.

"I didn't have to go when Mickey called. I went because I wanted to. I lied because I wanted to. I was being selfish. I do that a lot. It was wrong of me to lie to you, and it was wrong of me to lie to Mickey. I was not a victim in my relationship with him. I never did anything I didn't want to. And I'm sorry. You didn't deserve it, and neither did he."

"Why are you defending him right now?" Trevor spat. "He's not a good guy, Ian. He hasn't done a single good thing in his entire life. The only reason he's not in jail right now is a legal technicality. He'll probably be back in prison before Christmas. And why the fuck does what he do matter to you anyway? You pining away like a bitch over your ex, when's he's obviously sticking his dick in that junkie. You're pathetic, you know that, right?"

Ian stared at Trevor, shocked at his vicious tone. He took a moment to collect himself, not wanting to add any fuel to the fire.

"Trevor, what are you trying to do right now? Do you want to fight? I know you don't like Mickey, and I understand why, but do you have to talk shit about him every chance you get? It's not cool, I'd appreciate it if you'd stop." he looked over at Trevor, who was obviously still irate. "Mickey and I
have been through things together that you could never understand. I'm not doing all this shit for Jack to get Mickey back. I'm doing it because it's the right thing to do. I'm doing it because I love him and I want to help him in any way I can. It doesn't matter if we never get back together again. I would do anything for him. It's just the way it is. The way it's always been. I just forgot that fact for a little while."

"You have got to be fucking kidding me right now. What the fuck do you think this is, a Lifetime movie? You think that asshole gives a shit about you? You really are crazy. He's USING you, like he always does. How do you not see that shit?" Trevor let his fork fall to his plate with a loud clang. "I really thought when we met up here tonight you would apologize, for shitting all over me, cheating on me, ruining the relationship we were building together. I did this favor for you because I thought it meant we were gonna work on getting back together, but you are just using me, like that dick is using you. It's a vicious cycle with you south side assholes. You deserve each other." he went to stand, but Ian grabbed his wrist. He cringed at how easily Trevor accused him of being crazy, but he tried to let it go. He probably didn't even think about what he was really saying.

"Trevor, I don't want to date Mickey. I don't want to date anyone right now, I can't. I've got a lot of personal shit going on right now, and I have to focus on me. I thought maybe we could be friends again, you know. I could use one right now."

Trevor looked down at Ian like he had just grown a second head. "Ian, I don't want to be your friend. Unlike you, I have plenty of friends. And you are too much work. If we're not going to fuck, it's not worth the effort. I thought you knew that. It was never about being friends. Good luck with whatever 'personal shit' you are going through. (he had the audacity to use air quotes when he said that.) But you've always got some crisis going on, don't you? I'll call Matt and let him know about the bed. Don't call me again unless it's about Jack or Victory House. Good luck with your ex."

And with that Trevor grabbed his coat off the back of the chair, storming out onto the street, leaving Ian with a huge headache, and a fifty five dollar check to settle on his own.

He sighed, leaning forward in his chair to grab his wallet out of his back pocket.

This wasn't how he expected this conversation to go. He didn't know Trevor was still so bitter after all this time. He'd said some really hurtful things, twisting the knife as hard as he could.

Ian had hoped they could be friends. He wasn't lying when he said he needed that. But it seems Trevor didn't want that at all. It made Ian feel cheap. Reduced to his body and what it could do for others. He hated that feeling.

Trevor knew that. Dick.

Fine. Okay. Ian shook it off as best he could.

He tried. He tried to make amends with Trevor, to explain himself, to start over.

But sometimes, that shit just isn't in the cards.

He left a fifty and a ten on the table and headed out onto the street.

That was the most expensive argument he'd ever had....

-------------
Mickey and Jack walked into the bar around 7:30. Mickey had taken his time getting ready. He took a long, hot shower, slowly washing the day off him, mulling over what he had planned to say to Jack.

Jack was curious about what was going on with Ian. He'd asked Mickey a few times since the hospital incident, and Mickey had blown him off. Mickey wasn't sure why Jack needed to know, but he thinks he owes it to him, since they are best friends and all. And with all the shit Ian's done to help Jack, Mickey thinks it only fair that Jack knows why.

They wander into the Green Door Tavern, a place Mickey's never been but Jack swears by. They are seated in the back and a waitress brings them two beers. Mickey orders a bourbon bacon burger, Jack gets a buffalo chicken sandwich. They are drinking their beers, waiting for their food silently. Mickey's eyes travel down Jack's arms. He's been wearing long sleeves lately. It's finally summer proper now, the June sun setting in the window at the front of the restaurant. Mickey knows why Jack's wearing long sleeves, there scabby track marks barely visible on his wrist as he wraps a hand around his beer. Mickey looks away.

He knew Jack wouldn't be able to get clean on his own. He knew he'd have to keep using until he got into that house. But it didn't mean Mickey had to like it. He was worried about Jack, so afraid of a repeat of that horrific night. He just wanted Jack better. Now.

But he couldn't do shit. He just had to sit on his ass and wait for Ian's asshole ex to save the day. Just the idea of it made him sick.

Jack waved a hand in front of his face. "Hello?"

"I asked if you talked to Ian lately? I haven't heard you utter his name in days. Usually you can't shut up. 'Ian hates this show.' or 'Ian has that hoodie, looks hot on him.'" Jack laughed.

"Shut the fuck up, I don't do that." Mickey grumbled. "Besides man, he obviously doesn't want shit to do with me. Haven't heard a word from him since he flipped the fuck out the day you got released."

"You ever stop to think why that is? Why he freaked out like that?" Jack asked, just as the waitress came over with their food. Jack gave her a stunning smile and he pulled his plate a little closer. She blushed bright pink, all the way up to her hair, before shuffling away awkwardly.

"Why do you do that? Hit on chicks like that? Getting their hopes up and shit."

"Being nice doesn't always equal hitting on people, Mick." Jack laughed. "And don't change the subject. Why do you think Ian freaked out that day, what do you remember?"

Mickey picked up his burger, going over the afternoon in his mind, scouring his memory for any clues. When he comes up empty, he shrugs, looking over at Jack.

"He thinks you picked me over him, Mickey." Jack sighs, obviously hoping Mickey would have picked it up on his own. "I asked if you were going to come home with me, or going with Ian, and you picked me. You didn't see the look on his face. He felt out of place, maybe even unwanted. He thinks you want me. He thinks you want to be with me."

"Ian doesn't want me like that anymore." Mickey mumbles, instantly uncomfortable with the sharp
"I don't know if you're right or not, and that's not really what I'm talking about anyway. I don't think it matters if we are dating or just fucking or just friends. Ian thinks you chose me over him, as a person you want to spend time with. It's probably strange for him, to see you so happy, with friends and all that shit. From what you told me about before prison, it was just the two of you for a long fucking time. He probably built it up in his head that you and him were unbreakable, even if you weren't together. And that idea was crumbling before his eyes. I can see why he lost his shit a little bit. And the shittiest part is, you guys could get past all this shit, if you would nut the fuck up and talk to each other. But you're both too stubborn and scared to take that first step. So now you're stuck." Jack took a long sip of his beer, put the glass down on the table and reached over to pat Mickey's hand, which was laying limp next to his fork, his food untouched. "You're gonna have to be the bigger man, which is ironic, I know, cuz that ginger fuck is huge."

Mickey barked out a laugh. He couldn't help himself. Jack always knew what to say to make him smile. He finally grabbed his burger, tearing into it with his teeth. Delicious. They ate in silence for a few minutes, save for Jack's pornographic moans as he devoured his meal. Mickey shook his head fondly. That kid was an idiot.

"But seriously Mick, you gotta tell him how you feel, if you wanna have any kind of real relationship with him at all." Jack finally spoke.

"I know. I'm just trying to figure out how to go about it. He seems off, and I don't wanna trigger him, you know. Don't wanna fuck up his bipolar."

"I get it. I don't know shit about it, but I get it. But YOU are my friend, Mick, and I gotta look out for you, just like you're trying to look out for him." Jack smiled.

"Yeah, okay, man. I'll work on it. I know it's gotta happen sooner or later." Mickey shoveled the last of his food into his mouth, grabbing his napkin and wiping his mouth. "But fuck all this girly bullshit right now. Pay the bill, let's get outta here. Wanna get home so you can suck my dick." he guzzled the last of his beer and stood up from the table, leaving a smirking Jack in his wake.

"Oh baby, talk dirty to me." he muttered under his breath, leaving some cash on the table and following his friend out into the warm Chicago night.

--------------------

Ian is sitting on the couch in the Milkovich house, watching some car show on the history channel. He doesn't even like these shows, but the remote is missing, and he's too lazy to get up and look for it. His lunch with Trevor earlier in the day still has him in a funk he just can't shake. He feels emotionally drained and so fucking tired.

His head lolls to the side as the front door opens. Iggy walks in, shrugging off his zip up hoodie and hanging it on a hook by the door. He looks over at Ian. "Hey." he says.

"Hey Iggy." Ian mumbles. He hasn't really spoken to Iggy all that much since he's moved in. That one joint he left Ian a while ago did a bit to assuage the tension between them, but they still haven't had an actual conversation, just the two of them, without Mandy or Tessa as a buffer.

Iggy went to the fridge and got a beer. "You want one?" he called out.
Ian knows he probably shouldn't drink. He defiantly shouldn't drink.

But fuck it. "Yeah." he calls back.

He's had a shitty day, he deserves to unwind a bit.

"What's up with you, Ginger? You're acting more morose than usual." Iggy said, handing Ian his beer and sitting down next to him. "What the fuck!" he yelps, reaching behind him and pulling the remote out from behind his ass.

"Jesus fuck, seriously? I've been watching Counting Cars for two hours, and that shit was right there this whole time?" Ian grumbled, grabbing the remote from Iggy's hands. "And how the fuck do you know the proper use of the word 'morose' Igg?"

"Tessa's a good teacher. You saying I'm stupid? Fuck you, bro." Iggy said, shoving Ian playfully.

Ian shoved him back, smiling. He changed the channel to some old gangster movie, much more to Ian's liking. He took a sip of his beer, settling back into the couch more comfortably.

"Where are Mandy and Tess?" Ian asked, not taking his eyes off the television.

"They went to a movie. Some fucking chick flick. I'd rather gouge my own eyeballs out with a grapefruit spoon." Iggy made a disgusted face. Ian laughed.

He forgot how funny Iggy is.

He missed him while he was off living his Milkovich-free existence.

Not that is was much of an existence, looking back.

Once he left Mickey at the border, his whole life going forward was black and white. But now that Ian's back in the mix, Milkovichs every where he turns, everything is in technicolor again.

And it's fucking glorious.

He's basking in his happy thoughts, drinking silently with Iggy for a few minutes, until the other man breaks the silence.

"So, how do you plan on fixing it, dude?" Iggy asks, not bothering to look over at Ian. His eyes still fixed on the men on the TV screen begging for their lives.

Ian looked over, startled. "Fixing what?" he asked, confused.

"Shit with Mick, you idiot. Try and keep up." Iggy replied. "Do you think I don't see it? It's been a while since you mentioned him, but you stiffen up any time his name comes up, you make excuses to disappear when he comes around. You are avoiding him. Again. Even after I heard you telling Mandy you were gonna fix shit with him. You really that much of a pussy?" Iggy didn't sound angry or upset, just curious.

Ian was in shock. How the fuck did he end up in a heart to heart about Mickey with Iggy of all fucking people? He's not really known for his sage advice or deep thoughts. But Iggy's always been undercover smart. He notices shit, he takes it all in. Just because he doesn't usually comment on it doesn't mean he's ignorant to it.

Ian sighed. He wasn't sure how deep he wanted to get into his shit with Iggy, but he deserved some kind of answer.
"I wanna fix it, Igg. I really do. But I'm kinda fucked up myself right now, and I don't wanna make shit worse, or push him farther away. I don't want to fuck it up any more than I already have." he put his beer bottle to his lips and took a long pull. "I want to do it right for once."

"Well, that's cool and all, dude. But I don't know how long you expect him to wait. You know what I mean?" Iggy asked.

"He told me that shit with Jack isn't like that. That they're not dating." Ian answered, confused.

"Sure, whatever, but Jack's not the only swinging dick in Chicago, bro. You think Mick's gonna sit around knitting sweaters and shit til you feel like setting shit right?" Iggy fixed Ian with a pointed look while he took a long pull off his beer, pulling a joint out of his shirt pocket. He's right, of course. Ian shouldn't expect Mickey to put his life on hold while he gets his shit together.

"Alright, that was enough real talk for like a month. Wanna get high?" he wiggled the joint right under Ian's nose. Ian snorted a laugh.

"Yeah dude. Thanks." Ian smiled.

"You're a good dude, Ian. I can see why Mick's been so hung up on your Irish ass for all these years. Not that I'd ever suck your dick, but I get it, you know." he made a sweeping motion up and down Ian's body with his free hand.

"Oh fuck off, Igg." Ian laughed. He grabbed the joint out of his hand and a lighter off the table. He lit the joint and took a long drag off it. He felt the smoke settle in his lungs, spreading a calm warmth through his chest and down his extremities. He exhaled long, blowing smoke out toward the living room ceiling. He handed the joint back to Iggy, who took his own long drag before speaking again.

"I think you guys could be really happy, you know."

Ian nodded, he thought so too, once upon a time. He didn't know if that was the case any more, but he wanted to believe Iggy. He really wanted to.

"But if you pull any of that shit ever again, hurt him like that, I'll cut your fingers off and feed 'em to you. I'll kill you slow, Ian, and then I'll bury your body down by the river. Okay?" Iggy face held no hint of amusement, no glimmer of humor in his tone.

Ian blanched, all the blood draining from his face. "Yeah, Iggy, okay." he whispered.

"Good." Iggy smiled. He clapped his hand down on Ian's shoulder hard. "It's good to have you back, Gallagher." he smiled wide, like he just hadn't threatened to torture and murder Ian moments ago.

But that's just how the Milkovichs were. Fiercely loyal and protective. You were in the circle or you were out.

And Ian has a feeling, after this conversation, that he's well on his way back inside the circle. It's a good feeling.

"This is so not how the mafia kills people. Gallagher, are you seeing this shit?" Iggy laughs. Ian just smiles.
"I vaguely recall you saying something about sucking my dick." Mickey said, stretching out on the couch while Jack retrieved two beers from the fridge. He walked around the couch and flopped down next to Mickey.

"That's not the way I remember it, Mick." Jack laughed.

"Semantics, kid." Mickey laughs, taking the beer from Jack. He takes a long sip, sighing in relief as the alcohol flows through his system.

It's much later in the evening now. The full moon is shining through the huge windows, illuminating the space. One of the million Alien movies is playing on the flat screen.

"Did you think about what we talked about earlier? With Ian? You gonna make a move or what? I can't watch you guys flounder anymore. That shit is painful."

"You really wanna talk about this shit right now?" Mickey groused. He had had enough talking for one night.

He'd call Ian when he felt like it. Or maybe he'd wait for the prick to call him. He wasn't in any kind of rush to put himself out there again. He'd had his heart stomped on by Gallagher enough times, he's sees no need in expediting the process if he's only gonna get destroyed again. Maybe he's being a pussy, but so fucking what? He's had to be strong and tough his whole life, and he's tired. He just wants to forget it all for a while. He thinks he's allowed that, after everything Ian's put him through. After everything they've been through together, he's allowed to be scared.

"It's okay, Mick. I didn't mean to upset you. Just wanna see you happy." Jack said, scooting closer to him. Mickey smiled, grabbing his beer again and finishing half of it in one sip.

"Wanna see me happy, do something about this." he grabbed Jack's free hand and placed it over his crotch.

Jack groaned low in his throat, instantly hot all over. "Fuck, Mick. Always changing the subject." he laughed. He took Mickey's beer as well as his own and put them on the coffee table. Then he turned and crawled up into Mickey lap, straddling him, one leg on either side of his thighs. "Tell me what you want." he murmured, his mouth right next to Mickey's ear. Mickey sighed, tilting his head to the side so Jack could run his tongue along the tendons of his neck.

"Already told you, asshole. Wanna get my dick sucked." he groaned as Jack ground his ass down on Mickey's now fully hard dick.

"Yeah? You want me to put my mouth on you?" Jack asked innocently. He pulled his head out of the crook of Mickey's neck and gazed into his hooded blue eyes. "You wanna choke me with that huge cock, baby?"

Mickey rolled his eyes at Jack's dirty talk, a bit chagrined with himself that it was working. He was getting hornier by the second. He surged forward and kissed Jack hard, his tongue working against Jack's almost violently. Jack gasped into his mouth as Mickey thrust up, desperate for some friction. The kissed hard for a few minutes, biting and sucking each other's lips until they were swollen. Mickey thought he could taste blood.

Why does that turn him on even more?

Finally, Jack pulls away. Mickey chases him, not ready to give up the make out session just yet.

"Patience, Mick, I'm gonna take care of you." Jack giggles. He stands up and pulls his shirt over his head, then leans over to rid Mickey of his. "Pants too, tough guy." Jack says as he strips down.
Mickey makes quick work of getting rid of his clothes, and soon he's sitting down on the couch again, naked, stroking his achingly hard cock while he watches Jack get on his knees in front of him.

"You look good on your knees for me," the words slip out of Mickey's mouth unbidden. He wasn't even aware he said them until Jack mewed out an inhumane noise, his own hand replacing Mickey's, grabbing his dick and pulling it roughly.

"I like being on my knees for you," he replies letting go of Mickey's cock. It falls back against his stomach with a wet thud. "Sit back a bit."

Mickey does as he's told. He sits back against the cushions, spreading his legs.

Jack crawls a little bit closer, laying his cool hands on Mickey's thighs. Mickey looks down at him, wanting to look him in the eye, but his eyes catch on his arm. There are new tracks there. Mickey drags his eyes away. He can't do shit about it. And worrying more won't help. So he tries to let it go.

"Gonna rock your world, kid." Jack mumbles, sticking two fingers in his mouth and making a show out of sucking them. He got them nice and wet, running his tongue over and around the digits, sucking them into his mouth, then tonguing them again. He grabbed Mickey's throbbing erection with his free hand and started pumping it slowly.

Mickey let out a choked sound at the contact. It felt so good. Tortuously slow and so, so tight. Pleasure rippled through his body.

"You like that?" Jack asked just as he brought his spit lubed hand down to circle Mickey's rim. "You ain't seen nothing yet." he smiled. Just as he took the head of Mickey's dick into his mouth, he pushed the tip of his pointer finger past Mickey's rim.

Mickey's eyes rolled back in his head. Jack knew Mickey loved dual stimulation. It always got him there so fast, the orgasms always so powerful.

He let his head loll back on the couch, his eyes closed as he sank into the feeling. Jack bobbed his head a few times while he eased his two fingers into Mickey's tight hole. He groaned around the cock in his mouth, feeling his own hard on twitching against his stomach. He pulled off, running his tongue along the sensitive head while he pumped his fingers in and out, searching for that special......


Jack smiled around the cock in his mouth and pegged Mickey's prostate again, hard. Mickey's whole body jerked, his cock jamming down Jack's throat and making him gag, but he recovered quickly and resumed his rhythm, bringing Mickey closer to the edge. He took as much of Mickey into his mouth as he could handle, burying his face in the dark hair of his groin. He ran his tongue back and forth along the underside of his dick, pressing his fingers into his prostate, constant electric pressure. Then he swallowed around his dick. Once, twice, and Mickey was coming down his throat in hot spurts. His hands flew up to Jack's hair and held him down on his dick while his hips jerked and thrusted through the aftershocks.

"Fuck." he muttered stupidly. "C'mere." he motioned lazily for Jack to get up off the floor. Jack did as he was told, crawling right next to Mickey.

Mickey's tattooed hand went straight to Jack's dick, pumping him fast and hard, just like he liked it. It was slippery with precome from how turned on he was, making it easy for Mickey to slide his hand up and down the shaft. He swiped his thumb over the head and applied the smallest amount of
pressure before resuming his brutal pace. Jack wrapped an arm around Mickey's bare shoulder and hid his face in the crook of his neck. Mickey slowed for a moment, instead focusing on the pressure, squeezing and releasing over and over. Jack gasped, his hold on Mickey tightening.

"You think you can come?" Mickey asked lowly, hot breath fanning over Jack's ear. "You did so good, made me come so hard. You think you can too? Got it in ya?" he asked, pumping faster and faster. He wanted Jack to come. He really wanted that. If he could come, it meant he didn't have so much dope in his system blocking his senses. If Jack could come, it meant he wasn't do too much heroin.

Mickey really wanted that.

"C'mon man, fucking come." he practically begged, stripping Jack's dick with clinical precision and licking a fat stripe up the side of his neck.

"Oh fuck. Shit." Jack breathed, coming all over Mickey's hand and both their torsos.

Mickey had never been happier to be covered in come in his entire life.

Thank fucking god. He was so relieved.

"Feel better?" Jack asked, using a dirty shirt to clean up the mess off both of them. He sat back down on the couch and put his head on Mickey's shoulder.

"Stupid fucking question." Mickey laughed, grabbing both their boxers, tossing Jack his as he pulled his own back over his hips. He settled back against the couch to continue with the movie when something caught Jack's eye across the room and he stood back up. He walked over to the end table by the door, where their phones were sitting with their keys and wallets.

"Did you hear your phone ringing a while ago?" he asked Mickey, a quizzical look on his face Mickey couldn't place.

"Uh, I was kinda busy for the past half an hour. Why, who the fuck called?" he asked, getting up off the couch. "Fucking give it to me, don't just stare at it all fucking night. Christ Jack." Mickey grabbed his phone off the table and looked at the screen.

He had a missed call.

From Gallagher.

Fucking hell.

-----------------------------------------------------

Ian was laying in Mickey's bed, staring at the ceiling, high and horny. He cursed himself for getting so wasted at home with Iggy of all people. Not that it hadn't been nice, it was actually one of the best conversations he'd ever had with Iggy, murderous threats aside.

But he always got so horny when he smoked weed, always had. Even when he was a kid, getting high with Lip in the van in the yard, he always had to run inside after and rub one out before he could function again.
So here he was now, well past ten pm on Friday night, listening to Iggy snoring on the couch in the next room, palming his painfully hard dick over his boxers like a loser.

Mandy and Tess hadn't come home yet. It was just the two men in the house. Ian hadn't bothered to lock the door, figuring Iggy was out for the count anyway.

He ran his hand over his dick again, applying a bit more pressure this time. He hissed through his teeth.

'Fuck it.' he thought, pulling his boxers down and throwing them to the floor. He reached over into the drawer in his nightstand and pulled out the lube he kept there for just these occasions. Because lord knows he's not getting laid right now. After everything he went through with Brian, casual hook ups don't feel like a good idea.
Ian isn't even sure he could go through with it without having a panic attack.

So his hand is it, for the foreseeable future.
That's okay with Ian. He's got a spank bank chock full of hot memories to choose from.
He sqirts some lube onto his right hand and throws the bottle back into the open drawer.
He leans his head back into the pillows as he wraps a hand around his dick. His hand was warm and slick with lube as he tightened his grip. He clenched his eyes shut and let his mind wander....

He thought about a day a long time ago, in this exact room. He and Mickey were just kids, just starting to trust each other with things they liked or wanted to try in the bedroom. It took a long time to get Mickey to let his guard down. But when he did, it was amazing.
Ian is reliving the first time Mickey ever rode him. They were wasted, drunk off their asses and high on weed and coke. Being high always made Mickey more open and honest. More verbal with his wants and needs.

They were sitting on the floor, Ian can't remember why, when Mickey looks over at him. 'I wanna ride you' Face so serious, not a hint of humor.
'Fuck, okay.' Ian had replied like an idiot.
And then Mickey had just crawled into his lap, grabbed his dick and impaled himself on it.
It was easily the hottest thing that had ever happened to Ian back then.

Ian tightens his grip on his dick, reliving the memory. Mickey's naked torso, close enough to run his tongue along as he ground down in Ian's lap. The way he let his head fall back as he bounced up and down on Ian's dick. The soft way his breath fanned across Ian's neck when he brought his head down to suck on Ian's collar bone. The way he looked him right in the eye, right before he came all over Ian's chest.

Ian is jerking his cock so fast, so hard, lost in Mickey and the pleasure only he can bring Ian, even after all this time.
He sees his face so clearly, can almost hear him.
'You feel so good, Ian. Jesus fuck, perfect.'

Ian's orgasm sneaks up on him. He's shaking through it before he can even think to aim away from himself. He gets come all over his t shirt.

As soon as the high tapers off, he's consumed by feelings of dread. Shame and sadness flow over him in waves.

A tear escapes his eye, and then another. Before he even has a chance to grab something to clean up the mess on his chest, he's balling. Tears are flowing freely from his eyes, and he's desperately trying not to make too much noise. The last thing he needs right now is for Iggy to come in and ask him what's wrong.
He's not even sure what's wrong. One second he was lost in his steamy Mickey memories, and the
next he was drowning in this crippling sadness, pulses of anxiety jolting through his body. He's
shaking violently, his chest constricting painfully as he desperately tries to mimic the deep breathing
exercises he'd been taught in therapy.

He needs to call Caroline. This shit can't go on.

He should have known better than to jerk off to memories of Mickey. He knew that it would dredge
up all the shit he's been trying to avoid. All the things he'd done wrong, all the kindness he shit all
over. That broken look on Mickey's face when Ian abandoned him. It was the same look, every time
it happened. Like Mickey couldn't believe Ian was doing this again. Like he couldn't believe he let
himself get hurt again. Like he feels betrayed, by Ian and by himself.

But Ian just can't help himself. It feels too good in the moment, and it's worth the pain in the
aftermath. Reliving his history with Mickey is the best type of pain Ian's ever endured.

He sighs, looking over at the clock. 11:30. It's not too late to call, right?

He knows something has to change. He can't keep doing this shit. Yeah, this is it. This is the
moment. He's gonna do it.
He grabs his phone off the nightstand, and dials Mickey's number.
It rings and rings and Mickey doesn't answer.

Ian pulls the phone away from his ear to stare at it for a minute. There is no way Mickey's asleep at
11:30 on a damn Friday. He's probably balls deep in that fucking junkie. Or god forbid sharing
needles with him. Ian hangs up the phone and throws it down on the bed. He's frustrated with
himself for getting so upset.

Now he's that guy that can't even jerk off without getting teary-eyed. Fucking wonderful.

He runs a hand over his face, eyes still wet from his mini-meltdown. He sighs in frustration, grabbing
his phone again. He shoots of a text and sends it before he can talk himself out of it.

"Call him back." Jack says from behind him. They are both just standing there, staring at the phone
like idiots.

Mickey takes the phone and starts walking toward the bedroom. Jack grabs his own phone and
follows him. Mickey plugs his phone in to one of the charges on the nightstand. Jack mirrors him
with his own phone.

Mickey walks around to the bathroom to take a piss. Jack follows him in, since he clearly has no
sense of boundaries.

"Do you mind, dude? I'm taking a leak." Mickey says, eyes on his dick.

"You mean you're pissing with that thing that was literally down my throat two seconds ago? Nah, I
don't mind." Jack replied easily, leaning up against the wall. "Did you not hear me in there?"

"Jack." Mickey sighs, putting his dick away and flushing the toilet. "It's always a complete
clusterfuck with Gallagher. I don't know if I have the energy for his shit tonight." he walks around
Jack and flops onto the bed on his back. He laces his hands behind his head, staring up at his friend,
who is looming over him grim-faced, hands on his hips.

"Well, it's not always about you, prick. What if he's all fucked up over there, and he's reaching out or some shit? What if he's more fucked up than you are about it, and he's dealing with it all alone? Not everyone is lucky enough to have a Jack in their life, Mick."

Mickey glares up at his friend. What the fuck? Why is he taking Gallagher's side?

Mickey huffs, rolling over on the bed to grab for his phone on the nightstand. "Fine, fucker. I'll see what he has to say."

Jack beams, pleased with himself. He jumps on the bed next to Mickey and watches him fiddle with his phone. In place of the missed call is a text message:

gallagher: don't know if matt called you guys or not. jack's in, trevor got him a spot @ victory house. guess we'll hear more about it monday.

As Mickey was reading that one, a second one came through:

gallagher: mick, i think it's time we talk. about it all. u free 2morrow? it's important.

Mickey sat silently for a few moments, just staring at his phone. It was Jack, of course, who broke him out of his revelry.

"Look at that. Seems like you two are still on the same wavelength, huh? Bet he's been an inconsolable mess this whole time too."

Mickey dropped his eyes from his phone to turn around and stare at Jack, who was right behind him, reading over his shoulder.

"Fuck off, dick." Mickey said, elbowing Jack to get him to back off a bit. Jack huffed out a breath, folding in on himself a bit at the force of Mickey's hit. But he got the message, lowering himself back down onto the bed.

"That pretentious ass got your bed all set. We'll hear more Monday I guess." Mickey said, instead of answering Jack's question about Ian.

"Okay." is all Jack says in response. He pulls the covers down and wraps himself up in them, head on his pillow, looking up at Mickey. "Respond to that ginger fuck, then come and cuddle me. I'm fucking sleepy." he said, yawning for effect, obviously.

Mickey looked down at his phone, his mind reeling. Even though he was scared to death of letting Ian in again, he knew he never really had a choice. His fate with Gallagher was sealed years ago, when he first let his guard down and let that red headed asshole crawl into his chest cavity and make his home there. The rest of it was just background noise.
Ian was it.
He typed out his answer and put the phone back down.

me: of course. name the time & the place. u know i'm always down 4 u, firecrotch.

He turned off the lamp and got under the covers and pulled Jack's back against his chest, resting his face in the crook of his neck. Jack's hands resting on Mickey's arms, which were wrapped tightly around his middle.

"I'm gonna miss this." Jack murmured into the darkness.

"What?" Mickey asked.

"While I'm gone, at the halfway house, I'm gonna miss hanging out with you. Sleeping in the bed with you, fucking you. I'm gonna miss it."

"I'm not going anywhere, dude. It'll be different, but I'm not going anywhere." Mickey promised.

"I know, but if you and Ian start getting close again, we're gonna have to give some of this up. I don't wanna come between you guys. I know he already feels threatened by me."

"Jack, you don't have to worry about that shit. Just focus on getting better, yeah?" Mickey didn't want Jack thinking about his shit with Ian. He had enough of his own stuff to worry about.

"I will focus on me, if you promise to focus on you, Mick. Do what feels right for you. Not for me, or Ian or Yev or anyone else. You deserve to be happy. Please promise me? Don't make any more decisions based on what you want for others. Put yourself first." Jack's voice was laced with sleep as he mumbled out his little speech.

"Sure thing, Cauldwell. I promise." Mickey replied lowly, knowing his friend was already well on his way to unconscious. These past few weeks, waiting for the rehab bed had been hard on Jack. He was struggling to not get high, sick more often than not, trying his best not to give in. Heroin was all Jack had known for years, and Mickey felt proud that he could be partially responsible for him trying to really get clean, finally. He didn't want to get his hopes up, but he couldn't help but feel like this time might be different.

And it was so like Jack to worry about Mickey, even when his own life was falling to shit. But that's what friends did, right? Put the other person first, put themselves out there to protect the one they loved? Sacrifice and give to show their friend they cared?

Jack taught Mickey that first, and Lauren and Javier later. He'd never had friends like that before. He was eternally grateful he did now.

Life before them paled in comparison to how he felt now.

He dropped a quick kiss to the back of Jack's head before setting himself down to sleep.

He was finally gonna do it.

Tomorrow, he and Ian were gonna talk.

He had no idea how it was gonna go, but he think he was allowed to hope, for once, that maybe everything would be okay....
Coming up for air

Chapter Summary

Shit gets sorted....

Mickey is not nervous. No fucking way. It's Gallagher, for Christ's sake. Ian. At one point in Mickey's life, he knew Ian better than he knew himself. There is no reason for Mickey to be nervous. But he his.

It's just a conversation. Talking.

But that's the thing, isn't it? Ian and Mickey don't have the best track record as far as communication goes. They were never that couple that could talk openly about their feelings, fears or misgivings. Their hopes or dreams, wants or needs.

They were good at two things: fighting and fucking. And they were fucking good at those two things. It was all passion and chaos back then. Blood and cum and vicious words, followed by gentle touches and whispered apologies.

But god damn it, Mickey doesn't want that shit anymore. As good as it was back then, and as devastated as he was when it ended, he can't go back to that. It tore his soul out, left him in splinters. He doesn't want that again.

He doesn't know what Ian wants, he never could read the guy that way. But he's hopeful Ian doesn't want the old 'them' either.

Wherever they go from here, it can't be back there.

These thoughts were spinning around Mickey's head as he made his way down the sidewalk in the South side, walking from the L stop to his old house on S. Homon. He had left Jack that morning after coffee and eggs, having received a text from Ian asking him to come by so they could 'talk about this shit' as Ian so eloquently put it.

This is what Mickey's been waiting for since he got back from Mexico. Hell, this is what Mickey's been waiting for since Ian broke up with him. The truth. All of it. Every last awful detail. He wanted it all. And he wasn't going to stop until he got it all.

And he was going to spill his guts too, even if he didn't want to. He could just feel it, like a storm brewing in the pit of his stomach. The anger and pain and confused resentment he had toward Ian was all bubbling up to the surface, and it was gonna boil over and spew out of his mouth the second he laid eyes on Ian. He knew it, and he felt like he was powerless to stop it.

It's like his whole life these past four years had been leading up to this. This conversation, this confrontation.

He took a deep breath as he walked up the stairs, taking a moment to collect himself as he stared at the front door of his childhood home.
'Don't be a pussy.' he shakes his head, lifting his hand to knock on the door. He wonders if he has to knock, or if he can just walk in. It was his house long before Ian came along. But he doesn't want to start this off on the wrong foot. Doesn't want to make Ian uncomfortable. He needs to do this right. So he knocks.

He takes a step back from the door and runs a nervous hand over his damp hair. Yeah, okay, he showered before he came. Nothing odd about that. Not like he was trying to look good or impress Ian. He would never do something so fucking corny. No way.

The door swings open and Ian's standing there. He looks good. What else is fucking new? It looks like Ian put a little effort into this meeting too. He's wearing a gray henley and dark blue jeans, barefoot, which Mickey always loved for some reason. Ian had really nice feet.

That's not a strange thought at all.

"Hey." Ian says, stepping to the side so Mickey can walk into the house.

Mickey still hasn't gotten over what Mandy and Iggy did to the house. It looks like a real home now. There is this warmth to the place now that was never there when he was growing up. It feels like a place where happy people live. The thought brings the smallest smile to Mickey's face.

"Hey." Mickey replies. Ian reaches forward and grabs his hoodie from him as he slides it down his shoulders, taking it from him and hanging it on a hook by the door. "Thanks, man, but you don't gotta treat me like a chick." he laughed. Ian was always acting like some chivalrous hero from one of Mandy's romance novels, even when they were kids.

"You look nice." Ian says instead of replying to Mickey's comment.

Mickey doesn't think he looks nice at all. He's wearing an old Tool t shirt and torn jeans, an old pair of Adidas shell toes on his feet. Same old Mickey.

But that's probably what Ian appreciates anyway.

"You wanna beer?" Ian asks, walking further into the house. Mickey follows him into the living room, sitting on the couch. In his head, Mickey acknowledges that it's barely after noon, but they probably both needed to take the edge off to get through this conversation. He idly wonders if Ian should be drinking at all, but shakes off the thought. Not his problem anymore. He has to keep reminding himself of that fact.

"Sure. Thanks." Mickey says, sitting down on the couch. He looks around the room, trying to find some of his old home left underneath all this flowery bullshit Iggy's girl has plastered all over the place. Framed art and vases full of fresh flowers. Throw pillows and a quilt on the back of the couch. Terry is rolling in his grave right now. Not a single gun or hypodermic needle in sight.

It's a little jarring.

Ian comes back into the living room, handing Mickey a beer and sitting next to him on the couch. He stares at Mickey for a moment, before shaking his head and huffing out a quiet laugh.

"This is weird, isn't it?" Ian sighs.

"A little, yeah." Mickey concedes. "But I don't want it to be."

"Me either. This is so fucked up. Never thought it would be like this. For us, I mean."
"Doesn't have to be, Ian. That's why we're here, right? To make shit less awkward." Mickey takes a long gulp of his beer, looking at Ian over his bottle.

Ian nods, looking down at his own beer, cradled in his hands. "Okay, so where do we start?" he asks, looking over at Mickey for direction.

"Fuck if I know." he sighs. Mickey has no idea how they are going to go about clearing out all the dirty shit between them. There's so much history and hurt in there, where to even begin? He looks over at Ian again, sitting there avoiding his eyes, and a thought pops into his head. One that has been festering in his mind for years now. So he just goes for it.

"Why did you go all the way to the border with me, if you knew all along you weren't gonna go with me?"

There. It's out there. Done.

He takes a deep breath, awaiting Ian's reply.

Ian looks up at him then, his hand still in his lap for a moment. It looks like he expected this. Like this is where he thought this conversation was going to start. He takes his own deep breath, eye never leaving Mickey's.

"When we first left Chicago, I really thought we were gonna go all the way. But the closer we got to the border, the more my thoughts started to spiral. I wanted to be with you, Mick. I've always wanted to be with you, from the start. But I was so scared. To throw my life away. Not on you, I don't mean it like that." Ian stuttered out when he saw Mickey's raised eyebrows. Mickey expected this line of thinking, but it didn't mean it hurt any less. "Before I left with you, Fiona said some shit to me."

Mickey rolled his eyes. Of course Fiona would have a hand in this shit.

"She told me I had built a great life for myself. You know, with my job and my health, all that shit. And that if I went after you, it would set a match to all my progress." he took a deep breath and chanced a look at Mickey. Mickey eyebrows were knitted together, he knows he looks pissed.

That's because he is pissed.

Fucking Fiona and her stupid, fat fucking mouth. Never had a kind word for Mickey. Always assuming the worst, and always shocked and irritated when Mickey proved her wrong. Of course it would be her that planted the seeds of doubt in Ian's mind.

"And it wasn't only that. I was scared. You know, that I wasn't thinking clearly." Ian tapped the side of his own head for emphasis. He then gazed down at his fingers again, unable to look at Mickey any longer. "I was scared of this rash decision to follow you to Mexico, on the run from the feds, I was scared that I may have been manic at the time. I mean, take me and you out of the equation. If you heard about a dude running away with his ex, who was an escaped convict, what would you think? Crazy, right? Well, crazy is a dangerous word for me. I was scared I'd get down there and lose my shit for real. Do they have safe hospitals down there? Would I be able to be medicated? What if I went off the deep end, and hurt myself. Or god fucking forbid I hurt you? We had no plan. I was petrified I was going to lose my fucking mind. And I wouldn't be able to come back from it this time. Do you understand me?" Ian looked up for the first time during his little diatribe, and Mickey was staring at him. He had a soft, fond expression on his face.

Mickey understand. Of course he does.

But it still hurts.
"Why didn't you tell me?" he asks.

Ian eyes soften, and he gives a half-hearted shrug. "I wasn't sure until right at the border." he replies lowly. "I don't want you to think it was my plan all along to string you along to the very end and then spring it on you. The thoughts had been festering in my mind since that night by the bridge. But I didn't want to spend the little time we had left together fighting." Ian was wringing his hands in his lap now, beer momentarily forgotten on the coffee table. "I wanted to enjoy every last second I could with you. I know it was selfish, I'm sorry."

Mickey put his beer down next to Ian's on the coffee table. he scooted closer to Ian and put a hand on his shoulder. Ian stiffened for a moment at the touch, probably shocked that Mickey initiated the contact.

"It's okay, Ian, I get it." he said, rubbing soothing circles on Ian's back. "I understand, I really do. It was fucked up of me to ask you to come with me. It was reckless and selfish. I forgave you for not coming a long time ago." he huffed out an aggravated breath. "I never should have asked you to come in the first place."

"Hey," Ian said, turning his body slightly so he could look at Mickey directly. "I'm glad you asked me to go with you. Those few days were the best days of my life. Those memories kept me going while you were gone."

Mickey was taken aback at Ian's open candor.

Mickey always hoped that Ian missed him as much as Mickey had always missed Ian. But he never really believed it was true.

"You remember that night I was talking about, by the train tracks? When we spread out the blanket and looked for shooting stars?" Ian asks after a few moments of silence.

"Yeah, of course." Mickey replies. He removed his hand from Ian's shoulder, reaching down to pick his beer up off the table. He took a long sip and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"When you asked me if I ever thought about you when you were locked up, and I said 'a lot.'?" Ian continued.

Mickey just nodded. Yeah, he fucking remembered. That whole conversation made Mickey feel ripped open and so vulnerable. And Ian had given him hardly anything. The memory left a bitter taste in Mickey's mouth.

"I wasn't completely honest that night." Ian took a deep breath, then guzzled down a few gulps of beer. "I thought about you every day, Mick. You were never not on my mind. I just didn't want to admit it. To anyone. Not even myself. I wanted to be over you so bad. Because I knew you weren't coming back. And after I broke up with you, I wanted to totally reinvent myself. I wanted to leave you and the south side and all my fuck ups and mistakes in the past." Ian took a steadying breath as his words started to waiver. "But that shit didn't fucking work." he paused again, losing his composure. "And then I had you for those few days, and then you were fucking gone again. And I was really fucked up for a while after that." Ian sighed, tipping his head back and closing his eyes for a moment, recalling his time after the border in the mental hospital. "Really fucked up," he repeated. His eyes were welling up with tears as he did his best to keep his emotions at bay.

"I, uh, never knew." Mickey said, looking over at Ian. He just wanted to hold him, but he knew they weren't there right now.
Mickey was taken aback at Ian's words. He thought about him? He missed him? It was hard for Ian too? Mickey had no idea. He always thought Ian just put Mickey out of his mind and went on with his life.

The knowledge makes Mickey feel two ways. He feels happy and a little bit vindicated. Ian cares too, has always cared. It's not totally one-sided on Mickey's part. But on the other hand, he never wanted Ian to suffer. If it would have been easier for Ian to just forget Mickey and move on, Mickey would want that for him. Mickey never wanted anything but for Ian to be happy. Mickey's own happiness has always been secondary.

"Yeah, well, I never said, so that's on me." Ian replied. He looked over at Mickey with glassy eyes, and it took every ounce of Mickey's will power not to pull him into his arms at that exact moment.

Ian chuckled lightly and wiped at his eyes. "Your turn asshole." he smiled. "I'm not the only jerk off spilling his guts tonight. Tell me about Jack. What the fuck is up with you two? Are you getting high with him?"

Mickey bristled involuntarily. He knew this was coming, had tired to prepare himself, get his thoughts in order before coming over here, but now that the moment has come, he's kinda freaked out still.

Shit.

He sighed, running his free hand over his head and then down his face. He gulped down the rest of his beer and stood. "You got any more of these?" he asked, wiggling his empty back and forth.

"Sure, you know where we keep them." Ian replied. He settled himself back into the couch a little more, ready to wait Mickey out for as long as he had to.

Mickey went to the kitchen and opened the fridge, grabbing a beer off the top shelf and using the bottle opener on the kitchen table to pop the top. He took a guzzle off the bottle immediately, feeling the need for some kind of liquid courage to continue this conversation. He took a deep breath, tipping his head back in the dim kitchen, letting it out slowly, calming himself down as best he could before going back into the living room.

He sat down next to Ian again, taking another sip of his beer before putting it down on the coffee table to give Ian his undivided attention.

"Jack and I go way back." he started. "All the way back to the very beginning, when I first got locked up. He was my celly." he said. He watched as Ian's eyebrows crept up his forehead. He nodded slightly, a silent urge for Mickey to continue.

"Uh, I was in a really bad place back then. After what happened with you, you know." he cleared his throat, trying to keep it together. "After you cut ties, Svet wasn't far behind, then Mandy stopped writing. I was alone. Like, totally alone." he looked up at Ian, who had a stricken look on his face, his lips parted like he wanted to say something, but he kept silent. "Jack was there for me." he smiled fondly. "At first it was just fucking, you know, pass the time in the joint. Not much else to do. But he, uh, he kinda grew on me. We became really good friends." he paused to take a sip of his beer, watching Ian watching him. "After I escaped, he was the only person I kept in contact with up here for a long time. Didn't even reach out to Mandy at first. And even when I did finally find her, that dick bag husband of hers wouldn't let me talk to her. So Jack was it, until L and Javi found me. I was broken back then." he paused again, taking a deep steadying breath, eyes on his hand, cradling the beer bottle in his lap. This shit was hard. "After you left me at the border, I wanted to die."
Ian gasped. Mickey looked up from his lap to see Ian's shocked face, eyes welling up with unshed tears.

"Don't, Ian. It was a long time ago." he said softly. "But it's the truth, and we're being honest here, right?" he waited for Ian to give a slight nod before he continued. "Before L and Javi, I was wandering around Mexico alone. Stealing purses and backpacks to get enough money to survive. Jack would Western Union me money when he could. I called him so many times, just to hear a familiar voice. Just to know for a second that I wasn't totally alone." he ran a hand over his face, willing himself not to cry. "I was pretty devastated. And Jack was there for me, more than once, in and out of jail, when no one else could be bothered to care. That shit means a lot to me. Do you understand?" he asked.

Ian nodded again, but stayed silent. So he continued.

"So, uh, when I got the call from Mands that my case was being thrown out, Jack was the first person I called. I mean, who else was there, right?"

Ian cringed. Who else, indeed. He felt sick. He caused all this. Everything Mickey had to endure since his arrest was Ian's fault. And Jack was there to help Mickey through it.

It should have been Ian. Ian should have been there. His eyes stung and his throat closed up. It took every ounce of control he had not to break down in that moment.

Mickey took a sip of his beer and continued. "So yeah, when I first got home, me and Jack fell pretty easily back into the friendship we shared on the inside. Obviously we fuck. But it doesn't mean anything, just like it didn't mean anything in there. He's my best friend, and I do love him, but I'm not IN love with Jack. And yes, I was getting high with him when I first got home."

Ian's eyes hardened, and he opened his mouth to speak, but Mickey put a hand up, stopping him.

"Let me finish." he said.

Ian drew his lips into a thin line, but said nothing.

"I was trying to forget. It was too much for me, being back here, so close to everything I tried for so long to let go. All those shitty memories, Svetlana and Yev, you. I just couldn't deal. So I took the easy way out. But you should know, I haven't gotten high with Jack since that night. Not since the overdose. I realized how stupid I was being, jeopardizing everything I had just gotten back. Besides, it's a pussy move, ignoring all my shit like that. And I'm not fucking coward. Not anymore."

"Mick..." Ian started, but Mickey cut him off again.

"So you asked me, what's up with me and Jack. That's pretty much it. I love the kid, I want what's best for him. He's one of the best friends I've ever had. But we're not together, we're not in love. I'd do anything to help him get straight, which is why I asked for your help. But if you are asking if he's my boyfriend, the answer is no. I haven't had a boyfriend since you, Ian. Didn't see the point."

"What do you mean? Didn't see the point?" Ian asked, confused. He drank down the last dredges of his beer and put the empty on the table.

Mickey sighed, running his free hand through his messy black hair. "Ian, when I broke out I was in a really dark place. Especially after everything that went down at the border. I wasn't in the frame of mind to be with anyone. Not in the way I wanted to. I was so hung up on you, it wouldn't have been fair to me or the other guy. Not to mention I was a fucking fugitive. What if I got involved with Jack or Javi or some other decent guy, and the Feds came and fucking took me away? How would that be
fair? I just couldn't do it."

Ian nodded. Not that he understood. He'd never put his own feelings on hold like that. He'd always done whatever felt right in the moment, consequences be damned.

Mickey was always better at sacrificing than Ian.

"But it looks like you had plenty of boyfriends while I was gone." Mickey changed the subject. "What happened with you and SuperFag? Did you break up after you got back from the border?"

Ian grimaced. Looks like they're going to talk about Ian's ex's now. Great.

"Trevor?" he asked. "Yeah, I mean, when I got back from the border, and Monica was dead, I was all fucked up. I had convinced myself that this was where I belonged, you know, with my family and my job." he let out a bitter laugh. "But, um, nobody noticed I was gone."

"No one noticed?" Mickey balked. How the fuck was that possible? The Gallaghers had always been neck deep in each other's shit. They were especially always all up in Ian's business.

"Yeah. I mean, I understand. Monica died at the house, you know. It was really fucked up for a while there."

Mickey nodded. He'd not heard anything about how Ian's mom died. And although he hated the cunt for poisoning Ian against him, he knew Ian loved the psycho bitch.

"Sorry about Monica, man. That's shitty." he mumbles, because he knows Ian loved her in some kind of way.

"Thanks." Ian says. "She was fucked up. And she fucked us all up really bad. But she was still my mom, you know?"

Ian doesn't know if he's making any sense. Monica was never his 'mother' in the traditional sense of the word, but he had always had some strange connection with her, even before he knew they shared a diagnosis.

"Yeah man, I get it. My mom was a no-good junkie whore. Like literal whore." Mickey grimaced. "But I still loved her. All the way up to the day she took her last shot, man."

Ian looked over at Mickey, seeing a far away look in his eyes, like he's reliving the memory of his mother's death. Ian realizes in that moment that they've never talked about Mickey's mother. Not once in all the years they've known each other. But now doesn't really feel like the time for that, so he lets it go. Maybe someday they'll get there.

"Anyway." Ian segues back to their original conversation. "When I got back, and found out Monica was dead, it was like I was beating myself up for not being there. Not that I would have given up our time together, I don't mean...."

But Mickey cuts him off, waving a hand in his face. "I get it." he says, "Go on."

"Well, I told Trevor the truth, that I'd been with you."

Mickey did his best not to gloat, or preen. It wasn't the time for a pissing match with Ian's other ex-boyfriend. He miraculously kept a straight face as Ian continued.

"He, uh, wasn't very happy." Ian sighed. He ran a hand through his red hair, pulling the strands a bit.
Mickey suddenly thinks in that moment that Ian’s hair looks amazing. He shakes his head at the thought. Idiot.

"We tried to stay together for a while, but it was useless. He couldn't get over the fact that I was with you, and frankly, after I saw you I just wasn't into Trevor as much anymore. We decided to try and stay friends, and we were getting there. But then I met Brian, and he didn't want me to stay in contact with any exes." Ian trailed off.

"Okay, Gallagher, I think I've waited long enough." Mickey sighed, not really wanting to know, but needing to know regardless. "What the fuck is with that dude? Why were you even with a guy like that? What the fuck happened that was so bad you ran out of there and moved in with my sister?" he eyed Ian and waited him out. He could see the wheels turning in Ian's head, weighing his options, deciding what he wanted to reveal.

Ian shuffled uncomfortably on the couch. He didn't feel ready to talk about what happened with Brian. He had been successfully avoiding it for the past two weeks, and had hoped to avoid it until he slunk into Caroline's office on Tuesday.

But he couldn't lie to Mickey. Not after everything the other man had told him today. They were here today to get this shit out, as painful as it was for both of them.

"It's a real mess, Mick." Ian started. This shit was still so raw. He took a deep breath, deciding to start from the beginning. "After that shit with Trevor, I didn't wanna date anyone for a while. I was so fucked up over leaving you." he saw Mickey's eyebrows crawl up his forehead at that statement, but he didn't say anything so Ian continued. "I just didn't have the emotional fortitude to get into another relationship. I was really fucked up. I had a bit of a downward spiral, I told you about that, right?" Ian asked, referring to his stint in the mental hospital after he returned from the border. Mickey nodded. He hated the idea of Ian suffering, especially over him. Ian should never have to feel shitty on account of him.

"So, after I got out of the hospital, my family was all over me. You know how they can be." Mickey nodded again. Fucking Gallaghers.

"When I got out of the hospital, they were all telling me that running with you was a symptom of my illness, which was fucked, because that's kinda what I was thinking that night by the bridge." Mickey grimaced. He didn't see it that way at all.

"So I started thinking they were right. I couldn't be trusted to make my own life decisions. I needed to be monitored, needed to be told how to live. It was an awful feeling. But I just went with it. Let Fiona and Lip tell me what to do. She picked my new therapist, Lip told me to get out there, find a new guy to get my mind off you. Like it was that fucking easy." Ian laughed bitterly. "When I met Brian at the gym, Fiona and Lip were all over me to lock him down. He seemed like a smart choice to them. He had money and class, never been arrested. All that North side faggot shit." Mickey balked at that. Is that all the Gallaghers cared about? Money? But he kept his mouth shut. Ian obviously wasn't done.

"But as soon as I moved in with him, he changed. Started cutting me down, talking shit about my family and friends. It started out small, not wanting me to go to family dinners, not wanting me to hang out with my crew from work. Pretty soon, it was just me and Brian, all the time. Unless we went out with his douchebag friends. They were a whole other level of awful." Ian sighed. This talk was sucking all his energy, and he hadn't even gotten to the bad part yet.
Anyway, after about six months, right before you came back, it was reaching its peak. He was always starting these meaningless fights, putting me down and just generally shitting all over anything I liked. Ian paused for a moment, running his hands up and down his thighs. "He, uh, also had some pretty severe opinions about my bipolar." Mickey's face grew dark at that statement, his jaw clenched. "He said it was all made up, that I did it for attention."

"Fuck. That." Mickey barked, taking Ian by surprise. "That fucking asshole knows shit about shit. Like you would ever do any of that shit on purpose. Like you would ever want to be that way."

Ian nodded, because he was on the verge of tears and didn't want to break down. This was it, the grande finale. He swallowed dryly. "Can you grab me another another beer?" he asked instead, trying to work up his nerve.

"Uh, yeah." Mickey said. He grabbed the empties off the coffee table and lurched off the couch and into the kitchen. He knew what Ian was doing, trying to buy time before he got to the meat of the story. He was trying to prepare himself, he knew it was going to be bad. He knew this whole time that he still loved Ian, but the churning in his gut proved to him that he was much deeper than even he anticipated. He was ready in that moment to find this Brian dude and slit his throat, and he didn't even have all the details yet. But that's how he's always been with Gallagher. Ride or die. No other options.

He grabbed the beer and walked back into living room, watching Ian nervously pulling on a lose thread of his jeans. He hated seeing Ian so wound up. But the one thing he knew would calm him was the one thing he couldn't do.

He couldn't grab him by the back of his neck and pull him to his chest, rub soothing circles on his back while running one of his hands through Ian's red hair. That shit was like thorazine to Ian, calmed him right the fuck down.

But Mickey couldn't do that. Not right now. It was fucking frustrating.

So he just sat back down and passed Ian one of the beers, taking a long pull off his own bottle. He was starting to feel tipsy. He could only guess how Ian was feeling. Last Mickey knew, he wasn't even supposed to drink. But it wasn't Mickey's place to say, so he kept his mouth shut.

Frustrating.

Ian guzzles down a few gulps of his own beer, then looks up into Mickey's eyes. He looks scared, and a little bit lost. And Mickey's heart breaks all over again. Mickey's surprised he has any heart left at all, after so many years on this roller coaster with Gallagher.

"It's okay, Gallagher. You don't have to say anything." Mickey says, feeling the anxiety rolling off of Ian in waves.

Ian shakes his head violently, tears prickling in his emerald eyes. "No, Mick." he stutters. "I gotta get this out while I've got the balls."

Mickey nods again. This is going to be bad.

Real bad.

Ian takes a long, deep breath, letting it out slowly. He doesn't look at Mickey when he starts to speak, his voice smaller than Mickey has ever heard it.

"So, like I said, it all kinda came to a head around the time you came back. He had started pushing
me around a little, slapping me in the face like I was a wayward child or something." he laughed bitterly before continuing. He chanced a look at Mickey and saw his face tinged red in anger. "It didn't happen a lot." he hedged.

"Ian." Mickey sighed.

"Mick, come on, we used to beat the shit out of each other all the time." Ian says, even though he knows it's not the right thing to say.

"We were asshole kids who didn't know how to communicate our emotions, Ian." Mickey said. Ian was taken aback at how much sense Mickey was making. He was never this open or honest in all the years Ian knew him. "And I never raised a hand to you to control you or manipulate you. The only time I ever hit you was when I was drowning in my own emotions and couldn't deal. It wasn't healthy, but it's not the same thing. And I think you know that."

Ian gaped at him. Who was this fucking guy, and what had he done with Mickey?

Ian's head was spinning. It took him a minute to process all Mickey had said and get back on track with his own story.

"Uh." he stuttered, collecting himself. "So I was actually thinking about ending things before the party. You know, Mandy's party."

Mickey nodded. Of course he knew. He remembered that whole night in vivid detail. Every terrible thing he witnessed at the club between Ian and that fucking asshole. It was a nightmare.

"But I also didn't want another failed relationship. Like, I've been trying so hard to find that thing, you know, happily ever after or what the fuck ever." Ian sighed, feeling like a total fucking asshole.

"Ian, you can't force a happy ending with a dude like that. You gotta be more discerning." Mickey said, no hint of teasing in his voice.

"I know that, Mick." Ian bit out angrily. "I was just trying really hard to make shit work. I don't like feeling like a failure."

"Ian, it's not your fault. How do you not see that?" Mickey was confused. This brittle, broken person was not the Ian he'd known for years.

"I guess." Ian sighed. He gulped down the rest of his beer in one long sip, setting the empty on the table again. Mickey was alarmed at the rate Ian was putting away the booze. He has rarely seen Ian drink like this.

"But the point of the whole thing is that I wanted to end it. After that fiasco at Mandy's party, which I never thanked you for, by the way." Ian looked over at Mickey, who promptly waved him off.

"Nah, Gallagher, don't thank me for that shit. Motherfucker had it coming."

"You didn't have to do that, though. Defend me. After everything, you didn't have to do that."

"I will always get your back, Ian. How do you not know that by now?" Mickey asked seriously.

Ian was again floored by this new Mickey. So willing to say what he thinks, no more brashness to cover up his real feelings. Just truth.

Ian wanted to be able to be like that. But it was fucking hard.
"So, when we got back to his place after the showdown at the club, I was so over it. He told me he was done with me, and I was like 'yeah, I'm done too.' I thought that would be it, you know, cuz we both wanted out of the relationship? But Brian lost his damn mind. Like he thought he'd dump me and I'd beg him to let me stay or something. He was so offended that I didn't get on my knees and cry for him to take me back. When that shit didn't happen, he lost his fucking mind." Ian said shakily, running a hand down his face. His hand came back wet. Great. He was fucking crying.

He promised himself he wouldn't do that shit today.

Fuck.

"Um," he mumbled. "He hit me, really hard. In the face." he chanced a look at Mickey, but the other man wasn't looking at him. He was staring at the coffee table, rolling his half full beer between his hands, obviously desperate to keep his cool while Ian choked out this horror story.

"I blacked out. Can't remember the last time I got knocked out by a punch, had to have been fucking hard." he took another steadying breath. "When I woke up, I was in the bedroom, in my underwear." Mickey stiffened. This was it. This was where he had suspected this was going, but it didn't make it any easier to hear it.

"He, uh, he forced himself on me that night. I mean, it had been like that a few times before with him. You know, like I hadn't been too into it, but I let him anyway. I can't really explain it. It was just easier to let him do what he wanted then to fight." he sighed. "But this was different. It was, fuck, I don't wanna say it." he paused again, trembling a little. "It was rape. He fucking raped me. It was violent and it was brutal and I was so fucking scared, Mick. It was mortifying. I felt so used and dirty. He liked to make me feel that way." he didn't look up as he said it. Didn't think he could handle the look in Mickey's eyes. Pity or disgust, either would be equally devastating.

Mickey, on the other hand was fuming. How the fuck could Ian get sucked into this shit? How did he get to the point where he thought it was okay to let some asshole use his body like that? Not worth the fight? What the actual fuck? Mickey's mind was reeling. Full of compassion and need to protect Ian, and murderous thoughts of how to best destroy this Brian fucker.

He had thought after Ian got his bipolar under control, this shit with letting guys use his body was over. Those nights at the club when he wouldn't come home, when Mickey would stay up all night worrying, only for Ian to come home with a sore ass and hickey's all over his back. Mickey had blamed it on the illness, tried to forgive Ian. But now he's not sure if it's the disease at all.

Maybe Ian just hates himself so much, he thinks he deserves the abuse. Like he has to trade his body to get respect.

That thought makes Mickey want to cry.

But he keeps it the fuck together. Because that's obviously what Ian needs right now.

"Ian." Mickey starts carefully, leaning in closer so he can lay a tentative hand on Ian's thigh. Ian cringes a little at the contact, but Mickey shrugs it off. It probably because of the intensity of this conversation. "You didn't do anything wrong. It's not like these assholes come with a warning label. 'may be prone to violent tendencies and sexual assault.'" Mickey rubs Ian's leg as the latter huffs out a small laugh at Mickey's wildly inappropriate joke. "But you figured that shit out, even if it was the hard way, and you got the fuck out. A lot of lesser people would stay. Thinking they didn't deserve better. But you know you do, so that means you already have a leg up." he patted Ian's leg for emphasis. "You're gonna be just fine. I know you will. You're a fucking survivor. South side, right?"
"South side." Ian agreed, smiling for the first time since this heavy conversation started.

"So." he continued. He was so close to the end of the story, he just had to power through. "After he was done with me," he cringed at his own choice of words. "I got the fuck outta there. Checked myself in for the weekend at Cook Country, got my meds straightened out, you know, cuz he flushed them." Mickey's eyes widened at that. This prick just keeps getting worse. What the fuck? "The I moved in with Mandy. You know the rest." Ian said, sipping his beer. He was pretty hammered now, not realizing how much he'd been drinking during their talk.

"I'm glad you got outta there, Gallagher. And I'm glad that prick didn't fuck up your meds shit. That was the right call, checking in. I know it's never easy for you."

Ian nodded. Mickey was right. It was hard as fuck to check in. But he'd learned a long time ago that doing the right thing was hardly ever doing the easy thing.

"Yeah, it's hard, but I like my life too much to give it up, Brian shit aside. I'm happy, and I wasn't gonna let him take that from me. I wasn't gonna let him take anything more from me." Ian said quietly, feeling weepy again.

Fuck.

Mickey finally bit the bullet then, taking his hand that was resting on Ian's leg and pulling him to his chest. He wraps both arms around Ian's shoulder, and Ian burrows his head into Mickey's chest. It feels so natural, like this is what they should always be doing. They fit together so perfectly. Always have.

The moment feels a little wrong though, due to Ian's tears staining Mickey's t-shirt. Ian has always been a silent crier, and if it weren't for the wetness on Mickey's chest, you would have no idea he was having a crisis at the moment.

Mickey holds him tightly, rubbing soothing circles along his back, rocking back and forth slowly.

"It's okay, man." he murmurs into Ian's hair. It would be so easy to drop a soft kiss onto his red head, and it would feel so right.

But Mickey has a feeling Ian is in a weird spot right now, and he doesn't want to make him feel any more uncomfortable. So he just rocks them for a few minutes.

Ian finally pulls away, wiping his long fingers down his face, clearing away the evidence of his breakdown. "Fuck. I didn't want to lose it like that." he sighs.

"Ian, it's okay." Mickey says, leaning back to put some distance between them. "It's fucked up shit to talk about." he pauses, running a hand down his own face. "Thank you, you know, for trusting me with this. You didn't have to."

Ian nods, a little surprised, yet again, by Mickey's sincerity. Where the hell had all this emotional growth come from?

"So, where does that leave us? What's going on here?" Ian asks, because that's what all this is about, anyway.

Them.
"I don't know, Ian. I mean, what do you want?" Mickey asked, retrieving his beer off the coffee table to resume his drinking. "We said we wanted to be friends last night? Is that what you want? Is that the endgame here?" Mickey asked, unsure of what he wanted the answer to be.

Did he want to be with Ian again? After all this time, after all the bullshit they put each other through?

That was a stupid fucking question.

Of course he wanted Ian. He'd always want Ian.

Even if it ended up killing him.

But was that the right thing to do? Should he really give it over to Ian again? To inevitably get broken in half again?

But that was unfair, because Mickey had changed a lot over the past few years, who was he to say that Ian hadn't changed too? Maybe things could be different this time.

"I really don't know, Mick." Ian said, pulling Mickey out of his head. "I want to be with you, always have. You know that. But after all this shit with Brian, I don't think I can be with anyone for a while." Ian sat back against the couch, wrapping his arms around himself protectively. "I can't be the boyfriend I want to be when I can't even let anyone touch me."

"I just touched you." Mickey pointed out.

"You know that's not what I mean." Ian sighed. "I, um, tried to fuck some random at the club sometime last weekend, and I had a total freak out. Full blown panic attack. I fucking cried jerking off the other day." Ian spat bitterly. "I'm too fucked up."

And there were the tears again.

Fuck.

"Hey, hey." Mickey mummered, pulling Ian back to his original position against his chest. "Fuck, man, you do whatever you have to do to get back to yourself. Take as much time as you need, you know I'm not going anywhere."

Ian looked up at him, his grip on Mickey's side tightening. "Does that mean you'll wait for me? Til I get better?"

Mickey smiled down at him. Ian's face was so open and child-like. And here Mickey was again, bending to Gallagher's will.

"You said 'friends', Gallagher. Are you now implying you wanna get back together?" the idea had Mickey smiling despite himself.

"Maybe." Ian hedged. "I don't know. Can we just see how it goes? I still love you Mick, but we don't really know each other anymore. Let's take our time like we said, see what's what?"

Mickey nodded, even though he thought it was pointless. They are obviously still in love, probably always will be. But if Ian needed to take it slow, for the first time in his life probably, Mickey was going to let him. Besides, maybe Ian's right. Love isn't enough to sustain a real relationship. They proved that shit more than once. And they really don't know each other anymore.
And more than anything, it's obvious Ian needs a real friend right now.
Ian needed it. So Mickey was going to give it to him.

As always.

"Thank you, Mick. I really need some time. But I don't wanna do it alone, you know?" Ian fiddled with the hem of Mickey t-shirt.

"Whatever you need, Ian. You should know that shit by now." Mickey sighed. He pulled Ian closer to him, running his hand through Ian's hair.
Ian let out a low breath, relaxing into Mickey's touch.
Mickey gave in in that moment, laying a soft kiss to the top of his ginger's head.

"Whatever you need." he repeated.

Mickey doesn't know how long they sat like that, Ian gripping Mickey like a lifeline and Mickey running a hand up and down his back.

Mickey felt lighter than he had since he came back from Mexico. They had gotten all their shit out in the open, and they were still here, still willing to take a chance on each other, however long that took. He didn't know for sure what was going to happen with Ian, but he knew he'd do anything to have more moments like this. Soft, quiet, gentle moments lost in each other's presence.

He loves Ian more than anything, and he'll go to the ends of the Earth to help him feel better.
However long it takes, Mickey's gonna be there.

He sighed in relief, arms wrapped tightly around Ian, rocking him back and forth. He'd stay like this forever if he could.

Being with Ian like this is like coming up for air after almost drowning.

He can finally breathe again.
Room to Grow

Chapter Summary

everybody's making moves.

Chapter Notes

this chapter has some talk about trans people from a perspective of a person who doesn't really understand it. it's not hateful, just a little ignorant. i think that kind of stuff is normal for people who don't really get it, or deal with it in their everyday lives. i don't think it's too bad, but i'd be remiss if i didn't at least give a heads up.

Things with Ian are good. All things considered, he's doing okay.

It's been about a week since he and Mickey had their heart to heart. Ian didn't know what was going to come of this shit with Mickey, but he's relieved and happy to at least have him in his life again. They both agreed that there is still something powerful between them, and neither of them were willing to give up hope just yet.

They hadn't seen each other since that day, too busy doing their own things, but they had taken to texting each other. They texted more now than they ever had when they were together. Ian was surprised when the first text came. He knew that he and Mickey were in a much better place now than they were when Mickey first came back, but he hadn't expected Mickey to initiate contact.

But he did.

Surprising Ian again.

A stupid, meaningless "Hey, long day of saving lives?" on that past Wednesday had started it all. Now Ian sends him photos of his morning jogs, and Mickey sends him back pictures of his work injuries. Stupid shit like wood splinters with a caption that says "you think this needs stitches, doc?"

Ian loves it.

After that day at the Milkovich house, when Mickey and Ian had spilled their guts to each other, Ian had been exhausted. Emotionally drained, pretty fucking drunk and completely spent. But he was happy. He felt like that talk was the first step towards a real relationship with Mickey. Which is what Ian really wanted.

He just had to get there. He had a ways to go. He knew that.

He had finally told Caroline about everything that happened with Brian, before and after the break up. She was very concerned Ian didn't tell her about Brian's abusive tendencies from the beginning, and Ian had a hard time explaining to her that he didn't see it that way. Abusive. He just thought Brian was kind of a dick. He'd been dealing with guys like him his whole life.
It wasn't even the first time Ian had been raped. Him and Caroline had gone over that shit from his past again and again. The men at the club, taking what they wanted whether or not Ian was into it. Or even coherent.

But it had felt different with Brian. Partially because Ian was mentally present when it happened. He wasn't so out of his mind on drugs or so incredibly manic that he didn't know what was happening. He was sober and lucid and could feel every second of the assault.

But the other reason it was so different for Ian was because Brian was his boyfriend. A person he trusted and cared about. Someone he was supposed to feel safe with. And Brian had taken that trust and mutilated it until there was nothing left. He broke Ian down until all he had were jagged pieces of who he used to be. He used and abused Ian's body, and his mind, and now Ian's not sure how to get back to himself. But he's gonna fucking figure it out.

Caroline kept telling him how proud she was of him, for checking himself in, and getting out of the relationship. She said many people weren't strong enough to do it on their own.

She sounded just like Mickey. The thought made Ian smile.

Today was a big day. For Ian and for Mickey. Today was the day Ian and Mandy were moving into their apartment on West Loyola Avenue in Boystown. It was far from his childhood home, and it was almost a half an hour by car to work. (meaning it's almost an hour on the L, but Ian will make it work.) But Mandy loved it, and the neighborhood was nice, so Ian guesses it's worth the commute. Besides, he's in love with the building. It's just so damn charming. The built-ins and the moldings, the aesthetic of the place is amazing. It's clean and it's got all new appliances. And most importantly, it's his. He did the work to get it, his name is on the lease, and he will be able to make it his home. He will no longer be a guest in someone else's house, which is how he felt for the past ten years of his life. First at home with Fiona, then with various boyfriends after that, culminating in the shit show that was his 'home' with Brian. He never felt like he belonged there, Brian made sure of that. He always felt like an unwelcome guest.

But here, in this new place with Mandy, he was going to make his home.

It was fucking exciting.

It was also a big day for Mickey. Jack was finally going to Victory House. He was supposed to go the past Monday, but he was still too strung out to get into the house right away. The guy who ran the house, Andy, had told Trevor that Jack needed to be clean, no longer dope sick, to get into the house, since they had no detox services on site. And anyone who's witnessed a junkie detox knows it a painful and somewhat gross experience. The house just doesn't have the resources for that.

So Mickey had checked Jack into a detox called "Gateway" to get him clean enough to get into the house. Luckily, Andy was willing to hold the bed for the six days it takes to complete the detox program.

So here Ian was, laying in bed at 6:30 in the morning on a Sunday, looking around his room, that used to be Mickey's room, that will be Mickey's room again by the end of the day. He had boxes strewn all around the room, half packed with clothes and random odds and ends. He had only been at the Milkovich house for a couple months, but he had amassed quite a bit of shit.

All the things Brian had destroyed or kept, Ian had managed to reacquire. He had a new laptop, a new ipod, new clothes and all that happy shit. He was slowly rebuilding his life, inside and out. It felt good. Like maybe Brian hadn't destroyed him as much as he thought he had.
Ian stretched out in the sheets, hands up over his head and toes pointed down toward the end of the bed. He yawned, clenching his eyes shut. It was gonna be a long day.
But it was going to be amazing.

-----------------------------------------------

Mickey groaned, rolling over in the big bed to lay on his back. The apartment was quiet. Too quiet. Jack had been gone for six days, off to detox to get his shit straight before he moved into the halfway house, and Mickey's not ashamed to admit he misses him. It's strange, having this huge apartment all to himself. Working all day with Matt and the guys just to come home to a dark, empty apartment. Devoid of Jack and all his frenetic energy, the place feels empty and cold.

Mickey didn't even want to stay there while Jack was in detox. He told Jack and Matt he'd get a room at a roach motel for the week, but both Matt and Jack insisted he stay at the loft until Ian and Mandy moved into their new place. Mickey had begrudgingly agreed, even though he felt weird being there without Jack.

The week had gone by both fast and slow for Mickey. Fast because he'd kept busy with work, as busy as Matt would let him. He got home just as the July sun was going down and fell into Jack's huge bed with a beer and fell asleep with the TV on. But slow at the same time, because the moment he walked through the door at the end of the day, it was just him and his thoughts. Nothing made the time drag more than mentally listing all your failings and mistakes while watching The Sopranos on DVD. He hated being alone with his mind's tortured musings.

He hadn't seen Ian since the day they talked.

Mickey thought that was probably a good thing, even though he missed the guy more than he probably should. That talk had been emotional and jarring and so fucking draining, Mickey felt like both of them needed a little time to process all they had learned about each other.

But Mickey had always been weak where Gallagher was concerned, and now that he got a taste of him again, he had to have some kind of contact, couldn't help himself.

So he gave in and started texting him. Simple, stupid shit. But it was nice to have that connection, even if they weren't physically together. It felt good. And Mickey would take what he could get right now.

He knew for a fact that he couldn't pursue a relationship with Ian any time soon. Even if he wanted to, which he probably did if he was being honest with himself, he couldn't in good conscience go after Ian when he knew what the other man was dealing with at the moment.

Mickey knew first hand what it was like to be raped. Although the circumstances were different, he was sure the emotions were the same. He was sure Ian felt dirty, and skittish, and probably didn't want to be touched too much. If Mickey had to guess, he's pretty sure Ian won't be ready to date anyone for a while, never mind fuck.

But that's okay with Mickey, because he's got a lot of his own shit going on right now too. First, he's got to get up to Gateway and pick up Jack and drop him at the Victory House. He has his bags all packed and sitting by the front door. Matt is going to pick Mickey up around 9 and they are going to go get him together. Jack's mom, Lexi, still won't talk to Jack. She's positive this is just another ploy
for money, and refuses to get involved. Mickey understands that, maybe, but he just doesn't have the heart to turn his back on the kid. He loves him. And Matt obviously feels the same way, going against his wife to help Mickey get Jack to treatment.

Mickey is grateful to Matt for so many things, his job, Matt's kind advice and caring personality. But he's most grateful to Matt for not giving up on Jack. Mickey doesn't know what he'd do if he had to help Jack all on his own.

Then, after Jack's situated at Victory House, Mickey's gotta high-tale it down to S. Homon to help his sister and Ian move to their new apartment on Loyola Ave. He didn't want to spend his weekend carting people and shit all over Chicago, but he was powerless to say no to any of these people.

He had a lot of other shit going on besides moving from one spot to another, though. He had a meeting with Batemen, his PO, earlier in the week, and the dude thought it would be just swell if Mickey would go to some fucking support group for rape victims. Mickey openly balked at the guy. Who the fuck did he think he was, using personal shit from Mickey's prison file against him like that? Making him dredge up all this shit he thought he buried long ago. Making it a part of his parole agreement so Mickey had no fucking choice. It boiled his damn blood, being forced to do anything. He'd lived his whole life that way. With Terry, then in prison. He detested being told what to do. And he'd rather skin himself alive than share his feelings with a group of random strangers. Never mind a group of gay rape survivors. But Batemen gave him no other options, it was group or a parole violation. Mickey was taking a few days to get used to the idea. He didn't have to share, right? He just had to show the fuck up and get his card signed. He could do that.

And to add insult to injury, the court date for Yevgeny's adoption was coming up soon. It would only be a few more months before the kid would no longer be Mickey's son. On some deep level, Mickey knew Yev would always be his. But he would no longer be a Milkovich by name. Which honestly was probably a blessing for the kid, but it still made Mickey's heart ache in a way he couldn't really describe.

Not only that, but Svetlana had been dodging him for the past couple weeks. He'd been really wrapped up in shit with Ian and Jack over the past month, but not so lost in it that he didn't have time to text his ex-wife to ask about the kid. None of his texts had garnered a response. He'd looked up Yev's soccer schedule online, but without Jack as a north side buffer, he was too chicken shit to show up on his own, especially without the go-ahead from Svetlana first. So he was stuck. He wanted to see Yev, try to build some kind of relationship with him, adoption or not. But his commie ex-wife seemed to be blocking him for whatever reason.

Fuck it.

He'd deal with that shit another day. Right now he had to get ready to pick up Jack. It was a little after 7, and he had to shower and get ready before Matt came and picked him up. It was gonna be a long day.

He groaned again, heaving himself up and pulling himself to the edge of the bed. His bare feet hit the wood floor and he walked to the bathroom in his boxers, scratching his chest mindlessly. He pisses first, before stepping up to the sink to brush his teeth. He glances at himself in the mirror. He looks good. All outside stressors aside, he's sleeping better now than before Jack went away. The heroin was really fucking with his sleep schedule, not to mention he'd lost ten pounds in the short time he'd been getting high with Jack. It was like he was never hungry, didn't really think much of it until he stopped being stupid, and took a real look at himself for the first time in a month. He had been skinnier, and paler (how that was possible, he didn't know) than when he was in jail, which is saying a lot. Over the last week or so, he'd gained what little color he usually had back, and managed to
gain a single pound. Baby steps, he supposes.

After he brushed his teeth, he turned on the shower, wandering into the bedroom again while he waited for the water to heat up. He grabbed his phone so he could have the music while he showered. It really was too fucking quiet here.

When he unplugged his phone from the cord and grabbed it off the nightstand, he saw he had a flourish of text messages.
What the fuck was everyone doing up so early on a Sunday?
Oh right. Probably getting ready for this crazy fucking day they all had in store.
He unlocked the phone to read through all his messages, running a hand over his head.

miss bitch: hey asshole, u up? better not flake on us today. ur small & all, but every able body helps.

Mickey shook his head. Mandy never could just be nice. Even when she was asking for help, she had to be a bitch.

me: yes, fuck. i'm up. ur princess ass won't have to lift shit. calm your tits, bitch.

He scrolled past Mandy to see a message from Iggy. Shit, he's getting it from all Milkovich angles this morning.

iggs: hey dude. gonna b around today? i can't deal w/ these high maintenance jag offs alone. plz don't make me.

Seriously? What the fuck is with everyone thinking he's gonna bail? God damn it.

me: fuck u. i said i'd b there. i'm gunna b there. 12 pm, right?

He fired off his response to his brother, and scrolled through the rest of his received messages. The next one was from Matt.

matty: hey kid. just want to thank you again. it means a lot, you coming along today. i'll see you @ 830. i'll bring coffee.

Mickey shook his head at that one. Matt didn't have to keep thanking him. He wanted to be there for
Jack. Wanted to help him get better. He also wanted to be there to support Matt through this, since Lexi seemed to have lost all interest in Jack's recovery. Maybe she was just so emotionally drained from doing this shit for years. Mickey was wrung dry, and it had only been a couple months.

Loving an addict was tiring.

Mickey shook his head, not in the mood to get lost in dark thoughts about Jack's addiction right now. He scrolled past Matt's text to the last one in the thread, from Ian, of course.

Ian hadn't missed a day texting since they last saw each other. That simple fact brought the smile back to Mickey's face.

ian: guess i'll be seeing u around noon? just wanna thank u 4 helping us out 2day. i know u are super busy 2day, and u didn't have 2 come. so thanks. c u soon. ;)

Ian and his fucking winky faces. Jesus. It's like he's still seventeen.

He made Mickey feel that way too, sometimes.

He doesn't bother to respond to Matt or Ian. Matt already knew he was gonna be ready at 8:30, and he was really trying not to get too caught up in 'Ian' thinking before he got picked up. He needed to focus on Jack this morning, he could deal with Gallagher later.

He closes his messaging app and opens up Pandora, going to his metal playlist. The sounds of Slipknot filling the bathroom through Jack's bluetooth speakers. He opened up the glass door and slid into the huge tiled shower.

The water pressure was amazing, although the shower felt inordinately big without his usual shower buddy. But he tried to put that out of his mind as he grabbed the shower gel and soaped up his body. He let his mind wander, which was never a good thing for Mickey. He hadn't gotten laid since Jack went in, and after having dick on tap for so long, he was jonesing for a good fuck, but didn't want to put the effort into a club hook-up, and grindr just freaked him out. Gave him a serial killer vibe he just couldn't shake. After so many years of having someone around to fuck, he was at a loss with his new situation.

Just thinking about how he wasn't getting laid was getting him hard. What the fuck....

He ran a soapy hand down over his dick, sliding over the head and down the shaft to his balls. He pulled on them lightly, sighing as he tipped his head back.

Fuck it. He's got a couple minutes to spare.

He spread his legs a bit to get a better grip on his dick. It gets fully hard quick under his tight grasp. He slides his fist up and down the shaft, head still back, mind still wandering. At first he thinks he'll think of Jack, but that feels all kinds of fucked up considering where the kid is at right now.

He knows in the back of his mind that's just an excuse. He doesn't want to think of Jack.

He wants to think of Ian.

He wants Ian.

So fuck it.

He pulls on his memory, settling on something that will get him there fast. It's a memory of a shower, ironically enough.
Ian and Mickey had been staying at the Gallagher house, and Fiona had finally scrounged enough money to pay the gas bill. No one else was home, and the hot water just got turned back on. The two boys had scrambled up the stairs, pushing and shoving each other playfully to get to the bathroom first.

Ian had gotten there a step before Mickey, blocking the bathroom door with his huge body.

'C'mon, man, I really need a fucking shower.' Mickey had sighed, not wanting to go home smelling like Ian's dick and cum.

'You can have a shower, Mick, but only if you join me in mine.' Ian smirked.

They had never showered together before. Looking back on it now, it was such a small thing, but to Mickey at the time it had been huge. Just one more thing to show him how much of a faggot he really was. Anger and shame mixed together as he pushed Ian with both hands.

'Fuck off. I'll just shower at home.' He'd said, crossing his arms over his chest. He stared Ian down before turning to head back to the boys' bedroom to grab his shit and go home.

'Mick.' Ian had sighed, grabbing his hand and pulling him to his chest. 'No one's here, it's just you and me. You know I'll never tell.'

Mickey caved, like he always seemed to do with Ian.

Mickey had allowed Ian to pull him into the shower and under the hot water, secretly grateful for Ian not giving up, but not pushing too hard.

Ian had him bent over facing the front of the tub while he took him from behind, running a hand soothingly down his back while the other one gripped tightly on his hip. Perverse sounds and quiet praises passing his lips as he turned Mickey into mush with his dick. Mickey came so hard that day.

And Ian never told. Just like he promised.

Mickey is reliving that hot memory, hand flying up and down on his cock as he works himself towards orgasm. He thinks about Ian's mouth on his shoulder blades, hands in his hair, pulling his head back so he can suck on his neck. He thinks about Ian's huge fucking cock stretching him out and hitting places inside him he didn't even know he had. He can hear Ian's voice in his head as he climbs higher and higher toward his peak.

'Fucking sexy, Mick. I'm so close. Gonna fill you up with my cum, you want that? Fuck, your perfect.'

Mickey slams his free hand against the tiled wall as his orgasm hits him. His legs shake and he covers the wall with his release. His whole body thrums with the power of it, and he thinks for a second he's going to fall out.

But he doesn't.

His heartbeat calms down, his breathing goes back to normal, and he's left standing there in the hot shower, washing the evidence of his pleasure off his stomach and legs.

He didn't think of Jack while he was jerking off because he felt guilty doing it. What the fuck was he thinking, thinking of Gallagher? Was that any better? Ian was struggling right now, just like Jack, except he was recovering from being raped.

Mickey felt a strange feeling settle over him. He was confused. Was it wrong to think of Ian like that
while he was all fucked up over that Brian douche? Did it make Mickey just as bad? Using Ian like that?

Mickey shook his head as he got out of the shower.

No. It's not the fucking same.

That was his memory. One he shared with Ian. He owned it just as much as Ian did. It was part of who they were. He was allowed to relive it. He was allowed to miss Ian, he's allowed to fantasize about Ian. He's allowed that. It's not using Ian or exploiting Ian. It's loving Ian in the only way he can right now. And fuck anyone who thinks he'll give that shit up.

He left the bathroom to get dressed. He was running behind due to his trip down memory lane, and Matt would have his ass if they were late to collect Jack.

------------------------------------------------

Ian had finally dragged himself out of bed around 8:00. He showered and brushed his teeth, avoiding his aching morning wood because he was scared he'd have another melt down. Caroline had told him it would become easier with time, that he just had to keep going to therapy and writing in his journal. Ian wasn't sure it was going to be that easy, but he didn't know what else to do except follow her advice.

It's not like he knew shit about healing emotionally. No one he knows has ever done it. They just pushed it down, or medicated it away with drugs and alcohol. He was on his own with this, so who knew how long is was gonna take.

Ian sighed, willing his boner away, along with all the fucked up feelings it brought.

Fuck. Why did everything have to be so hard? Literally.....

Ian laughed at himself for the irony of his stupid thoughts.

He finished up in the bathroom, grabbing his meds from the cabinet for the last time, along with his toothbrush, the only things of his left in the bathroom. He grabbed a pill out of each bottle and put them in his pocket, and threw the bottles and his toothbrush in the open box by the bathroom door.

He wandered into the kitchen, finding Iggy, Mandy and Tess already around the table, sipping coffee and eating bagels.

"Who got breakfast?" he asked.

Iggy raised his hand, mouth full, poppy seeds littering his shirt. "Mph" came the muffled response, crumbs flying out of his mouth.

"Jesus fuck, Igg, come the fuck on with that shit." Mandy barked, jumping backward as to not get hit with the bagel shrapnel.

"Sorry." he smiled, finally swallowing and taking a sip of his coffee.
"Dick. I'm not gonna miss your stupid ass at all." Mandy grumbled, swiping crumbs off her cut off t-shirt.

Ian giggled. Couldn't help it. Mandy sent him a glare that had him straightening up quick, though.

"Baby, what did we say about talking with your mouth full?" Tessa asked gently, rubbing Iggy's back.

"Sorry babe." Iggy said, actually looking conciliatory. Ian was always shocked to see how Tessa seemed to tame Iggy. She had turned him into a polite, kind, considerate person. That made her a miracle worker in Ian's eyes.

"Whatever." Mandy grumbled, obviously less impressed.

"What time is Mick coming around?" Mandy asked, sipping her coffee out of her 'bad ass bitch' mug.

Iggy shrugged. "He said around 12:30 " he says, stuffing another bagel in his mouth. Kid could put the food away, that was for sure.

"Why the fuck isn't he here now? He knows we wanted to start early." Mandy said, pulling out her phone again. "I'm getting his ass here now. He promised."

"He, uh, he's bringing Jack to rehab this morning with Matt. You know, his boss?" Ian said, pulling a bagel out of the bag, not wanting to look up in case his emotions showed on his face.

"So you guys ARE talking again. I knew it!!" Tess screeches, jumping out of her chair and onto Iggy's lap. "Pay up, baby." she coos, putting her hands on Iggy's face and squeezing his cheeks together.

"Fuck." he grumbles, sliding Tessa to the side so he can grab his wallet out of his back pocket and pass his girlfriend twenty dollars.

Ian is flabbergasted. "You were betting on whether or not me and Mick were talking?" he asks. Why the hell was his relationship with Mickey betting material.

"Nothing too serious, baby, don't worry." Tessa says sweetly, patting Ian's hand across the table. "Me and Iggy were just talking the other night about how nice it would be for you and Mickey to be friendly again. He said it was way off, but I had a feeling it would happen soon. I got a way with these things, you know. I can see it." she tapped the side of her head for emphasis. "I get feelings around certain people, and you and Mickey have strong energy together."

"What, are you like a psychic or something?" Mandy laughs from her spot seated on the counter.

"I dunno about all that." Tessa shrugs, wrapping her arms around Iggy's bare shoulders. "Just get feelings sometimes. And I got a feeling about you two. And it just won me twenty bucks, so...." she trails off, smiling.

Ian shakes his head at that, tossing his pills in his mouth and washing them down with a sip of his coffee. Iggy's girlfriend is a nice enough girl, but he doesn't know how much weight he's going to put on her prediction.

Even after everything they said to each other during their last meeting, he has no idea how they'd ever get back to what they had before.

It just doesn't feel possible.
Mickey's knee will just not stop jerking. He's been sitting in the lobby of the hospital for the past half hour. How fucking long can it take to check someone out of a place like this? He was jittery and anxious and he just wanted to get Jack and get the fuck out of this place. It wasn't a real hospital, but it had that sterile feel and that hospital smell, and Mickey hated that shit.

"Chill." Matt murmured, setting a hand on Mickey's shoulder, shaking him back and forth a bit.

"Sorry." Mickey replied, rolling his coffee cup in his hand. Back and forth, feeling the hot liquid sloshing around inside. "Just not good at waiting."

"I get it, kid. I'm nervous too."

They wait for another ten minutes until the door at the end of the room opens and Jack walks out, followed by an Asian woman in scrubs. Jack's eyes immediately went to Mickey. His face held a strange mixture of relief and guilt. Mickey gave him what he hoped was a reassuring smile, and a slight nod of his head as he stood up from his seat. Jack nodded back, picking up speed in his steps until he was almost sprinting to Mickey's open arms.

Mickey readily accepted him, closing his arms around him and holding him tight, swaying slightly from the power of the embrace.

"Asshole." Mickey muttered into Jack's hair.

"Dick." Jack replied easily, their inside joke complete, the both huffed out a laugh, neither moving to let go just yet.

Mickey could hear Matt talking to the nurse or whatever on the other side of the room, so he pulled back a bit, setting his forehead against Jack's and putting one of his hands on the back of his neck to keep him in place.

"You're going to do this." he said.

It wasn't a question.

Jack was going to do this, or Mickey would have to walk away. It was going to hurt like a motherfucker, he didn't want to lose the kid. But Mickey's walked away from things he loved just as much and survived. And that is what this is about. Surviving. Mickey couldn't continue on like this.

"Yeah, man. I'm gonna do it." Jack mumbled, laying his head on Mickey's shoulder.

"Okay." Mickey whispered. "Okay."

Mickey looks up when he feels Matt's hand on his shoulder. He finally pulls away from Jack so his father can pull him into a tight hug.

"Jackie boy. You scared your old man good this time." he said, pulling back so he can look his son in the eye. Matt is taller than Jack by a few inches, but they look so alike, Mickey thinks looking at Jack must be like going back in time for Matt. "No more fucking around, yeah?" he asks, running a
hand over his son's mop of unruly hair.

"No more fucking around, Dad." Jack sighs, leaning into his father and snuggling his head into his shoulder. Mickey is taken aback at how young Jack looks just then. He's only a few years younger than Mickey, but in that moment he looks like a scared child. "Promise." he adds, squeezing his dad hard.

Mickey doesn't know how serious he is about his promise to his father, but he hopes he has some intention of actually following through this time. Mickey doesn't want to lose him, but he has to do what's best for himself. He hopes to god Jack doesn't make him choose.

Matt picks up the duffel bag Jack had dropped at his feet in his haste to get to Mickey and slung it over his free shoulder. Keeping his other arm wrapped tightly around his only son, he started walking toward the exit of the clinic.

"Let's get you to this fucking place, so you can start working on that, okay?" he laughs.

Jack laughs with him, sparing a look over his shoulder at Mickey, who is trailing behind them, hands in his pockets. Mickey shoots him a wink, and Jack gives him one of his stunner smiles before he turns around to face forward.

"Mick, you got directions to this place? I don't want to fucking google it again." Matt sighed as he unlocked the truck.

"Uh, sure." Mickey replied, pulling out his phone so he could open up the email Ian had sent him a few days ago. "I'll get us there."

"Lift with your knees, Igg. You're gonna throw your fucking back out." Ian grumbled, holding his end of the couch aloft while Iggy struggled to get his side off the ground.

"Motherfucker." Iggy grunted. "Why you gotta take this shit anyway? Why don't you just buy a new one?"

"Because, asshole." Mandy said, picking up a box and walking out of the storage unit. "All this stuff is fucking brand new, just sitting here waiting for my new place. Why the fuck wouldn't I take it? Jeff owes me this, for all the bullshit he put me through. The least he can do is give me the furniture from our house."

"Isn't that a direct quote from your divorce attorney?" Ian laughed, stepping up backwards on the the bumper of the moving truck so he could maneuver the couch inside. God knows he didn't trust Iggy to walk backwards, never mind backwards and up a step. He didn't want to break an ankle today.

"Ha ha, Ian." Mandy rolled her eyes, walking around the struggling men to jump into the back of the U-haul with her single box.

"I can't believe none of your million siblings could be bothered to help." Mandy says, depositing her box in the back of the truck and making her way down to the pavement again.
She looks good today. Healthier than she did when Ian first saw her. Her hair was shiny, pinned high on her head in a big bun, little whisks flying free, framing her face. She was wearing what looked like one of Mickey's old Pantera t-shirts, and cut off jeans shorts with bleach spots all over them. She looked like the Mandy Ian met back when he was a stupid kid, minus the hooker make-up. She was beautiful, as usual.

Ian was over the moon to see her getting back to herself.

"Nah." Ian started. He dropped his edge of the couch and walked back to the back of the truck, where the paneled door was pulled up and the truck was backed against the opening of the storage unit. "They are still kinda pissed at me for not moving home, not to mention never telling them about Brian." he cleared his throat, avoiding Mandy's eyes.

Iggy stood off to the side awkwardly, not knowing what Ian was talking about, but able to discern it was some heavy shit he probably didn't want to know.

"Uh, I'm gonna go see what's taking Tess so long at the soda machine." he called over his shoulder, already making his way to the front of the storage yard.

Once he had made it a fair distance, Mandy jumped up into the open back of the truck and sat down on the couch. "Come." she said, patting the cushion. Ian stood up and went over to the couch, flopping down on the couch next to her.

"They're still not talking to you?" she asked. Mandy knew that Ian's family was usually a sore spot, but she couldn't help but ask.

"Not really, no. When I told them about what happened with Brian, they were really mad at me for not coming to them. Not going home. Then when I told them I was gonna stay with you, they got even angrier, thought it was about Mick, of course. Thought I was hanging around you to get close to Mick again. Then they started in on my bipolar, saying all this shit about how they wanted me around so they could keep an eye on me. But I don't want that, Mands, I wanna take care of myself. I wanna move in with you, be my own person again. I need that. I need the independence of it. They don't understand that. They think I'm just being defiant, but that's not it. I need to do this on my own. They don't understand." Ian laid his head on the back of the couch, staring up at the roof of the box truck.

"Have you talked to them at all since then?" Mandy asked, laying her head on his shoulder.

"Lip texted me a couple times. Saying fucked up shit like 'you're only hurting yourself.' and 'let us take care of you'. Oh, and my personal favorite 'you can't count on them like you can count on us'. Whatever the fuck that means. I know he means well, but he's just pushing me further away with shit like that." Ian sighed, putting his arm around Mandy's shoulder and pulling her into his side. "I think they still see me as that fucked up seventeen year old? Remember?"

Mandy nodded. Of course she remembered, it had been terrifying.

"I was with you guys when it first got bad. And you and Mick tried to take care of me." Ian's voice took on a fond, far-away quality as he relived the memory. "Fiona and Lip were so pissed, offended even. That they didn't see it, that they weren't there for the first symptoms. I think they still feel that way. Like only they are allowed to care about me. Like you and Mick don't deserve my trust or something." he sighed again, feeling those same emotions building up inside him. Anger and frustration with his siblings for pulling these stupid power plays with him when the Milkovichs were concerned. "They never thought you guys were good enough for me. Always telling me I could do better. But they don't know shit. You and Mick took better care of me than they could ever hope to.
And I think that's why they are so mad."

Mandy tipped her head back to look Ian in the eyes. He had that same distracted look in his eye again, like he was reliving a well-worn family argument in his mind. She nudged him with her shoulder so he would look down at her.

"Well, fuck 'em." she smiled. "Let them come to you. You don't own them anything, Ian. Live your own life however makes you happy. Give it some time. You know as well as I do, they aren't going anywhere."

Ian smiled down at her. "Yeah, you're right."

"Of course I'm fucking right. Do you know me at all?" she laughed, jumping up off the couch just as Iggy and Tessa came back around the corner, hands filled with sodas and snacks.

"You didn't do anything the whole time we were gone?" Iggy balked.

"Are you seriously shitfing on my work ethic right now Igg?" Mandy laughed. "Go grab the bed frame and shut the fuck up."

Iggy stared daggers after his little sister, then turned on Ian. "Got something to say, Red?"

"Nah, Igg." Ian laughed, plucking his Dr. Pepper from Iggy's full arms. "Couldn't do this shit without you." he laughed. He started walking back toward the storage unit. "But we better get our asses in gear, before Mandy really gets pissy."

"Yeah, dude." Iggy laughs, following behind Ian. "I'm in no mood to get stabbed today."

Matt put the truck in park outside a huge house on a quiet North side street. Mickey looked around, feeling out of place as usual. This was a much more residential neighborhood than the one where Jack's loft was. The house itself was huge. Big wrap around porch with Adirondack chairs littered all over it. Huge bay windows and a slate roof. The grass was green and there were flowering bushes lining the front walk and the porch.

Jack came up behind Mickey and huffed. "This looks awful." he grumbled.

"You're just saying that cuz you don't wanna be here." Mickey replied. He knew Jack was nervous and probably a little bit scared, but he wasn't gonna feed that shit. "It looks like a nice house. Give it a chance." he slung an arm around Jack's shoulders and lead him up the walk, feeling Jack reluctance in the way he dragged his feet. "C'mon man, you got this." Mickey whisper, knocking their heads together softly as they continued toward the front door.

By the time they got up the walk, Matt was already at the door, which was now open. There was a man standing there, in his mid-forties, if Mickey had to guess. He must be the guy that runs the house, the one who owed Ian's dick of an ex the favor to get Jack into the house.

"Hey guys, I'm Andy, welcome to Victory House." he smiled brightly, shaking Matt's hand.

"Hey, I'm Matt." Matt answered, shaking back. Once he had let go, he put a hand on Jack's shoulder.
"This is my son, Jackson, and his friend Mickey."

Jack put his hand out to shake the man's hand. "Just Jack, please." he said.

"Well, it's nice to meet you Jack, and the rest of you as well." Andy said nodding in Mickey's direction. "I hope you find your time here to be the start of your journey to true recovery."

Mickey barely contained his eye roll as he followed the men into the house. The foyer was huge, with a giant staircase being the first thing you saw when you came in. Off to the left was what looked like a den, and on the right was the living room with a huge flat screen TV and an expensive stereo. Mickey's first thought was how do they keep this shit around in a house full of newly clean junkies, but he kept that shit to himself.

"So, this is the living room, and the library." Andy said, waving to the right and left. "And if you follow me, I'll show you the rest, and then we'll talk terms, okay?"

"Sounds good." Matt spoke for the group. Mickey was merely here for moral support, but he was listening. He knew he didn't really have a say, but he was going to check this place out nevertheless. No way in hell he was taking that Travis dude's word that this place was good enough for Jack. Fuck Travis, or whatever the fuck his name is.

The followed Andy down a short hallway, halfway down he stopped pointing to a door on the left. "Downstairs bathroom." he said. Pointing to the right, "Basement. There's a rec room of sorts down there. Pool table, TV, board games. It's also where he have our in-house meetings. AA, NA, or otherwise." he continued down the hall until he came to the kitchen. It was in the back of the first floor, and was huge, like the rest of the house. It had hardwood floors like the rest of the downstairs, and a big island in the middle of the room, bar stools scattered around it haphazardly. There was a huge window looking out onto the back deck, with a door to said deck toward the back of the room. The stainless steel appliances were new, reminding Mickey of Jack's apartment. Andy opened a door, which led to a good sized pantry. "This is where you can keep any snacks and shit you buy." he pointed to some plastic totes that had people's names written on them on tape. "You can get whatever you want, but put your damn name on it. Obviously we've got a bit of a theft problem, things being what they are."

"You mean a house full of junkies?" Jack laughed. Matt gave him an unimpressed glare, but Andy just shrugged.

"Pretty much." he conceded. He turned on the spot and walked to the door by the end of the kitchen, and opened it, stepping out onto a deck. The men followed him into what Mickey was impressed to find was a beautiful back yard. The deck was nice and big, low to the ground. Beyond that was a small brick patio with a picnic table and beyond that was a fire pit with more Adirondack chairs circled around it. A tall fence ran the perimeter of the yard, a small shed in the back corner.

"You got free reign of the yard, but fires only on weekends, and no guests until you've been here two weeks, okay?" Andy asked, maneuvering around the yard to get back into the house.

"Uh, sure." Jack said, following his father and Andy back into the house, Mickey trailing behind again. They made their way back through the house and to the stairs.

"Grab that bag and I'll show you where you're rooming." Andy said, already making his way up the stairs.

Matt grabbed the bag and headed up first, followed by Jack and Mickey in the back again.
The upstairs of the house was just as massive. There was a landing at the top of the stairs, and a big open space at the top. Doors lined both sides of the long hallway.

"There are seven bedrooms up here. Four doubles and three singles. The doubles are usually for newer guys, like you. For you to get your bearings and see how you fit into the house. And honestly, lots of guys don't last too long. If you are one of the few that can work the program, once someone graduates, you can get a single. It's based on seniority, you know what I mean? And the last single is mine. I live on site, and we've got a couple other guys who work here part time, most are graduates of the program that wanna give back somehow." Andy droned on while walking to the end of the hall. "This here on the left is the bathroom you can use. There's another one at the other end of the hall, but that one isn't for you. We got a system, so keep to it, okay?" he eyed Jack, who nodded.

"Okay, so this is you." Andy said, pushing open the door directly across from the bathroom.

The room was smaller than the one at Jack's apartment, but bigger than Mickey's bedroom at his old house. It had two beds lined up against the far wall and two dressers directly opposite of the beds. There was an old TV on a bookshelf in the corner, books overflowing the shelves and stacked on the floor. There was a closet on the wall nearest the door, but the door was closed so Mickey couldn't see in. The walls were bare around the closest bed, but the walls by the far bed, by the window, were covered with drawings and pictures cut out of magazines. The far dresser was littered with toiletries and framed photos, clothes hanging out of half open drawers.

"So you'll be rooming with Rowan." Andy said, pointing to the far end of the room. "He's not here right now, he's working down at the drop in center. That's where I know Trevor from." Andy said conversationally, as if Mickey or anyone else in the room gave a fuck about Trevor.

Well, that's not quite right. Matt probably gives a shit. It's because of that guy that they are even in this house right now. It's because of that guy that Jack got in at all. So Maybe Mickey should care too.

It's hard, though. To be grateful to someone who has such rabid hatred toward him based solely off the fact of who he is to Ian.

But Mickey can't get caught up in that shit right now. Travis or Toby or whatever his name is did Mickey and Jack a huge solid, so Mickey's going to let it go.

For now.

"Not to get too personal right off the bat, Jack." Andy said, crossing his arms over his chest and leaning up against the nearest wall. "But you're gay, yeah? Or else you wouldn't be in the house."

Jack sat down on the empty bed, leaning back on his hands and kicking his feet out lazily. "Yep. Big ol' moe, right Mick?" he laughed, shooting Mickey a wink, who rolled his eyes.

"Alright, just wanted to let you know Rowan is transgender. He's female to male, that's how he ended up here with us. You don't have an issue with that, do you? Because I can't have you at Victory House if you're going to start shit with your roommate." Andy didn't move from his spot on the wall, just raised his eyebrows in challenge.

"That shit means fuck all to me." Jack answered honestly. "Why the hell would that matter to me?"

"You'd be surprised how closed-minded people can be, even in the LGTB community. I just don't want any trouble. Rowan's been through a lot, and this is a safe space, for him and all you guys, got it?"
"Won't be a problem. I literally couldn't care less." Jack assured him.

"Well then, that brings me to my last point. Victory House is a lot like the champagne room, kid. As in 'there's no sex in the champagne room.' I don't want you fucking your roommate, or any of the other dudes here. Or fucking any other dudes in the house." Andy's eyes went to Mickey as he said that, and Mickey had to bite his tongue hard to keep from telling the fucker off. "Do what you want when you're on day pass or overnights, but only take your dick out around here to wash it or jerk it, preferably both in the shower. Okay?" Andy finished his speech, arching an eyebrow at Jack, who burst out laughing.

Mickey cracked a smile, but kept his laughter in.

"Sure, okay." Jack replied once he had calmed down.

"Okay then, that's about it. Let's get downstairs and do the paperwork, then you can come up and settle in." Andy pushed himself off the wall and lead the way out of the room.

When Jack and Matt followed Andy into the office, Mickey made his way to the front porch for a smoke. He was dying for a fucking cigarette, and didn't think he could listen to that recovery spiel any longer.

He motioned over his shoulder, making eye contact with Jack before he opened the front door.

Jack nodded, putting a finger up in a 'one minute' gesture, and Mickey took that as his cue, leaving out the front door and flopping down on the step. He pulled his cigarette out of his pants pocket and wasted no time lighting one and putting it to his lips. He sighed in relief as the smoke filled his lungs, instantly unwinding. He leaned back on the step and kicked his feet out, listening to the nearly silent north side. It always unsettled him a little, being this far out of the ghetto. With no screaming or sirens it was just him and his thoughts, chirping birds and the distant sound of a lawn mower.

Mickey didn't like to be left alone with his thoughts too long. It reminded him to much of prison, when there was nothing to distract him from his anxieties.

His mind drifted to Jack, sitting in the front room of the house behind him. How was he going to do this? He's been getting high since he was fourteen years old. Mickey was at a loss of how he was going to give it up. Who even was Jack anymore, if not a junkie?

Mickey took a drag off his cigarette, trying to focus on anything besides the bleak outlook of Jack's attempted recovery.

He wondered how his sister and Ian were doing with their move. He had to get his ass over there soon. He promised he'd help, and this shit with Jack was taking longer than he anticipated.

He was happy for his sister and Ian, getting their own place was a big deal. From what little Mandy had told him about her marriage to Jeff the Epic Douchebag, he had coddled her like a little girl. She didn't work, she had no social life, he catered to her every need except for her need for love and fidelity. That life was never for her, she was not housewife material. She didn't want to spend her days hand polishing heirloom candlesticks or gossiping with neighbor women about who couldn't shed their baby weight. She told Mickey she had gotten bored long before Jeff cheated on her, and it was only a matter of time before it ended.

That did not placate Mickey in the least, and he still planned on paying that fucker a visit once his parole was concluded. No one treats his baby sister like that and dodges a beating.

So he was happy to see Mandy getting her groove back, as she put it. She deserved the fucking
world. After the way they grew up, she deserved it more than any of them. Mickey never forgave himself for not killing Terry when he found out what had been going on right under all their noses. He thinks back to what a coward he was back then. How his father had been the embodiment of the boogeyman, and how terrified he had been of him. How he was so sure every beating would be his last. How he was positive his father would choke the life out of him on day or beat him until he drowned in his own blood.

But nothing could compare to what Terry had done to Mandy. Mickey knows what it feels like to be raped. That one incident was enough to scar him for life. He still had nightmares to this day. He can not fathom how Mandy functions day to day with the weight of years of that type of abuse crushing her. At the hands of her fucking father, no less. Mickey shakes his head, willing away the boiling rage rumbling in his chest. Now is not the time.

The point was, Mickey reminded himself, that she rose above that fucking shit, ditched the dude that was mistreating her, and she was starting over from fucking scratch. Mickey knows how hard that is to do, and he so damn proud of her. She's strong and she's resilient, and she's amazing.

Not that he'll ever tell her that, probably. Mickey's not the emoting type. All he can do is support her and remind her as often as need be that she doesn't have to do it alone.

She has him.

And she's got Ian again too.

Mickey can't really wrap his head around how happy he is that they have each other. Mandy and Ian always had a special friendship that nothing could break. Mickey had always been a little jealous of their connection, but he would never do anything to break it. They needed each other. And now that Mickey had friends of his own that he depended on and loved without end, he knows how life changing that shit can be. He's glad they found each other again after leaving their respective mistakes in the dust.

And Ian, fuck. How can he even describe what he is feeling about Ian in the moment. He was so fucking sad that Ian had gotten himself into that mess with that abusive, psychotic prick, Brian.

He was another one on Mickey's hit list for when he wrapped his parole.

There were a lot of things Mickey could let go now. He'd grown a lot since he was a violent, closeted teenager. He no longer broke someone's nose when they called him a faggot. He didn't feel the need to get physical every time someone challenged him in some way. His patience had grown exponentially in the past few years, and he no longer took everything as a personal insult.

But if you fuck with his family, you better be prepared for the hell that will rain down on you.

Because it will come. Sooner or later, you will get yours.

He was mulling over all the different ways he could make the Brian cocksucker's life a nightmare when the front door opened and Jack strolled outside.

"Got one of those for me, Mick?" he asked, pointing to the remains of Mickey's cigarette.

Mickey went back into his pocket and fished one out for Jack, lighting it for him.

Jack sighed in relief and laid his head on Mickey's shoulder. They sat silently for a moment, watching the occasional car passing on the street.
"This feels weird already." Jack said, breaking the quiet with his doubts.

"It's only weird cuz you're making it that way. You're gonna be fine." Mickey replied. He wrapped an arm around Jack and pulled him to his side, still focusing on the empty street as he spoke. "You can do this. You know that. You just didn't want to. Do you want to now?"

Jack huffed out a small laugh, tipping his head to look in Mickey's eyes. "I think I do," he admitted.

"Well, then you fucking do it." Mickey replied easily. "And I've got your back when shit inevitably gets hard."

"Ha, Mick. Get's hard." Jack dissolved into a fit of giggles and Mickey rolled his eyes heavenward. "This fucking guy, I swear."

--------------------------------------------------

It was a little after one, and Ian and various Milkovichs were taking a break from the arduous task of assembling IKEA furniture to indulge in some greasy fast food.

Ian eyed the newly hung clock for what felt like the hundredth time. Mickey said he'd be here to help at 12:30, and it was well past that in Ian's mind.

Ian's mind was reeling with bizarre and anxious thoughts. What if Jack doesn't want to go to treatment, and he convinces Mickey to make a run for it. They could be halfway to Mexico by now, and no one would be any the wiser.

Ian shook his head, chiding himself for his spiraling thoughts. He took a bite of his chicken sandwich and did his best to calm the fuck down.

Mickey wasn't in runner mode anymore, and Jack really didn't have anything to run from. He was an addict, not an escapee. Mickey's not going anywhere. There's no reason to worry.

But there is, isn't there?

Ian wants so desperately to be with Mickey. Really be with Mickey. But he's emotionally paralyzed at the moment. Just the thought of being intimate with anyone, even Mickey, makes his chest constrict and his face get numb and tingly. He's totally at the mercy of his anxieties at the moment, and he can't give Mickey what he needs or deserves.

Caroline's voice rings in his head, clear as a bell 'Ian, you were brutalized, it will take time to get you back to the point where you can trust another person with your body again.'

Ian's left hand was clenched into a fist, his blunt nails cutting into his palm.

It's not fair, that after all this time he has a real chance with Mickey, and now he's got this stupid hang-up. He's been waiting for this open and carefree version of Mickey since the first time they fucked. And here he is, in all his out-of-the-closet, emotionally mature glory, and Ian is having a meltdown. Fucking figures.

Ian just hopes that Mickey was serious when he said he wanted this too, and was willing to give Ian some time to get back to himself.

Ian took a bite of his sandwich and washed it down with some watery Doctor Pepper just as there
was a knock on his new apartment door.

"Must be Mick." Mandy said, dropping her plastic fork back into her salad and bounding toward the door. Ian turned in his seat just in time to see her swing the door open and let Mickey in.

He looked good. Really good. He was wearing a gray t-shirt with the sleeves cut off, just like he used to when they were kids. He had loose fitting jeans on, because he never wore shorts. Ian wonders if Mickey wore shorts in Mexico. It occurs to him in that moment that Mickey has told him very little about his time in Mexico. Ian wonders if that's because it's too painful to talk to Ian about that, or if he just doesn't want to share that part of his life with him. That thought sends Ian spiraling again and he has to reel himself back in as Mickey walks into the room.

"Hey." Mickey says to no one in particular.

"Hey bro." Iggy says, dropping his burger so he can jump up and greet his brother. They do an odd version of a hand shake-bro hug. "Glad you're here, I can't put this shit together to save my fucking life." Iggy motions toward the entertainment center half assembled in the living room.

"Ha." Mickey laughs. "You're fucking useless, Igg." Mickey lets go of his brother to go to his sister, who has also stood up by this time. "Hey Mands, how's the move going?" he asked, pulling her into a tight hug. These affectionate moments were few and far between growing up, usually relegated to when one of them was released from jail. Nowadays, Mickey would take all the hugs he could get. It felt so good to be able to show affection to his siblings without having to worry if it made him look like too much of a pussy.

"It's going pretty good so far," she replied, letting go of her brother to return to her lunch. She sat down across from Ian again on the floor, since they didn't have their table set up yet. "We really need some help putting this shit together, though. I wish Tess was still here, she's handier than Iggy."

"Fuck off." Iggy replied, mouth full of bacon cheese burger.

Mandy just laughed.

"Hey Ian." Mickey said, finally making eye contact with Ian, who had been surreptitiously staring at him the whole time trying to decipher if he had a post-orgasm glow about him.

It was ridiculous to think that Mickey and Jack had the time or opportunity to get off while they were at the halfway house with Jack's father. But Ian was never a logical person. He lived off his emotions and his bizarre thoughts. And in this moment, he couldn't shake the image of Mickey's blissed out face while getting railed by that off-brand Lip junkie.

"Hey Mick." Ian tried to smile, but it probably came across more like a grimace. "Thanks for coming, I know you were busy today." he couldn't help himself, he had to stick that in there.

Mandy, totally oblivious to Ian's inner turmoil, asked the question he couldn't bring himself to.

"How'd it go with Jack this morning? He make a run for it?" she laughed, unknowingly mirroring Ian's own thoughts.

"Fuck off with that shit." Mickey replied tersely. "He's really trying. His dad thinks it could stick this time."

Mandy put her hands up in surrender. "Sorry." she said. "What do you think, though? Think he's ready?"
"Who the fuck knows. Are you ever ready for something like that? He's gonna try. That's all I can ask of him."

Mandy nodded. "That's real good, Mick. Hope it works out. He seems like a good kid." she said, finally picking up her fork again to finish her lunch.

Mickey didn't say anything more on the topic, only walked around the group sitting on the floor and went directly to the entertainment center, picking up an allen wrench to get this shit underway.

Ian watched him work from his spot on the floor. He was at a bit of a loss. Things with Mickey were okay, but they were not the way he wanted them to be. They had shared a lot since Mickey got back, talked more about important shit than they ever did when they were kids. But it still felt awkward and stilted, and Ian hated that feeling. He was jealous of the easy relationship Mickey had with Jack, and even Javier in Mexico. It seemed like he was just so willing to give pieces of himself away to these people, when Ian always had to scratch and claw to get the smallest part of the real Mickey. At least that had been the way it was before. He wasn't sure how it was going to pan out this time around.

He wanted to think positive, and hope that there was still a chance for them, but how long would Mickey really be willing to wait? Not to mention the fact that Ian couldn't very well ask Mickey to stay celibate while Ian exorcised his demons. He would have to witness Mickey hooking up with other men while he fleshed out his personal bullshit.

It was going to be hard, and Ian wasn't sure it would even work out in the end.

But he wasn't willing to give up.

Not yet.

----------------------------------

Mickey could feel Ian's eyes on him, burning a hold through the back of his head. He tried to focus on the task at hand, assembling some queer bookshelf, now that the entertainment center was functional (no thanks to Iggy).

Mickey was secretly glad Ian was giving him space right now, standing across the living room in the small kitchen, filling the cabinets with cups and plates. He was emotionally wrung dry from his earlier encounter with Jack, and didn't think he had it in him to engage in a full blown Gallagher-style soul searching conversation at the moment.

He grabbed the allen wrench and the screwdriver out of the pink tool box Mandy had supplied him with. He teased her about it until she informed him it was in fact Ian's tool box. A gag gift from his asshole brother. Lip was never funny, in Mickey's opinion, and this farce of a tool box was just another example of his lacking sense of humor. What was he even trying to say with a gift like that?

He worked quietly, listening to his family and Ian making light conversation in the kitchen. His mind wandered to Jack, how was he settling in at that house? Was he going to get along with his roommate? What would it be like sharing a room with a transgender dude? Would it be any different than sharing a room with a regular guy? Would Jack find him attractive?

Mickey shook his head balefully, reprimanding himself in his mind for going off on that tangent. What difference would it make to Mickey if Jack did fuck the guy? Jack didn't belong to Mickey, Mickey didn't even want him that way.
Then why was the idea of Jack hooking up with the kid rubbing him the wrong way? Was it because he wanted Jack to focus on getting clean, or was it some misguided jealously speaking?

Or was it the painfully obvious fact that Mickey was insecure where transgender guys are concerned?

Yeah, that was probably it.

Of course, Mickey would never tell a soul about how Ian being with Travis, or whatever the fuck his name was, had sent Mickey into a tailspin. Wondering if this was what Ian wanted now, a guy with a pussy. A guy with a college degree, and a milquetoast personality? A guy that could convince Ian to get fucked up the ass with purple dildo, when Mickey had been asking him to bottom for him since they were just kids. What made him so fucking special?

What was it about this dude that got Ian so wound up that he would abandon his hard limit like that? And would Jack get so entranced with this new roommate, seduced by the same trans black magic that had captured Ian? Was Mickey doomed to lose all his sexual partners to dudes with strap-ons?

Mickey sighed and dropped the screwdriver to the floor. "Done," he said, standing up from the floor. "Where do you want it?" he asked looking over his shoulder to see if anyone was even paying attention to him. He'd been so lost in his own head, he hadn't heard a word anyone had said for almost a half an hour.

"Um, could you push it up against the far wall by the window?" Ian asked, coming up behind Mickey and standing way too close for either of their comforts.

"Sure." Mickey replied softly, pushing gently on the book case. When he heard the loud screeching the thing made as it protested his attempt to move it. "Can you give me a hand? Don't wanna scratch these wood floors."

Ian nodded, grabbing one end of the book case and lifting. Mickey lifted his end and they easily maneuvered the shelf to the designated corner.

"Team work!" Ian beamed, putting his hand up. He frowned slightly when Mickey didn't move to high five him. "Don't leave me hanging, Mick." he scolded lightly.

Mickey rolled his eyes and half-heartedly slapped Ian's offered palm. Ian smiled again, bringing his whole face to life. And Mickey was quite sure in that moment that he'd never leave Ian hanging again, if he could help it.

---------------------------------------------------------------

It was hours of long, hard work. Well, it was for Mickey at least.

Iggy bounced not long after Mickey arrived, stating that he had moved all the shit from the house and the storage unit, thus had filled his quota for brotherly duties and manual labor. He also had to return the rental truck and, as he so eloquently put it, 'get home to give it to my bitch.'

How Tess would take to being talked about like that was anyone's guess. But she stuck with Iggy, so Mickey assumed she found it endearing.
Mickey had just finished putting Ian's bed together. He had finished Mandy's first, and once she was satisfied that her room was in order, she informed the remaining two men she was headed out for the evening.

"I'm going out with some girls from work." she called from the bathroom, which was still a mess of boxes and totes. "I promised I'd be there before 7, and I'm already running behind." She fluffed her black hair with her hands and eyed her make-up critically.

She had put on a red dress with a low back, skin tight, with black fishnets. She hobbled around the bathroom on one foot while she slipped a black heel on the other. She came out of the bathroom and did a spin in front of Ian and Mickey, who were now seated in front of the entertainment center organizing DVD's in some cryptic order that Ian swore had a meaning to it somewhere.

"How do I look?" she asked, smiling.

"Like a hooker." Mickey replied without missing a beat. They could joke about it now.

Mandy closed the small space between them and swatted at the back of Mickey's head.

"Ow, bitch. Back the fuck up." he grumbled, rubbing the back of his skull.

"Be nicer." she replied.

"A high end call girl?" he asked, earning another glare from his sister and a stifled laugh from Ian. He'd count that as a win.

"You look beautiful, as always, Mandy." Ian said, jumping up from his spot on the floor to twirl her on the spot, rounding off the display by dipping her deeply and kissing her forehead. "See." she said, twisting in Ian's arms to shoot her brother another disapproving look. "Was that so hard?"

"Gallagher's a better liar than me." Mickey said. "Always has been."

Ian tried to hide the pain that little jab gave him. Maybe Mickey didn't know what he said was going to come out that way. Mandy didn't seem to catch onto it either, as she just kicked her brother with a heeled toe and let go of Ian to step toward the door. She grabbed her purse and turned to them while opening the door.

"I know it's our first night in the new place and all, but I don't know if I'll be home. If I find a dick to hop on, your on your own tonight." she smiled impishly, blowing kisses behind her as she shut the door.

"She's the best, isn't she?" Ian asked dreamily. He had a fond smile on his face and a far-away look in his eyes.

"She's not the worst." Mickey conceded with a small smile of his own. "What's with you? You're all mooney-eye all of the sudden."

"Nothing." Ian replied quickly, walking away after relocking the door and flopping down on the couch. Mickey eyed him skeptically, clearly not convinced.

Ian shrugged, pulling his knees to his chest and wrapping his arms around them protectively. He looked small when he did that. Mickey didn't like it.

"What, Gallagher?" Mickey insisted. "Don't make me beg." he took up a seat on the other end of the
"It's just, shit. It's hard to explain." he jumped up from the couch and scrambled toward the mess of a kitchen. "We got beer, and some frozen pizza, you hungry?" he asked.

"Nah. But I'll take a beer if you're offering." Mickey replied, wondering why Ian was dodging his question.

Ian grabbed a couple beers from the fridge, which was mostly bare still, and came back to the couch. He handed one to Mickey and took a sip of his own. "So you gonna tell me what that look was for when Mandy left, or are you gonna just ply me with liquor until I forgot I even asked."

Ian took a long pull off his bottle and decided to bite the bullet, and spill all the madness that was swirling in his brain all over Mickey.

"It's just, I'm so happy. To have Mandy back in my life, and now you're here, and it feels like a dream, like I'm going to wake up one morning and be back in Brian's bed, wondering how I got so fucking lost...." Ian shook his head, feeling so fucking stupid. Here he was, hanging out alone with Mickey, and he was going to lose his damn mind again. He shook it off, determined to at least try to articulate the spiraling thoughts in his brain. "Three months ago, I wasn't living. I was barely existing. I went to work and I went home, to Brian. At the time, I thought it was as good as I was gonna get, you know?"

Micky nodded, even though he didn't know. He had no idea Ian felt that way. That was Mickey's usual frame of mind, not Ian's. Ian had always been the dreamer, big goals and lofty aspirations. He always wanted more than his south side life was willing to give him, and he clawed and scraped to get it. Never in a million years did Mickey think Ian would settle for anything, never mind that shit existence he had going with his ex.

"But then, all of the sudden, everything gets flipped the fuck around." he laughed, taking a sip of his beer. "The next thing I know, Mandy's calling me, and it's like no time had passed at all. And then I turn around, and you're here...." he trails off, an affectionate smile ghosting over his lips. "And I just feel like I'm living this life I don't deserve anymore. After everything I did, to you and Mandy, I don't deserve this second chance."

Mickey opened his mouth to speak, but Ian shook his head. "I don't deserve it. I abandoned you when you needed me the most. And I just let Mandy fade out of my life like she never mattered to me, which couldn't be further from the truth. And she needed me, just like you did. But I was so full of myself and focused on my own bullshit, I didn't even stop to think about how much I was hurting you guys."

Ian put his beer on the table and turned to face Mickey straight in the eyes. "I'm so sorry, Mick."

Mickey waved him off, sipping his beer. "Stop that shit, Gallagher. We've already hashed all this garbage out. I know it's unreal, that we're here again after all this time, but it's happening. You aren't going to be able to get anywhere new until you leave this tired, old shit in the past."

Ian nodded again, unable to speak for fear of sobbing. He hastily picked up his beer and downed half of it in one sip. He wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his hoodie and turned away from Mickey. "You've come so far since prison, Mick. Sometimes I feel like you are a whole new person. Like I don't know you anymore. Why would you even wanna get mixed up in this shit with me again? I'm just as much of a mess as the last time you were around." Ian shook his head, angry with himself for ruining the evening. "No, fuck that. I'm worse now than I was back then. I can't even let anyone touch me. I can't do anything without totally losing my shit. As if bipolar disorder wasn't bad
enough. Now I'm full of anxiety and fear of intimacy." he growled, finally letting the anger take him over. It was just so unfair.

"Sex, Mick!" he screamed, taking Mickey by surprise. Mickey startled a little and backed up on the couch, giving Ian a wide berth as he jumped off the couch and started pacing in the small living room. "I can't have sex. I get all freaked out, my heart starts pounding and my ears ring and my whole body goes numb. Everything goes tunnel vision, down to one singular point and I feel like I'm losing my damn mind!! It's so unfair." he dropped his body down on the couch roughly and threw his hands up in the air. "I never knew how much of my self-identity was wrapped up in sex, Mick." all his energy had drained out of him and he was left weak and sad. "When I was younger it was a way to feel powerful and in control. And then it was a way to feel closer to people, make a connection that I couldn't make emotionally. With you, fuck. I've never felt that way, before or since. None of that power or manipulation shit was there. It was just love and affection. I figured it was a once in a lifetime thing that I'd never experience again. I gave up hope on ever having what we had. Then when Brian came along, it got all fucked up. All my power was stripped from me, I had no say. It was all about keeping the peace, not rocking the boat. I did whatever he wanted, just to avoid a fight. What does that make me? A pussy? A whore? I just don't fucking know anymore." he sighed. "But that last time, the really bad time, he really fucked me up. I mean, obviously, right? I can't even get a hard on without feeling like I wanna puke." Ian's voice cracked and he looked away from Mickey's pitying eyes. "And now, you're here. And I know we're not ready for sex. Fuck, I don't even know if you want me like that anymore." he stammered, trying to catch his breath. "But I do know that I want you, and I can't even enjoy that feeling. That excited stirring in your gut, those butterflies. I can't enjoy it, because to moment I give in to that rush, the fear crushes me."

Ian abruptly stopped talking, realizing a little too late that he had oversharred. He didn't wanna be the guy who pined after his ex right in front of him. What the fuck is he even doing right now?

Mickey had made it clear that he wasn't ready to go there with Ian again. Not that Ian blamed him. Ian was obviously a fucking mess.

And he had just made it a million times more awkward.

Fucking wonderful.

"Ian." Mickey sighed.

Here it comes.

"You gotta stop this."

Oh yeah, here it comes.

"Stop what?" Ian whispered.

He didn't think he could do this, listen to Mickey give him the easy let down, telling him he'd always love him, but he's not 'in love' with him anymore.

"You gotta stop beating yourself up over something that isn't your fault." Mickey sighed. "That shit with your fucking ex is NOT your fault. He's an abusive prick. We've talked about this before. It's totally understandable that you would be a little gun shy about physical shit right now. And honestly, I don't give a fuck about that. Like you said, we're not there yet. I am not going to stop hanging out with you cuz you can't suck my dick. What kind of guy do you think I am?"

Ian shook his head, feeling like an idiot. "I didn't mean it like that, Mick. I just don't want you to wait
around for me to get my shit together. I feel like an asshole. I don't want you to think I don't want you, because I do. I just can't right now. If you wanna fuck around with other people while I get my shit straight, I understand. We're not together. You don't owe me anything."

Mickey smiled fondly at Ian, taking a sip of his beer before putting it down on the table and scooting closer to Ian so their thighs were touching. "You telling me not to save myself for you, Gallagher?" he laughed quietly.

"Uh, yeah, I guess." Ian mumbled, feeling stupid again.

Mickey reached up slowly and ran a tattooed hand down the side of Ian's face. "Is this okay?" he asked. Ian just nodded, eyes wide. Mickey inched closer, his face hovering right over Ian's. "And this?" he whispered.

"Y-yeah." Ian replied, heart hammering in his chest. But not in that scary way that made him want to run. It was that exciting pounding that only came when he was in this close a proximity to Mickey.

"How about this?" Mickey asked, closing the distance between them and softly pressing his lips to Ian's.

Ian's breath hitched at the feeling of Mickey so close. There was no tongue and it was over before Ian could react.

"Yeah, that was nice." Ian said, a small smile creeping across his face.

"You didn't have any of that nasty feeling?" Mickey asked quietly, searching Ian's face for any signs of discomfort. "I didn't make you feel uncomfortable?"

Ian thought about it. This was the first time since his debacle of a club hook up that anyone had tried to kiss him, and that soul crushing fear he had experienced didn't come.

"No, it was okay." Ian laughed. He felt a million times better. Maybe it wasn't as bad as he thought. "But I think we should try again just to be sure." that cocky smirk on his face that Mickey loved so much.

Ian leaned in and pressed his lips to Mickey's again. This time with a little more urgency. Mickey kissed back without hesitation. Their lips moved together with an easy familiarity that never really goes away.

Ian surged forward, cradling the back of Mickey's head in one of his hands and winding his other around his waist. Mickey came to him without hesitation, his hands going to his hair like it was second nature.

Ian ran his tongue along the seam of Mickey's lips, and Mickey opened up and let him in. Their tongues tangled together and Mickey let out a choked noise and pulled Ian closer.

It was glorious. Mickey knew he missed kissing Ian, but he had no idea how much until it was happening again. Mickey was getting hard so fast, reveling in the feeling of Ian so close again. He pushed forward, craving more of the other man, when all of the sudden, Ian was pulling back.

Mickey opened his eyes, which had closed somewhere along the line and looked at Ian.

His face was ashen, and his eyes were wild.

Fuck.
"Hey, hey, you okay?" Mickey asked, suddenly terrified.

"No." Ian choked out. "I'm sorry."

Ian couldn't breathe. It was happening again. His heart was hammering in his chest and his whole body broke out in a cold sweat. His ears rang and his chest tightened up. He started pulling air into his lungs faster and faster, but couldn't catch his breath. "Fuck. Fuck." he stammered.

"Hey, hey." Mickey soothed. "It's okay. Ian, look at me."

Ian didn't look up, staring at his feet.

"Ian." Mickey said, his voice stern, commanding.

Ian looked up, chest still heaving. His eyes were vacant, terrified.

"Breathe with me." Mickey said, and started taking long, exaggerated breaths. "Come on. In, two three, four. Out, two three four." He breathed in long, held it for a second, then let it out again, repeating the pattern until Ian was mimicking him easily.

"There you go. Look at that." Mickey smiled.

It took Ian another few minutes to come back down to Earth, and once he had, he was mortified.

"Fucking Christ." he sighed. "See, this is what I'm talking about. You don't need this shit. I am a fucking head case. Even more so than before, and that's saying a lot."

"Don't talk about yourself like that." Mickey said, taking Ian by surprise again. "There is nothing wrong with you. You're going through some shit. You'll get there. Don't be so fucking hard on yourself."

Ian nodded, feeling relieved and so fucking stupid at the same time.

He didn't deserve all this kindness and understanding from Mickey, but like fuck he was going to turn it down.

It felt great. Exactly what he needed in the moment.

"You'll get there when you get there, Ian. Don't push yourself." Mickey said, finishing off the last of his beer while trying to readjust himself in his pants. He went to stand to grab another when Ian grabbed his wrist.

"Promise me, Mick. You won't wait around for me to get my shit straight. If you find someone to fuck in the meantime, fucking do it. I don't want you sitting shiva waiting for my crazy ass to be able to handle a hard on without a melt down."

"You seriously want me to fuck around while you are going through all this shit? Will that help you or make it worse? I mean, I know we said we're not together, and we're not, but is your jealous ass gonna be able to stay friends with me while I'm getting my rocks off with randoms? How are you not gonna get all pissy? I know you, Gallagher." Mickey felt like he was walking into a trap.

Was Ian saying this shit because he really didn't want Mickey to wait for him? Was he really okay with Mickey fucking around with other dudes? Or was he just saying all this because he thought that was what Mickey wanted?

And was that what Mickey wanted? Did he want to keep fucking around, or did he want to make
some kind of commitment to Ian, when Ian wasn't even ready to date yet? Fucking hell, why is shit always so complicated?

"I just want you to be happy Mick." Ian replied sadly. "You've been through so much shit, and you deserve it."

Mickey sighed. "Alright, how about this? I promise I won't deny myself, if I'm desperate for it, but we continue to work on shit between us, and that will come first, okay? I won't get into anything serious, don't think I even could with your ginger ass around taking up all the space in my head." Mickey smiled, which earned a smaller smile from Ian in return.

"Alright. I guess that's the best we're going to be able to get right now." Ian said. He got up from the couch, taking the empty beer bottles with him.

Mickey settled back into the couch a little more. It was getting late, he should probably be going soon.

Ian came back into the living room, two new beers in hand. He took a seat next to Mickey, much closer than he was before he got up. "You, uh, wanna watch a movie? I got the director's cut of Casino."

Mickey didn't even need to think about it. "Fuck yeah, you know how much I love that movie."

"You kinda remind me of Nicky." Ian laughed. "Hey, -Nicky-Mickey-, I never thought of that."

"Oh fuck you. I am nothing like that deranged lunatic." Mickey balked, hitting Ian with the back of his hand.

"You so are!" Ian replied. "You're both small, angry and super violent. Not to mention hilarious." Ian's whole face was glowing now, all traces of the earlier panic gone. "You are a lot cuter, though." he smiled.

"Fuck off." Mickey replied, but the blush creeping along his neck gave him away.

They settled onto the couch, side by side, as Ian started the movie.

By the time they got to the part where Nicky was meeting his untimely demise in the Nevada desert, Mickey was curled up into Ian's side, with Ian's arm wrapped tightly around Mickey's shoulders.

It was a good first night in Ian's new place. Despite all the shit they still had to work through, together and on their own, neither of them would want to be anywhere else.

--------------------------------------------------

It was the middle of the night when Mickey came too. He had an initial moment of panic when he looked around and realized he had no idea where the fuck he was, but a strong arm around his shoulder and the familiar scent of Ian permeating his senses set him at ease immediately.

He slid out from under Ian's arm, and pulled a blanket off the back of the couch to cover him. He stared at Ian for a moment, sleeping peacefully. He wondered if his sleep was really that peaceful, or if the tragedy he had recently suffered haunted his unconscious mind as much as it did his waking
moments.

Mickey was struck with an intense anger in that moment. The kind of anger that only ever comes when someone fucks with his family. Watching Ian sleeping, so soft and quiet, made him instantly hate anyone that would ever hurt him.

Mickey had hurt him, in the past, more times than he'd ever want to count. As much as he wishes he could take that shit back, what's done is done. The only thing he can do now is do his best to never hurt Ian again, and fuck up anyone who dares to mess with him.

Mickey makes a promise to himself in that moment as Ian stirs on the couch, falling to the side and curling up into himself. Mickey is going to help Ian through this shit, until he's the strong, vibrant person he has always been. And the first opportunity that presents itself, he's going to ruin that fucking guy that broke Ian so bad.

He's going to fucking destroy Brian.

Mickey walks over the the table in the kitchen to grab his phone and his cigarettes. It's late, and he has to get back to his house because he promised Matt he'd help him get some shit done at one of their work sites tomorrow. Working on the weekends was never something Mickey liked to do, but Matt had asked, so he was going in. Mickey is pretty sure Matt just doesn't want to be at home, where he's been fighting constantly with Lexi about Jack. He also thinks Matt doesn't want to be alone. Maybe he needs to be around someone else that understands why he is still holding out hope for his son when everyone else has written him off.

Mickey understands that. He's not ready to give up either.

So he's gonna go in and work with Matt for a few hours, give him some silent reassurance that he's not in this alone. It's the least he can do after everything Matt has done for him.

He unlocks his phone to check the time. 11:30. It's later than he thought. Shit. He looks at his phone again, noticing he's got a voicemail from Jack. He presses the button to hear the recording, wandering into the kitchen for some privacy, even though Ian's out for the count.

Message received at 10:10 pm: "Hey Mick. I'm just sitting here in this house, wishing I was anywhere else. But I know I gotta be here, you know, so I don't die or whatever." Jack huffs a small laugh over the phone before continuing. "I was talking to Rowan tonight. You know, my new cellie."

Mickey laughs at that. Fucking Jack.

"Anyway, I was telling him about how fucked up I am about coming here. How I don't wanna be here, don't really think I can get better, especially away from you and my dad. You know, cuz you support me through all this shit. But Rowan said something that got me thinking. He said that I gotta do this on my own. You know, get better. I gotta do it by myself, for myself. He said that a little time and space would help me grow. Learn to trust myself, rely on myself. And once I can do that, then I can really have strong relationships with others. Real give and take relationships where I am helpful, and not a hindrance. So I guess what I'm trying to say is that I'm glad you and Dad made me do this. I'm grateful for the distance and the time by myself to really learn who I am and what I want in life besides drugs. It's gonna be hard, but nobody can do it but me. And if it took this fucked up mess happening to me to make me see that, then so be it. I'm grateful for the time apart, because I know I'll come out on the other side stronger, and ready to be a better person to the people I love. So thanks, Mick, for everything. I couldn't do any of this shit without you. Talk soon, love you."
The phone beeped and the message cut off. Mickey pulled his cell away from his ear and stared at it for a moment.

That was the most he'd ever heard Jack talk about his addiction at once. It wasn't exactly a sore subject, just not something they openly discussed if they could help it. Maybe this place would finally be the thing that got Jack clean.

Mickey sat down at the table to pull his shoes on, some of the things Jack said stirring his thoughts.

A little time and space. Room to grow. If that's what Jack needed to get his shit straight, maybe that shit applied to everyone.

Maybe Ian needed this place with Mandy to heal and grow on his own after his traumatic shit with his ex.

Maybe Mickey needed time alone, away from Ian and Jack and all the other people he's always trying to save, so he can rediscover who he is, here in Chicago, back in the mix. Maybe he needs a little breathing room so he can remember who he is when he's not someone else's savior. Putting his own shit on hold so he can be a shoulder to cry on, someone to lean on. It's always easier to focus outside himself, on other people's wants and needs. But where does that leave Mickey?

So maybe having Jack out of arm's reach and Ian across town will be good for everyone involved. Mickey can still be there for them, support them and love them, but he'll be able to step back when he needs to and focus on his own shit.

A little breathing room.

Some room to grow.

And then, hopefully, it will all come together in the end, with everyone involved better for the distance.

Mickey grabs a pen and a blank envelope off the fridge, scribbling a note to Ian before he leaves the apartment.

Ian,
thanks for movie night. gotta head out, work in the a.m. hope to see u soon. call if u need anything. anything, man. call.
mick

He walks back into the living room, pulling his hoodie on and zipping it halfway up. He looks down at Ian's sleeping form, warm affection pooling in his stomach.

He loves him. Broken and battered or not, he loves him.
And he's gonna give him the space and time he needs to get back to himself.
But he'll never be more than a phone call away, never again.
Because room to grow is good and all. But nothing good ever blossoms without care and attention.

He runs a hand through Ian's red hair, a fond smile on his face as Ian unconsciously leans into the touch. Mickey sighs, wishing he could stay, but knowing it's not the right time for that shit.
So he walks away, locking the door behind him with the key Mandy gave him.
He's gonna do what he thinks is right, give everyone involved a little bit of room to get their shit straight individually, but be available enough to let them know they're not in this alone.
It's sure to be a delicate balancing act, but Mickey's in it for the long haul, no matter what.
It wasn't going to be easy, but Mickey didn't expect anything else. If he walked away whenever shit got tough, he'd never of had Ian in his life to begin with. So fuck it, difficult or not, he was all in.
Distract and Evade

Chapter Summary

things get a bit muddled, as everyone tries to keep their heads....

"So, I told her she didn't have to come if she didn't want to, I'd never force her hand that way, but I think it's unfair of her to try and make me choose. I mean, I understand if she's not ready yet, to trust him again. But I just can't not be there for him." Matt sighed, taking a hand off the wheel of the truck for a moment to run a hand down his face. "I love her, and I know she loves him. It's not like I'm not sympathetic to her feelings. But Jack fucking needs me right now? I mean, am I wrong?"

Mickey looked over at his boss from the passenger seat. They had just finished up a long day at a restoration project they were working on in the north side. It had been a long, hot 9 hours full of back breaking work, and Mickey was looking forward to getting back to the house on S. Homon and getting some god damn booze in his system.

It had been about three weeks since Jack had gone to the Victory House, and so far he was doing okay, as far as Mickey could tell. He goes to see him often now that he's allowed to have visitors, talks on the phone with him more. He seems to be acclimating to the house well, getting along with Rowan, his roomie, and the other dudes in the house just fine. Jack is a people person, always had been. He had charm and personality and everyone always liked him. This shit was no different.

Matt saw it as a sign that the recovery shit was gonna take this time, and his excitement over the idea of a clean and sober son was palpable.

The only problem was his wife, Lexi was still not on board. She refused to visit or take any of Jack's calls. She had iced him out, and in the process had caused a rift between herself and Matt. Their marriage was taking a serious beating over all this shit with Jack. Mickey felt bad, but there wasn't much he could do but listen.

"Anyway, sorry man. I don't mean to chew your ear off with this bullshit every day." Matt said sheepishly. "It's just that I don't really get to talk to anyone about it, so it all gets dumped on you."

Mickey looked over at Matt, hoping to convey his compassion for him with the look in his eyes. "I already told you, man, it's all good. I don't mind you bouncing your ideas off me. If Lexi's not ready, there's nothing you can do but wait her out. Hope Jack proves her wrong and you guys can put all this shit behind you. You're supporting your son, you're doing what you think is right. Lexi's doing what she thinks is right. You guys just gotta back up and let each other be for a bit." Mickey wasn't sure if what he was saying was true, or good advice, but it's all he had so he went with it.

"You're right, Mickey. Thank you. You're always there to listen when I need to vent. I can see why Jackson values your friendship."

Mickey blushed and looked out the window. He was still uncomfortable with Matt's open praise and affection. He'd never had it growing up. A male figure to look up to, someone you want to please and make proud. Seeing that look of appreciation in Matt's eyes was too much for Mickey sometimes. Years of being told he wasn't worth shit made him squirm over it, feeling unworthy of any such things. "Thanks." he mumbled quietly as the pulled up to his house. Iggy was on the front
step smoking, beer in hand.

"Does your brother have a job?" Matt asked, looking over at Iggy. He was petting a stray cat that hung around the house.

"Igg?" Mickey asked, following Matt's eyes until they landed on his brother. "Not really, he does odd jobs here and there. He never really acquired any skills when he was growing up. Our dad had him doing illegal shit most of his life, selling drugs and running guns, or bustin' heads when the need arose. But now that the prick's dead, Iggy doesn't know what the fuck to do with himself." Mickey's eyes stayed on his brother as he played with the stray. Iggy would often feed the cat, ensuring it stuck around the neighborhood. Mickey knew his brother had a soft spot for the thing.

"Does he want a job?" Matt asked, pulling Mickey out of his thoughts. He turned in his seat to gape at Matt.

"You wanna give Iggy a job? Iggy? My brother, Ignatious Milkovich? Fuck, I don't even know if he's ever had real job. I don't even know if the fucker has a social security card." Mickey shook his head.

"Well, not me, per-say," Matt started, still watching Iggy playing with the cat. "But I got a buddy who owns a landscaping business. He's always looking for help. They do all kinds of shit, not just landscaping. They trim trees and plow snow in the winter. He's got work all year. Just ask him about it. You'd be doing me and my friend a favor, and maybe get your brother heading in a better direction, huh? Now that your old man's dead, maybe you guys could all leave that shit in the past."

Mickey just stared at him. How in the fuck did Mickey ever get so lucky? To not only find a friend like Jack, but to end up with a dude like Matt in his life. The guy was just so good. Kind. Genuine. And he always wanted to help. First Mickey, and now he's even offering to help Iggy, who he's never even spoken to, just because he's Mickey's brother. Mickey didn't know if he'd ever get used to the effortless way Matt gave and gave. He didn't understand how someone could be so nice, so sportive and accommodating, even when his own life was falling apart. Mickey admired that shit. He wanted to be like that. He wanted to be like Matt.

"Sure man, I'll ask him." Mickey said, his voice a little thicker than he would have liked. "Thanks, Matt. You don't gotta keep doing nice shit for me though, and you don't even know Igg...." Mickey trailed off when he saw Matt roll his eyes.

"Kid, sometimes in life people are gonna wanna help you. Cuz you are a good kid who got dealt a shit hand and you never had a chance. You deserve that chance, and from what you just told me, so does your brother."

Mickey nodded, not trusting himself to speak in the moment. He opened the door to the truck and slid out onto the street.

"See ya later Mick. You still wanna go see Jack tomorrow?"

"Yeah, man. 2:30, right?" Mickey replied after he got his emotions back in check.

"Sure." Matt smiled as he put the truck back in gear. "Ask your brother about that job, I'll call my friend tonight. See ya tomorrow." And he pulled away from the curb, leaving a stunned Mickey in his wake.

Mickey walked up the sidewalk and climbed the stairs to the house. He plopped down on the top
step next to Iggy and took the beer he offered him from a six pack sitting by the railing. Mickey reached down to pet the cat sipping his beer.

"This how you planning on spending your Friday night, man?" Mickey laughed.

"Fucking Tess went out tonight with Mandy. Fucking girl's night or whatever. So unfair." Iggy sighed, like the idea of not being included in a girl's night was really busting him up. "So I'm just chilling here with Dexter." Iggy scratched the stray behind the ear.

"Okay." Mickey started, taking a long sip of his beer. "Two things. First of all, don't whine like that about your girl going out. She's her own damn person, and you sound like a pussy when you complain like that. And two, why are you giving a fucking stray cat a name? Dexter? What the fuck, Igg. You can't keep him."

Iggy looked over at Mickey askance. "Fuck you Mick. Just because I miss my girl and wanna spend time with her doesn't make me a pussy. If your ginger dick called your right now, you'd go running. And Dexter ain't a stray no more. He's a Milkovich now. If you don't like that shit, you can kick rocks. He ain't going nowhere."

"God damn it Igg. Don't call Ian my ginger dick." Mickey said, voice laced with irritation. "But I guess you're right, I would go running. But you have your girl, Ian's not mine anymore. And Tess will be home after last call. And you will sleep in the same bed and wake up next to each other tomorrow. So cut the bullshit and just be grateful."

Iggy was floored. Sometimes he forgot how much Mickey had changed since he got back from Mexico. He hadn't gone soft, not really. But he was sure as fuck a lot more mature. Put Iggy to shame most of the time with his deep thoughts and wise words.

"And fuck it, if you wanna keep the cat, you bathe that fucker and get a flea collar on him. I ain't getting bugs cuz you got a soft spot for strays, Igg."

With that Mickey stood up. He patted Iggy on the head with an open palm and turned to enter the house.

"Hear that, Dex? Looks like you got the green light from Mick! You're officially a Milkovich."

----------------------------------------------------

"Are you sure you can't stay for dinner?" Fiona asked for what felt like the hundredth time. She had been trying extra hard the past few weeks to pull Ian back into the fold of the Gallagher family. Ian appreciated the effort, but he wasn't quite there yet. He isn't even sure anymore why he's angry with them.

Was it wrong of him to keep his problems with Brian to himself? Did he owe it to his family to tell them every minute detail about the happenings in his life?

No. Fuck that.

Fiona was just being controlling and over protective. Ian was allowed to have his own life. He took responsibility for himself a long time ago, and this shit was his to own. All his accomplishments or mistakes were his. Not Fiona's, not Lip's.

He didn't want to hear their opinions or listen to them tell him what he should be doing differently. He just didn't want to go there with them anymore. It only lead to anger and resentment.
"Nah." he said, taking a sip of the coffee Fiona had insisted he have with her. "I promised Mandy I'd do the laundry tonight, and be around to pick her and Tess up from the bar later. You know, like a designated walker or something."

Fiona balked at him. "They can't walk themselves home from a bar in Boystown? What are they going to be subjected to, an felonious glitter attack?"

"Come on, Fi. Don't be like that. There have been some muggings in the area lately, and I just wanna be on the safe side." Ian said.

"Don't like you so far away, Ian. Living with Mandy. After what happened with Brian, you should be home with us. So we can keep an eye on you." Fiona went to put her hand on Ian's, but he pulled away.

"Why does this happen every time I come here now, Fi?" Ian sighed. "Is this because I didn't tell you I was having problems with Brian? Now you don't trust me, you think I'm not able to care for myself? Why do you always say the same shit?"

"I do trust you, Ian. You are doing so well. I'm proud of you. It's just," Fiona sighed, then seemed to steel herself for whatever she was going to say next. "I don't like the idea of you getting all wrapped up in the Milkovichs again. Mandy is a nice girl, Ian, but she's fucked up. And Mickey, well, I think we both know Mickey's not right in the head. I mean, I understand, they had a fucked up childhood, but Ian, they are never going to change. I don't want them to drag you down, sweetie. You've come so far, don't let them hold you back."

Ian stared at his older sister like she had grown a second head.

"Fiona." he started slowly, like he was talking to an imbecile. "You really need to stop running your mouth when you have no fucking clue what you are talking about."

Fiona's eyes bugged out of her head and her mouth hung open, slack jawed. She seemed to collect herself and went to speak again, but Ian cut her off.

"No. You couldn't be more wrong. Mandy has become an amazing woman, not that she wasn't an amazing girl growing up. She's strong and independent and smart. She has a kick ass office job, makes more money than I do." he laughed at the thought, filled with pride. "She left her cheater fucking husband because she knows she deserves better. And she's rebuilding her life from scratch, and I'm honored she asked me to be a part of that. And Mickey, fuck, when are you even gonna get off this tired, played out shit that Mickey is a bad person? I mean, how long are you gonna hold onto that bullshit for? He was a fucked up kid, I'll give you that. If Terry was my father, I'd have been the same way. He did a lot of really awful things when we were kids, and I did too. None of it was right." Fiona tried to interrupt, but Ian just talked over her. "He may have been fucked up back then, but he was still a good person. But now, fuck." he stopped talking so he could take a deep breath, overwhelmed by emotion and the need to defend Mickey to his sister. He never defended Mickey before, always let everyone treat Ian like he was the victim, reveling in the attention, secretly loving when people would stroke his ego, assure him Mickey was the problem, that Ian was blameless.

He wasn't gonna do that shit anymore.

"Now." Ian said, fond smile playing at his lips. "He's amazing. He's not afraid to tell me how he feels, he's kind, and so sweet. He takes care of Mandy, does anything she needs without question. He's trying to get back into Yev's life, although Svet is being shady about it. But he's fucking trying. When shit went down with Brian and I didn't want to come home, he moved out of his own house so I could stay there, so I would feel safe and comfortable. He always puts me first. Even now, after I'm
all fucked over Brian, Mickey's been there. To listen, to just fucking hold me and watch a movie. No expectations, just as a friend. Do you know how long it's been since I've had a real friend, Fi?"

Ian remembered about halfway through his rant that he hadn't told Fiona or anyone in his family what really happened with Brian. The rape. He hadn't told them. It wasn't anyone business except Ian's. If he didn't want to tell them, he didn't have to. He knew they'd make it into this huge thing, never look at him the same.

But that may explain the strange look she is giving Ian right now.

"Why, do you want to get back with him? Are you fucking Mickey again?" she asks, disgust written all over her face.

"No, Fiona. Fuck, you're not even listening." Ian says, losing patience. "I am not fucking him. I'm not fucking anyone. I don't want to fuck anyone right now. I'm not ready."

"Since when are you not ready to fuck? You're the worst slut of the whole family." she smiled filthily, nudging him with her elbow.

Ian grimaced. He's defiantly not telling her now. She'd probably say it was his fault or something.

"Yeah, and where has that gotten me?" he says instead.

Fiona just shrugs. Ian is grateful it seems the conversation has been dropped.

"So why did you want me to come by anyway?" he asks, ready to get this the fuck over with so he can leave. Dealing with his sister always drained him and put him in the worst mood these days.

"Well, I don't know if you've heard, but Kev got his GED, and we're gonna throw him a rager. We're overdue for a party since we didn't get together for the 4th this year." she said, smiling happily.

"No fucking way!" Ian exclaimed. "That's great, feels like he's been studying for that shit for years. When's the party? What can I do to help?"

And just like that, all the drama and hard feelings were forgotten in favor of something much more pleasant to the Gallagher siblings: partying.

-----------------------------

Mickey's sitting on the couch in the living room later in the evening, petting Dexter (damn cat wormed his way right into his TV time) and watching a special about John Wayne Gacy on the Crime Chanel with Iggy when his phone rings. He assumes it's Jack so he grabs it and heads to the kitchen, but when he looks at his display screen, it's Svetlana.

Well fuck.

He hasn't heard a word from the women since that one soccer game he attended with Jack. She had said at the time that she was open to the idea of Mickey being part of Yev's life, but then seemed to change her mind somewhere along the line, cutting Mickey off completely for the past six weeks. He had been reasonably preoccupied with Jack and Ian, the move and work, but the cold shoulder from his ex, and missing his son had been hovering in the back of his mind the whole time.

So what the hell was she doing calling him now? Out of the blue, after no contact for almost two months?
He sighed, trying to steady himself before he accepted the call.

"Hello."

"Mikhailo. Good that you answer." Svetlana's flat voice floated over the line.

"Good that I answer? Are you fucking for real right now?" Mickey balked. "I've been calling and texting you for weeks, and you have been avoiding me like the fucking plague? What the fuck?"

"Do not give me attitude." Svetlana replied coolly. "I did not want to talk to you while you were mixed up with that boy."

"Boy? What boy?" Mickey asked, irritated and confused.

"The junkie you brought to Zhen's game. You think I do not know? I see it. And David knows him."

"Jack? This is about Jack? You've got to be fucking kidding me." Mickey ran a hand over his face, trying to reel in his anger before he blew up. "How the fuck does your husband know Jack? And what the fuck makes you think you can decide who I spend my fucking time with? We're not fucking married anymore." That was a lot of 'fuck's, even for Mickey. He was seething.

"David plays golf with his father, Matthew. They are part of the same club. He hears many sad stories about your new rainbow boy. I do not want my son near that. You throw your life away again for a stiff dick, but I will not let my Zhenya be subjected to it." Svetlana barked. "You are junkie now? This is what you come home for?"

"Svetlana, what the fuck?" Mickey sighed. He was beyond pissed off now. The gall of this bitch. "It's none of your god damn business who I hang out with or who I fuck. I am not a fucking junkie. I work, I am not committing any crimes. And not that it's any of your business, but Jack's in rehab now. Told him I couldn't be his friend anymore if he didn't get his shit straight. I am doing just fine, thank you very much. Fuck you for listening to your husband running his mouth instead of coming to me first. I thought we were gonna do shit different this time, but I looks like you're just gonna keep thinking the worst of me no matter what I do."

Svetlana was quiet on the other end of the line for quite a while, like she was absorbing Mickey's words, deciding whether or not to believe him.

"You do not live with him anymore?" she asked quietly.

"No." Mickey replied. He went to the fridge and grabbed beer. He fucking needed it now, thanks to this bitch. "Like I said, he's in rehab. I'm back on South Homon with Iggy and his girl. Working with Matt, staying out of trouble."

"And you truly wish to be in Yevgeny's life. You will not disappear and break his heart? You will not run off with your drug addict lover and leave my son broken?" she asked, voice soft, yet hard at the same time.

"Svet, fuck. He is not my lover, he's my friend. I care about him a lot and I am trying to help him get clean. I am not going anywhere. I am trying to build a life for myself. And I want Yev to be a part of it. But I can't do shit if you keep fucking dodging me. I don't know what else you want from me." he gulped down his beer, waiting for his ex to speak.

When she did, her voice was softer yet still fierce. "I do not wish to keep you from him. But I must protect him. When I heard who that boy was, I assumed the worst. I see now I was misguided." she
paused again, as if mulling over her next words carefully. "Yevgeny's birthday is next month, you remember, no?"

Mickey tired to keep his rude comments to himself. Like he would fucking forget the kid's birthday. "Yeah, Svet, I remember." he said instead. No use getting into a pointless argument when they were already on such shaky ground.

"So, Yevgeny wishes for party at laser tag place. Laser Quest. Is just outside the city. Not too expensive. I think is stupid, but child wants, so I make exception. You will help pay. And you will come, make nice, play second papa. You will also bring gift. I will send you a link to his wishlist. This is what your son wants, so you will do, yes?"

"Laser tag? Um, okay. I didn't even know that was still a thing." Mickey said, a bit surprised. "But, uh yeah. That's a lot to spring on me over one phone call. And his birthday isn't for another few weeks. September is kinda far off," he replied. He didn't really know how long it took to plan this kind of shit. He'd never thrown a birthday party, or had one for that matter.

"I must make preparations far in advance." she replied. "I will be in touch. You wish to see Zhenya? I will meet you at the park this weekend, you may spend time with him."

Mickey was taken aback. He did not expect that. He thought he'd have to wait until this stupid party to lay eyes on the kid again.

"Uh, yeah, that'd be nice. Thanks."

"Is good. I'll be in touch." and with that she was gone. Mickey took the phone away from his ear and looked at it.

What the fuck just happened?

----------------------------------------

"So then, she just calls me out of nowhere and starts running her mouth about how she can't let the kid around me if I'm strung out, and how her dickbag husband plays golf with your dad and how they know we're both addicts and we're gonna run away to Mexico together, go all Sid and Nancy. What the fuck?" Mickey roars.

"I'm Sid, right? Cuz I just don't get a Nancy vibe from me...." Jack smiles, much to Mickey's irritation.

"Fuck you. This is serious. She's trying to use our friendship to keep me from my kid."

Mickey and Jack are seated in the back yard of Victory House, during one of Mickey visits. Mickey's been seething about his conversation with Svetlana all week. How dare that bitch try to give him an ultimatum like that? Was she trying to imply that Mickey wasn't good enough to be Yev's father? That he couldn't leave his past behind and become a better person? Fuck her.

"I mean, I kinda get it, Mick. I'm a mess. Hanging out with me was turning you into a mess. I was a bad influence on you. Do you think you'd ever be doing dope if you weren't hanging out with me?"

When Mickey looked away, choosing not to answer, Jack continued. "She was looking out for her son. She doesn't want to let the kid get attached if you were gonna get all wrapped up in my shit. I don't blame her. If her hubby is friends with my dad, they've heard some horror stories I'm sure. She was just doing what she thought she had to."
Mickey sighed in frustration. "But she didn't even ask me. She just assumed. What the fuck?"

"Well, unfortunately, that's what people usually do when heroin is concerned. They hear the word and automatically think the very worst. It's like the scariest drug, to like everyone. People just assume you are dead or dying. It's a normal reaction."

"Would you stop defending that bitch? You're supposed to be on my side." Mickey bit out.

"I am, Mick. Always. I've just been doing this a long time, and I know how people react. She's just scared, and icing you out is the easiest way to protect herself and your kid. But, hey, bright side: she invited you to the party, so maybe she's coming around?" Jack said, taking a seat next to Mickey on top of the picnic table.

"Yeah, there's that." Mickey conceded. He put his arms on his knees and rested his head in his palms.

"So focus on that." Jack said, putting his arm around Mickey's shoulders. "Hey, I've got an idea. Let's get your mind of this shit for a minute. Wanna do the thing?"

Mickey lifted his head up and stared at Jack. "The thing?" he asked, small smile playing at his lips.

"The thing." Jack confirmed.

"We haven't done the thing since lock up." Mickey mused, already excited.

"Well, don't you think it's time we rectify that?" Jack laughed, hopping up off the table. "I'm gonna go get the stuff. Be right back."

And he was gone, leaving Mickey feeling a bit better. Jack had that affect on him.

------------------------------------------------------

Ian stood outside his door, bag full of groceries resting precariously on his hip while he groped around inside his pocket for his damn keys.

"Motherfucker." he spat as the key ring slipped through his fingers and fell to the floor.

He'd been having one of those days. Nothing seemed to be going right. He'd overslept that morning, barely making it to work on time. He'd not had a shower first, so he felt gross and grimy all day, and he had no time for coffee so he had to wait for a lull at work to even get any caffeine in his system. Then he'd had shit calls all day. A drunk in the throws of detox had thrown up on him, a 7 year old with a odd rash and a serious attitude problem had kicked him in the balls, and an old lady with dementia had kissed him, full on tongue and everything. Nothing to violent or tragic, but enough to sour his mood for the duration of the work day.

Then, to top it off, Mandy was supposed to pick him up in her new company car, but she'd been a no-show. Mandy had been doing very well at work. Ian wasn't too clear about the particulars, but he knew she went from a secretary in the office, to a salesperson in the field. If Ian remembers correctly, the company she works for sells software to schools and colleges. Ian isn't really sure how she managed to pull that off, but she was always personable and she could persuade anyone to do anything, so sales seemed like a good fit for her. Sales isn't that far off form hooking, if Ian thought on it.

So with her promotion came a company car. A bonus neither Mandy or Ian had anticipated. It was a nice car, a newer model Honda Accord. Mandy was in love. It didn't hurt that the company paid for
her gas and insurance. Sweet deal indeed.

A sweet deal Ian was reaping no benefits from, however, since Mandy failed to collect him like she had promised.

So Ian was late to another appointment with Caroline, which made his therapist question is stability and his commitment to his treatment. Which in turn soured Ian's mood even more. He loved Caroline, she was a wonderful therapist. But every bad day wasn't a sign of a slip. He told her as such in so many words.

But talking to Caroline always calmed him down. The woman was like human thorazine. She had a quiet, calming voice. And even when she brought up topics that made Ian uneasy, he always felt better after getting it all out.

They had talked about his sister, and her never-ending need to control him. They talked about his ongoing recovery from his sexual assault. It was slow going, but he was making progress. They had talked about Mickey, and what had happened during their movie night. Ian's stupid, pointless, embarrassing meltdown. And Mickey's kind, understanding, amazing reaction. Caroline had been equally pleased.

'Ian, it sounds like you have found an ally to your recovery from this assault in Mickey. From what you have told me about your shared past, Mickey is in a unique place to understand your pain and anxieties revolving around sexual stressors right now.'

Ian didn't like how clinical she made it sound. But she was right. Mickey understood what Ian was going through right now. Ian wished neither of them understood, that neither of them ever had to deal with such things.

Life was so unfair sometimes.

Caroline agreed. He made an appointment for two weeks and was on his way to the grocery store within an hour.

So Ian had to ride the damn L to the grocery store, pick up his food for the week, while also fulfilling Mandy's shopping list for some reason. He had made it through grocery shopping without incident, thankfully.

He stood in front of the open fridge, putting away fruits and vegetables in the crisper. He left one apple out on the counter top, to eat after he finished putting the groceries away. It was only a little after 3 and he wouldn't be ready to start dinner until at least Mandy came home. He opened the cabinets and put away the dry goods, tossing the plastic bags under the sink in a tight ball. He grabbed his apple and made his way to the bathroom. He needed that fucking shower, like yesterday.

He closed the door to the bathroom an immediately started stripping. His shirt smelled like vomit still, regardless of how vigorously he had scrubbed it with wet wipes. He dropped it in the hamper with a disgusted scowl and went to work on his belt. He stripped the rest of his uniform off quickly, turning the water on with his free hand while the other struggled to rip off is right sock.

The steam of the hot water filled the room and Ian inhaled deeply, feeling the wet air fill his lungs and clear his sinuses. He hopped in the shower, the burning water easing his aching muscles immediately.

"Fuck." he sighed, tipping his head back. He grabbed his shower gel and a wash cloth off the ledge
and made quick work of soaping up his sore body.

What a long fucking day. He let his mind go blank for a moment, reveling in the silence for a split second before his brain went to the place it always went when he got a moment's peace.

Mickey.

It had been a few days since he had talked to Mickey, texting aside. Ian was trying to take it slow, after his melt down on movie night, it was obvious that Ian was not emotionally ready to go after what he wanted with Mickey.

And that sucked, because Mickey was just wandering around Chicago, being all hot and sexy and just...Mickey. It all felt insanely unfair.

He'd told Ian a little bit about his new job, working construction for Jack's father, Matt. How he worked hard all day, swinging a hammer and probably sweating up a storm. The mental visual of Mickey banging nails and sanding floors was sexy as fuck, but the notion that Mickey was making his living in a legit, above board business got Ian ten times harder. That's all he ever wanted for Mickey. A normal fucking life.

Images of Mickey working flashed through Ian's mind. Mickey lifting heavy boards, sweat glistening off his toned shoulders. Mickey bent over, on all fours, hand sanding some old oak floor. Mickey stretching up to paint a tall corner of a room, tight tank top riding up his back, exposing that sweet spot right above his ass...

Fuck.

Ian groaned low in his throat. He palmed his rapidly filling dick, running his hand over his shaft before gripping it tight. He leaned one hand against the shower wall, tipping his head forward under the pelting water, feeling it slide down his bowed back and in between his ass cheeks. He sighed, losing himself to the sensation.

He was suddenly hit with a memory he hadn't thought about in years, as it had been way to painful for him to relive. But things had changed so much in the past few months, and things that used to destroy him had taken on a new, hopeful light. Mickey's unexpected return to his life had given him an entirely new perspective. And these memories had become what they were always meant to be: cherished.

--- "Fuck I missed you." Mickey sighed, resting his hand on his chest as he stared up at the stars. Ian's heart was simultaneously bursting with love, and breaking with regret. Regret for abandoning Mickey when he’d gotten locked up, and regret for his plan to abandon him again at the bored the coming morning. Ian couldn't go. He'd decided as much, but hadn't had the heart to tell Mickey yet. He just wanted to selfishly enjoy the remaining moments they had together. He'd tell him at the very last possible minute, then he'd run, like he always did.

Instead of answering Mickey, Ian rolled to his side and cupped Mickey's face in his hand, pulling him to look Ian in the eye.

Mickey had a fond expression on his face, all traces of anxiety or sadness draining out of him the second Ian laid a hand on him. Ian leaned in, pressing his lips against Mickey's gently. Mickey sighed and moved his hand from his chest to the back of Ian's head, pulling him down to him. The kiss deepened as Ian opened his mouth, running his tongue along the seam of Mickey's lips until the
other man got the hint and opened up for him. Their mouths worked against each other with increasing intensity until Ian had rolled on top of Mickey. He lay between Mickey's spread legs, grinding his dick against the bulge in Mickey's jeans.

"Want you." Ian said simply, moving to latch onto Mickey's neck. Mickey tipped his head to the side with a breathy laugh, giving Ian more space to lick and bite.

"Always want you." Mickey replied easily, making Ian's heart ache just that much more.

Mickey went to sit up and roll over, but Ian kept him on his back with a hand to his chest.

"Wanna see you." Ian said, his eyes pleading as his hips thrust lazily against Mickey.

"Okay." Mickey said softly, running his free hand through Ian's sweaty red hair. He sat up a bit and undid his jeans quickly while Ian freed his erection from his own pants, tugging at it absentmindedly while he watched Mickey wriggle out of his pants, leaving them hanging off one leg as he returned to his reclined position, pulling Ian down on top of him.

"Still good from earlier, I think, so skip the foreplay and just get on me, huh?" he smiled, kissing Ian tenderly.

Ian nodded, not trusting his voice in the moment. This was it. This was the last time he'd ever have Mickey this way. The finality of it almost sent Ian over the deep end, spiraling into a dark pit of anxiety. But he reeled it in at the last moment, focusing on the feel of Mickey, hot and hard beneath him. He ran a hand up Mickey's side, under his shirt to rest on his heart as he kissed him like it was goodbye already. Their mouths moved against each other, tongues tangling with increasing want.

"C'mon, man. Need you." Mickey whined, grinding up into Ian as best he could while being pinned down like he was.

Ian sighed, nodded again, and removed his hand from Mickey's heart in favor of spitting in his hand before grabbing his cock and spreading the cooling spit along himself, then pressing it up against Mickey's waiting hole.

There was some resistance, but not a lot. Mickey was warm and pliant, wrapping his legs around Ian's waist as Ian thrust into him slowly. They never took their eyes off each other, gazing at each other lovingly the whole time they rocked together.

"God." Mickey gasped. "Right there, Ian. You feel so good. Missed you so fucking much." ----------

Ian came with a groan, unsure what sent him over the edge, the replay of the hot sex, or the memory of Mickey's intense emotions. He quaked through his release, shaking his head a little as he got his bearings back. He waited there, under the now luke warm water, for the usual panic to grip him. He had yet been able to jerk off without a panic attack following immediately.

But nothing came.

No ringing ears, no unhinged, repeating thoughts. No hyperventilating.

Just a nice, warm, post-orgasm buzz.

Maybe Ian was getting better after all.
"Ian? You in there?"

Ian jumped a mile at the sound of Mandy's voice.

"Jesus fuck, Mandy." Ian yelled back. "Thought I was alone, you fucking scared me." Ian grabbed onto the shower wall to steady himself as his heart hammered out of his chest with fright. He could hear Mandy laughing on the other side of the door.

"Bitch." he laughed. "What is so imperative that you must accost me in the god damn shower?" he asked, turning off the water and grabbing a towel off the bar by the sink.

"I need you to do me a favor." she called through the closed door. "Meet me in the kitchen when you are done in there." Ian listened to her foot steps as they got further and further from him. Mandy needed a favor? Wonderful. That usually involved Ian doing something slightly illegal or moderately mortifying.

Ian wrapped a towel around his waist, running another one through his hair before dropping it in the hamper and crossing the hall to his room. He grabbed his phone off the bed to check for a text from Mickey. Ian had texted him an hour or so ago, just to say hi, but got nothing in return. Mickey usually got back to him within a few minutes. Not that Ian had any reason to get upset. He was just used to their routine now, and got unreasonable anxious when it was disrupted. He shook his head at his own idiotic behavior, dropping his phone back to the bed in favor of dressing.

He didn't plan on going back out tonight, but it still felt too early for him to put sweats on, so he threw on a semi-clean pair of jeans and a black t shirt. Grabbing a grey hoodie off the back of the chair by the window, he threw it over his shoulders, leaving it unzipped, and grabbed his phone. He walked back out into the living room, eyeing his messages again. Maybe he'd send Mickey another text. Maybe they could hang out sometime this week.

Or maybe Mickey is avoiding him on purpose and Ian should take the fucking hint.

Ian sighed, pocketing his phone and walking back out into the living room. Fuck it, he's not going to chase the man.

'Give him a god damn minute, Ian, don't be all clingy. Nobody likes that.' he thought to himself as he jumped over the back of the couch, landing with a bouncy thud.

"What's up Mands?" he called out to her. She was fussing around in her bedroom on the other end of the living room. The door was slightly ajar and he could hear her tossing things around and muttering to herself. "What the hell are you doing in there?" he chuckled.

Mandy poked her head out of the door, looking frazzled. She was in her bra and panties, a slinky red dress hanging limply in her hand.

"I have a sort of date." she replied, smiling shyly.

Ian was taken aback a bit. Mandy never got coy about her dates. She was always blunt and crass, usually telling Ian straight up that it was a booty call. None of the men she had met since her divorce had been worth more than a fuck.

So far, anyway.

"A date?" Ian asked, watching her gazing at herself in the mirror, red dress plastered against her
front. She shook her head and made a beeline for her bedroom again. Ian jumped up from the couch and followed her into her room.

"Is that why you didn't pick me up from work today like you promised?" Ian asked, half teasing.

"Oh shit! Ian, I'm so sorry. I got talking and then the date thing came up, and I just got carried away. Fuck, I'm an asshole." Mandy said, apologetic.

Ian waved her off, already having forgiven her. He never could stay mad at Mandy.

"Is this just another 'Friday night fuck' date? Or do you think this one may stick?" he asked as she rummaged through her closet with increasing ferocity.

"It's a date-date." she replied over her shoulder. "It's kind of a big deal to me, so I'm freaking out a bit." a slew of clothes was flying out of the closet, landing on the floor in a heap.

"I can see that." Ian chuckled. "Is this what you need help with? Cuz it's a no-brainer, really, wear the blue dress."

Mandy poked her head out of the closet. "The blue one? You think so?"

Ian nodded. "The blue one makes your body look amazing. But you have a banging body regardless, so I don't see why you getting all worked up." he laughed. "Dudes fall all over you when you are in a t-shirt and jeans."

"See, that's the thing." Mandy replied, pulling the blue dress off it's hanger. It was sleeveless, with a plunging neckline and a cinched waist. It was about knee length, and the skirt was pleated. Ian thought she looked amazing in it. The electric blue color brought out her eyes and complimented her pale skin perfectly. "It's not actually a dude...." she trailed off, unzipping the dress and avoiding Ian's eyes.

"Excuse me?" Ian replied, jumping away from the wall and meeting Mandy in front of her closet. "Who exactly is this person?"

Mandy smiled that uncharacteristic shy smile again, then turned away from Ian to pull the dress over her head. "Her name is Macy. I met her at work." Mandy replied pulling the dress down over her body, still not looking at Ian. "Zip me?" she asked, pulling her hair up with her hands.

Ian zipped the dress, then grabbed Mandy by her shoulders and turned her around. He put two fingers under her chin and tipped her head up so she was finally looking him in the eye.

"Is this a new thing? Or have you been hiding your bisexuality from me for our entire friendship?" Ian laughed, trying to cover his overt shock with humor.

"It is a new thing." Mandy conceded, giving herself a glance in the mirror before moving out of her bedroom and into the bathroom, Ian hot on her heels. She was pulling out her makeup bag when Ian came up behind her, leaning against the open bathroom door with his arms folded over his chest.

"Go on." Ian said.

Mandy pulled out her eyeliner and started on her left eye. "Well, I mean, I've fooled around with girls before, you know, drunk or whatever. Lots of girls do."

Ian nodded. He did know that much.
"But I've never been like 'attracted' to a girl before, as in I wanna do more than finger bang her or whatever. But Macy is just so cool, we get along so well. And she's fucking hot, man."

Ian chuckled.

"She is!" Mandy exclaimed, rounding on Ian with her eyeliner held aloft like a knife, right under his chin.

"Whoa." Ian laughed, putting his hands up. "I believe you."

Mandy smiled, then shrugged before turning back around to give her other eye her full attention.

"So you've always been attracted to women, or is this your way of saying 'fuck men' after what happened with Jeff?" Ian wondered.

"Eh, half and half, maybe." Mandy shrugged again, putting her eyeliner down in favor of a light silver eye shadow. "Like I said, I've always found women sexy, and the sex is always amazing, but I never found a women I could see myself actually dating. Until Macy. So why the fuck not, right?"

"Why the fuck not?" Ian repeated, smiling. If this is what Mandy wanted, Ian was going to support her. All he wanted was for her to be happy. She fucking deserved it.

Mandy left the bathroom, Ian right behind her. She got on her knees on the floor of her bedroom and grabbed a pair of shoes from underneath her bed.

"So is this what you needed my help with? Picking out something to wear? That's very stereotypical 'gay best friend', if I do say so myself." Ian laughed.

"Erm, no." Mandy said lowly, grabbing her purse and walking out of the bedroom. Ian followed her back into the living room, where she was now seated on the couch, pulling on a pair of black pumps.

"Well, what then?" Ian asked, sitting on the chair opposite her. He laces his hands together and settles them behind his head. "If you have sex questions, I can't really help you." he laughed at her blank stare. "I mean, I did have sex with that one girl, but I don't think that makes me an expert. Besides, that sex was awful."

Mandy sets him with an icy glare, effectively shutting him up.

"Macy is coming to pick me up in a few minutes. I need you to take my car and go get Mickey at Victory House, and bring him back to S. Homon. I promised to grab him, but this shit came up last minute."

Ian's mouth hung open in shock. "You what?"

"You heard me, Ian. Just go get him. He needs a ride, it takes like an hour to get back to the south side on the train."

"Mands, I don't want to go get him from that place. I don't want to impose when he's there with Jack. He hasn't even replied to any of my texts today. He obviously doesn't want to see me."

"Now you are simultaneously making excuses while jumping to conclusions." Mandy replied, grabbing her purse. "Do this for me so I can go out on my date. And do this for Mick. I'm sure he wants to see you, he's just been preoccupied with Yev's birthday."
"Yev's birthday?" Ian asked, following Mandy to the front door. He feels like he's been following her all over the apartment since she came home.

"Yeah, I know it's not for a month or so now, but Svet started planning and is actually including Mick."

Ian's eyebrows shot up to his hairline.

"I know, right?" Mandy said. "I didn't think she'd even invite him. Looks like we both thought wrong. I'm glad, though. Mick obviously wants to be in the kid's life. So this is a good first step. You're going to come, right? Svet invited us both."

"Really? Me?" Ian was shocked.

"Well, yeah. I think she's trying to keep the peace with Mick, and she knows your presence has always had a tranq dark effect on his pyscho ass."

Ian laughed. He couldn't argue with that.

"Well, if I am going to Yev's birthday party with you, you have to come to Kev's GED party with me. It's going to be an old school Gallagher catastrophe. I can't go alone."

"Kev got his GED?? Finally."

"I know, right?" Ian mimicked Mandy's earlier words with a smirk. She smacked his shoulder fondly.

"Okay, deal. But I really gotta go. She's probably downstairs already. The keys to the Honda are on the table by the door. Mick's gonna be ready to get picked up in about an hour." Mandy grabbed Ian by the back of his neck, pulling him down to her so she could plant a wet kiss on his cheek. "Thanks Ian. And don't wait up." she gave him a cheeky wink and was out the door before he could reply.

"Good thing I didn't put my pj's on." Ian said to the empty room. Looks like his shit show of a day was not quite over yet.

'The thing' was something that Jack and Mickey did when they were locked up. They didn't do it often, only when one of them was in a mood, in dire need of cheering up. It always got the job done. When Jack was upset about his parents not visiting him, or a bad call from his lawyer. Or when Mickey was dealing with crushing disappointment from lack of contact with Ian or his sister. When they were feeling alone and depressed, when they only had each other to lean on, they did 'the thing.'

It had never failed to boost both their moods, and it continually solidified their friendship.

'The thing' was a two pronged approach to mood enhancement.

The first part was about to go down.

Jack bounded back into the back yard with his phone in one hand, and his bluetooth speaker in the other. "Got part two on lock, now let's get this show on the road before Rowan comes down here and throw a wrench in the works, huh?" Jack smiled deviously, dropping his phone and speaker on the picnic table, and dragging Mickey towards the shed in the back yard.
"Jack, the song is part one, the blowjob is part two." Mickey laughed. They never fucked with the order of the thing. It was just the way it always was.

"Yeah, well, Rowan is coming down in like fifteen minutes and your sister is coming to collect in a half an hour, so I think it's best to reverse the order today." Jack winked, pulling Mickey faster toward the shed in the corner of the yard.

The rickety door swung open and Jack waved his arms around the small space. "Ta da!" he sang. Mickey ran his eyes over the space. There were tools lining the far wall, empty pots and buckets piled up in the corner, wooden crates along the closest wall. Jack put a hand on Mickey's chest and pushed him to sit a nearby crate.

"We really doing this here? What if someone comes in? Won't you get into a world of shit?" Mickey asked nervously. The last thing he wanted to do was fuck up Jack's chances at the house.

"Nah. Andy's not here, and the dude that's working the house right now is on the phone with his husband. He's always busy for at least an hour." Jack made a crude wanking gesture with his hand and winked at Mickey.

Mickey laughed, relaxing a little. He leaned back against the wall, spreading his legs a little.

Jack knelt in front of him, running his hands up his thighs. Mickey sighed, tipping his head back against the wall.

"Gonna make you forget about all that shit. Don't gotta worry about anything right now, I'm gonna take care of you." Jack breathed, nuzzling his nose into Mickey's crotch. Mickey could feel his dick straining in his jeans. He lolled his head back and forth as Jack mouthed over his hard cock through his pants.

"Yeah, s'good." Mickey mumbled.

Jack groped and nibbled at Mickey's jeans for a few more minutes, until Mickey was so hard it was painful.

"C'mon, man." Mickey begged. "Please." He thrust his hips up into Jack's face, making him laugh.

"So polite." Jack drawled, finally pulling Mickey's zipper down and taking his dick out. He pumps it a few times, slowly sliding his hand up and down, watching Mickey's face intently. His steady gaze unnerves Mickey, always has, ever since the beginning. Like Jack sees right through him.

Mickey gasped as he felt Jack's hand wrap around him, couldn't help it. He banged his head against the shed wall, closing his eyes.

"Ah." Mickey's sharp intake of breath is the only sound as Jack finally takes him in his mouth. There is no more teasing, no more build up. Jack is relentless, pushing all of Mickey's buttons, intent on getting him to let go. Lose himself in feeling and sensation. Forgetting about all the bullshit clogging up his brain and making him want to crawl out of his own skin.

Jack's head bobs as his hands slid up and down Mickey's thighs. It's a lot like it was back then, in lock up. Jack works fast.

Mickey can feel his dick hitting the back of Jack's throat. He can hear him gag a bit, but he doesn't pull off. He doesn't pull back or slow down. He hums, swirling his tongue around the tip, biting it lightly like he knows Mickey likes. Mickey moans lowly, trying desperately to keep it down.
Somewhere along the line Jack had taken his own dick out too. Mickey didn't notice, too lost in the feeling, floating somewhere over his own body, buoyant on waves of pleasure. Mickey can hear the sloppy sounds of Jack slurping around his hard on, and the quiet slapping of him jerking his own cock. Mickey takes one of his hands and runs it through Jack's hair, pulling just enough to make Jack groan low in his throat, the sound sending shock waves up Mickey's spine.


Mickey bangs his head against the wall again, tightening his fingers in Jack's hair as he comes hard down his throat with a low growl. He's trying to catch his breath, hand still resting in Jack's hair where his head rests on Mickey's thigh as he jerks his dick a few more times before coming silently all over the dirty wood floor.

"Damn." Jack laughs. He stands up and starts tucking himself back in. Mickey follows suit, zipping his pants as he watches Jack kick some loose potting soil over the cum splattered on the floor. Mickey laughs at that, eyebrows raised. Jack just shrugs.

"You feel better?" he asks, genuine concern on his face.

"About halfway there." Mickey smirks, reaching for Jack. Jack puts out a hand and helps Mickey stand.

"You're right, time for part two of 'the thing'." he smiles brightly and Mickey socks him in the shoulder, just hard enough to make him wobble.

Jack opens the door to the shed and takes a quick look around. Deeming the coast clear, they walk back into the back yard. Jack picks up his phone and opens up the music app.

"You ready for this?" Jack smiles at Mickey fondly, as the sounds of Biggie Smalls fill up the yard.

"You fucking know it, kid." Mickey laughs, getting into character.

He forgot how much fun this was.

------------------------------------

Ian knocks on the front door of a big house on the north side. Mandy texted him the address while on her hot lesbian date. Ian doesn't want to be here, but he promised Mandy, and he does want to see Mickey, so here he is.

A man who looks a few years older than him answers the door. He's obviously gay, it hangs around the guy like a glittery pink cloud. Ian doesn't know how he knows, it's just like that with certain guys. He's wearing a pale yellow v-neck sweater, and his tortoise shell glasses frame his face in an odd way.

"Can I help you?" he asked, eyeing Ian suspiciously.

"Um." Ian stutters, feeling like an idiot all of the sudden. "I'm here to pick up Mickey?" it comes out like a question. "Friend of Jack's." he adds on as an afterthought.

"Oh, sure. Yeah. They're hanging out in the back yard." the man laughs, even though Ian sees
nothing funny about it. "Just through there, in the kitchen there's a door. If you go now, you may be able to catch the show."

Ian doesn't know what the fuck that means, but he nods anyway, making his way down the hall and through the kitchen. He can hear the music before he even gets to the door. It's Biggie Smalls, the 'Ready to Die' album, if he remembers correctly. By the time he opens the door and steps onto the deck, he can hear Mickey and Jack singing along, before he can even see them. Ian can also tell, even from a distance, that they have changed the words.

"My man Igg left a Tec and a 9 at my crib. Turned his self in, he had to do a bid. A 1-to-3, he be home the end of '93. I'm ready to get this paper, G: you with me?" Mickey raps. Ian can see from his hidden vantage point that Mickey is really into this.

Whatever this is.

Ian comes off the deck to see Mickey standing by the picnic table, with Jack sitting on the table top. Mickey has such a big smile on his face, Ian backs up, still not wanting to be seen. He wants to watch this thing to the end. It's oddly fascinating. He's never seen Mickey do anything like this before.

Then Jack picks up the second part of the song.

"Motherfucking right, my pocket's looking kinda tight. And I'm stressed. Yo Mickey let me grab the vest."

Ian sees Jack's changed the words too. This is obviously not the first time they've done this.

"No need for that, just grab the fucking gat. The first pocket that's fat the Tec is to his back. Word is bond, I'ma smoke him yo don't fake no moves. Treat it like boxing: stick and move, stick and move." Mickey laughs while shadow boxing with Jack.

Jack jumps off the table and starts punching back as he comes back at Mickey with the next part of the song.

"Nigga, you ain't got to explain shit. I've been robbin' motherfuckers since the slave ships, with the same clip and the same four-five. Two point-blank, a motherfucker's sure to die. That's my word, nigga even try to bogart, have his mother singing "It's so hard..."

Ian doesn't know what to think about what he is seeing. He's never seen Mickey do something like this before. It's so out of character. It's like fucking karaoke all over again. Ian still doesn't move. He just stares, completely consumed by whatever the fuck this is.

They rap the whole song, taking turns just like in the original. It's toward the end of it all that Ian realizes he's been inching closer the entire time. He's almost within their line of sight as the song starts to wind down.

Mickey is dancing around with Jack, hopping up and down, totally lost in the moment.

"Man, niggas come through I'm taking high school rings too. Bitches get strangled for they earrings and bangles, and when I rock her and drop her I'm taking her door knockers."

They stand a few feet from each other. It almost looks like they are about to square off, but they come back with the next line together.

"And if she's resistant "baka! baka! baka!" they scream at each other, ducking and shooting at each
other with finger guns before Mickey comes back for the big finale.

"So go get your man bitch, he can get robbed too. Tell him Mickey took it, what the fuck he gonna do? I hope apologetic or I'm a have to set it."

Jack walks up to Mickey, chests pressing together, and it looks again like they are about the throw down, but they just scream the last lyric in unison.

"And if I set it the cocksucker won't forget it!!" and they throw their arms around each other, laughing like maniacs.

Ian shouldn't be here. He shouldn't have seen that shit. It feels so personal. Why the hell does Ian keep stumbling into these intense moments between Mickey and fucking Jack?

God damn it.

He shuffles awkwardly for a minute before anyone notices he's there. Jack's the one who sees him first. His face is unreadable. He doesn't look angry, maybe confused? Ian can't tell. He still doesn't really know this kid.

"What are you doing here?" Jack asks, blunt as always.

At the question, Mickey turns, finally laying eyes on Ian. Mickey looks shocked, maybe even a little embarrassed. He must know Ian saw some of their little performance. He's blushing, running his 'FUCK' hand over his mouth, then through his hair. He doesn't say anything. Jack speaks instead again.

"Seriously, dude. What are you doing here? How did you even know how to find me?"

Ian takes his eyes off Mickey to look at Jack. He hadn't even noticed he'd been staring. But Jack had, clearly. He looked angry at Ian's intrusion.

"Um." Ian stutters under Jack's accusatory gaze. "Mandy couldn't come, so she asked me to pick you up." He aims his answer at Mickey even though he's still in this bizarre stare off with Jack.

"Oh." Mickey says. Ian can't read him either. Not here, not when he's with Jack. Mickey feels like a stranger any time he's with Jack.

Ian doesn't like it. Not at all.

"Were you just lurking over there? Watching us?" Jack does sound angry now.

"Well, no. Not really." Ian defends. "I just got here towards the end. I didn't want to interrupt...whatever that was."

Jack laughs. It sounds too loud in the quiet back yard. Mickey's blushing again. What the fuck?

"I don't think anyone's ever witnessed us doing 'the thing', Mick. Feels weird, right?" Jack smiles, running his hand through Mickey's hair. Mickey laughs quietly, swiping at Jack's hand, but not moving away.

"Kind of." Mickey mutters shyly.

What the fuck is 'the thing'? Ian is so fucking confused. And what the hell is wrong with Mickey? Acting all shy and coy. Shit's disturbing.
"Uh, thanks for coming, man. You didn't have to. I could've taken the L." Mickey says, finally stepping away from Jack to wander over to the picnic table that sits in the middle of the yard. He grabs his hoodie, throwing it on and zipping it up.

"I promised Mandy I'd get you." Ian says. Because he can't tell Mickey he wanted to see him, that he's been missing him. Not now. Not in front of Jack.

"Okay, yeah." Mickey says. He looks over at Jack. "Gotta go, man. Thanks for this, for today." he pulls Jack into his arms, hugging him tight.

"Always, Mick. Anything you need, you know that. Did it help? The thing?" Jack asks, mischievous smile playing at his lips.

Mickey clears his throat, letting go of Jack and stepping back. "Yeah, man. It helped."

"Always does." Jack smirked, shooting a look at Ian he can't decipher. "I always take care of you, don't I, Mick?"

Mickey is blushing again. Ian has a sickening feeling he knows what 'the thing' is. He just stumbled upon some weird sex thing. He's certain of it.

Ian knows he told Mickey not to wait for him. Not to wait for Ian to be ready for sex. But bearing witness to the actual evidence of Mickey not waiting is hurting Ian more than he anticipated. And Jack's smug attitude is making it so much worse.

Now that Ian's almost certain they had been hooking up before he got here, he finds himself examining Mickey more closely. Is that flush on his neck from his dancing and singing, or is it from getting fucked hard like he likes? Is that sweat on his brow from jumping around, or from hopping on Jack's dick? Is his voice sore from screaming song lyrics, or is it from screaming Jack's name? Begging him to fuck him harder. 'Right there, fuck, right there.' Ian can hear Mickey's sex-drenched voice in his head. He can see them fucking, in his mind's eye. He feels a wave of nausea hit him. Fuck this shit.

"Are you ready to go or what? I wanna go home." Ian ground out, pissed off that he has to see this shit. Fuck Mandy for sending him here. And fuck Mickey for not saying anything. He's just standing there like an idiot while Jack makes these stupid innuendos they can all see right through.

"Yeah." Mickey stammers, finally finding his voice. "Let's go."

The three men walk towards the deck again, only to see Trevor standing there, arms crossed over his chest. Mickey stops dead in his tracks, Jack so close behind him that he slams into him.

"Fuck, Mick, what the hell?" he grumbles, looking up. "Oh shit." he laughs, seeing Trevor towering over them on the deck.

"Ian, can I talk to you?" Trevor asks, not even bothering to greet the other two men.

"Uh, sure, I guess. Mick, wait here for a sec? I'll get you home, I promise." Ian says. He can tell Mickey is barely containing his anger. It's written all over his face. but what the hell is Ian supposed to do? Ian's not very happy right now either.

Mickey nods and Ian follows Trevor back into the house. The stand in the kitchen, on either side of the island. Trevor crosses his arms over his chest again. He looks like he's ready for a fight.
"What's up, Trev?" Ian asks, ready to get this shit over with as soon as possible.

Trevor deflates, his angry posture dissolving. He looks tired.

"I, uh, just wanted to apologize." Trevor mumbled. "I was a dick. I know that. I don't know why I say the shit I do. But I do say it, and then I always have to say I'm sorry after. Because I am. I'm sorry."

"It's cool, man." Ian says, even if he doesn't really feel that way.

"No, it's really not. Look, I don't know if we're ever going to be friends, not close ones anyway. But there's no reason for us to be weird around each other either. I know I said I didn't want you as a friend, and that was a fucked up thing to say. You were trying to reach out, make amends or whatever, and I just shit all over it. So I'm sorry." Trevor sound conciliatory, but he's got a gleam in his eye that makes Ian wary.

"Thanks man. And I'm sorry too, you know. For all of it. I know I did things the wrong way, most of the time. But I hope you know I never meant to hurt you." Ian put his hands on the island, not breaking eye contact. He wants Trevor to know he's serious.

"Jack seems like a good fit here." Trevor changes the subject so fast Ian flounders for a moment.

"Jack?" he asks dumbly. "Oh yeah. From what little I've heard he seems to like it."

"Mickey's here a lot." Trevor says, all nonchalant. "They spend a lot of time together." there's a barely-there teasing tone to Trevor's voice that Ian doesn't like.

"Jack's his best friend." Ian says, not sure where this is going.

"More like his best fuck. Better tell them to cool it on that shit before Jack gets booted." Trevor laughs.

Is this what he called him in here for? To throw this shit in his face? To threaten Jack and Mickey indirectly through Ian? Was this his plan all along?

"I don't know what the fuck you are talking about." Ian says, angry now.

"Look, Ian, I don't know what you think you have going on with your ex, but it's clear to me he's way more interested in Jack. Don't you think? George, the guy who's shift just ended filled me in on what was going down here this afternoon. They are not a undercover as they think they are. Anyway, just tell 'em too cool it on the fucking around here. Andy hates that shit and Jack will be out on his ass before he knows what hit him, okay? Okay. Good talk, Ian. Glad we could clear the air. See you around." and Trevor was out of the kitchen before Ian could ever formulate a response.

Ian is seething. So fucking mad. Mad at Trevor for pulling that passive-aggressive bullshit he always pulls. Mad at Jack and Mickey for jeopardizing Jack's chance at the house after they all put so much work into it. Mad at Mickey for still fucking around with Jack. Even though he knows he's got no right, it still feels like a betrayal. After everything they've talked about, after all the almost promises they've made to each other. After Ian let himself believe that maybe they could be something again.

Ian is fucking mad.

He storms out of the kitchen and back into the back yard.
"What do you think that's about?" Jack asks as they stand awkwardly in the yard waiting for Ian to come back outside.

"Who the fuck knows, that dude is weird. It's like he's always pushing Ian away, then pulling him back. At least that's what it looks like from the outside." Mickey says, shrugging his shoulders. He pats his pockets for his cigarettes, pulling one out and lighting it quickly. He felt anxiety curling up his spine, maybe a little guilt too. He knows he didn't do anything wrong, doing 'the thing' with Jack. He and Ian made it clear that they were just friends now, maybe kinda working on being more. But nothing concrete. Ian had said that he wasn't ready. Ian had said he wanted to go slow.

So there is absolutely no reason for Mickey to feel bad.

So why does he, indeed, feel like shit all of the sudden?

Jack and Mickey doing their 'thing' was supposed to help Mickey take his mind of shit. It usually got the job done, pulling him out of his own head and letting him focus on getting off, then just being silly and having fun. Blowing off some steam.

But now he just feels worse than he did before he came over here.

And that pisses him off.

He didn't do anything wrong, god damn it.

"Hey, you okay?" Jack asks, putting his hand out for Mickey's cigarette. Mickey passes it over without question.


"This about Ian being here? So soon after we...." he trailed off, waving his free hand between the two of them.

"Yeah." Mickey concedes. "Maybe."

"Listen man." Jack says, laying a hand on Mickey's shoulder. "This shit between us has always been fun for fun's sake, but if you're thinking maybe it's not such a good idea now, you know, with him around, it's cool. I don't wanna fuck up your shit, Mick. I don't want you regretting shit because you're conflicted. You know what I mean?"

Mickey nods again. "Yeah. I dunno man. I don't know what's going on with him."

Jack opens his mouth to speak again, but just then the back door swings open and Ian comes barging back into the yard.

"Are you two fucking kidding me right now?" he yells, pointing an accusing finger between the two of them.

"What are you on about, Gallagher?" Mickey asks, backing up a bit. Ian's face is all red, he looks like he's ready to throw down.

"Trevor just told me to politely ask you two to stop fucking on house grounds. You know, cuz it's against the fucking rules and this prick could get tossed on his ungrateful ass." he screams, rounding
on Jack and poking a finger into his chest.

"Do you even care? About this house? About getting clean? About Mickey? Do you fucking care about anything besides yourself? I can't fucking believe this shit."

Jack puts his hands up, face pale and blank. He looks over at Mickey with his eyebrows raised.

Ian sees the look that passes between the two men, and it makes him exponentially madder.

"And you!" he screams, stepping up to Mickey. "What the hell are you doing? You do all this work to get him in, pull me into this shit. I call in favors, I have to grovel, I have to deal with Trevor's stuck up ass. All for him to come to me and rub it in my face that you are fucking right in front of me. Probably got yourselves off before I got here today."

Mickey knows he must look guilty, because Ian's eyes soften for a half-second, looking hurt, before they harden again. Ian shakes his head in disbelief.

"Fucking assholes. Cut the shit. Or I'll tell Andy myself." he rounds on Jack once more. "Then you're shit outta luck, kid." he laughs bitterly at the stunned look on Jack's face.

"I'm fucking leaving." Ian says, already making his way back onto the deck. "Mickey, you come now or you take the fucking L. I don't care anymore."

Mickey watches Ian's retreating form for a moment before turning to Jack. "Gotta go, man."

Jack nods. "Yeah, okay."

"Guess we should cool it for a bit. Like you said." Mickey says, a step toward the deck.

"Yeah, Mick, okay." Jack says again. "Whatever happens, we're still cool, right?"

Mickey hears Jack's unasked question, clear as day.

'You're not gonna ditch me?'
'You're not gonna choose him over me?'
'You're not gonna stop being my friend if we stop sucking each other's dicks, right?'

Mickey sighs, taking two steps back so he's in Jack's face again.

"We're cool, man. No matter what, I got you. Okay?"

Jack's whole body relaxes, Mickey watches it happen. He pulls Jack into a hard hug. "Not going anywhere man. You know I love you for more than that shit. Besides, your dick sucking skills couldn't keep me around on their own. Been telling you for years, gotta work on that technique of yours."

Jack laughs, knowing what Mickey's doing. Distract and evade. It's the 'thing' all over again.

"Very funny, asshole. Go get your man." Jack pushes Mickey toward the deck.

Mickey smiles brightly at his friend, then flips him off with both hands before jogging back into the house.

--------------------------------
Jack walks into the house after he watches Ian and Mickey drive away in a car he's never seen before. He goes straight to the office in the front of the house, finding Trevor staring out the window. He was probably watching them driving off too.

"What do you want?" Trevor sighs, like just the sight of Jack makes him weary.

"Just wanted to let you know that you did a shitty thing just then."

"I don't know if I'd be passing judgement right now, if I were you." Trevor spits. "You're the one who's breaking house rules with that fucking dirt bag."

"That's what this is about, huh? Mickey. It's always about Mickey with you. Is it because Ian loves him so much? Is that the problem?" Jack leans up against the wall by the door, arms crossed over his chest, amused smirk playing at his lips.

"I don't know what the fuck you think you're talking about." Trevor spits. He takes two steps forward like he wants to get in Jack's face, but holds back a few feet away.

"I think you know exactly what I'm talking about." Jack drawls, not moving from his spot against the wall. "Listen, I get it, okay. It's weird, their dynamic."

Trevor looks angry for a moment, then resigned. He crosses his arms over his chest too, mirroring Jack's posture.

"I heard through the grapevine you and Ian are trying to be friendly again. I know what went down, you know, between you two."

"You don't know shit." Trevor replies angrily.

"Oh, but I do." Jack smiles. "I know it's hard to let that shit go. You feel betrayed, you feel not good enough. You keep wondering what is so great about this fucking guy that your dude can't fucking let him go. You wanna be friends with Ian, but you're still so bitter about that shit with Mick that it's blocking you from getting there. So you lash out, you do stupid shit like making threats, trying to regain the upper hand, save face."

Trevor visibly crumbles. Jack watches it happen, a little fascinated. All the anger and bravado draining out of him as he sinks back down in his office chair.

"I'm sorry. I don't know why I get that way. With him. With Mickey. I just can't let it go. What the fuck makes him so special?"

Jack's amused. He never thought he'd be having this discussion with Trevor. But it's not hard to explain. Not for Jack.

"Listen, I don't know how you feel about Ian. If your intentions are to be an actual friend to him or if you are trying to get him back, but if you wanna be in his life at all, you're going to have to let this tired anti-Mickey campaign go. Because I've known Mickey for a long ass time, and even though I just met Ian in the flesh a few months ago, it's been plain to see all along, they will never let each other go. I don't know if they're gonna get back together, but I know for a fact they will always love each other. So you want one, you better be ready to at least tolerate the other."

Trevor made a disgusted face, but Jack was undeterred.
"It's not easy. I won't lie. To love one of them while hating the other. That's why I'm trying to let go of my own jealous shit. I wanted Mickey like that once. Like the way you want Ian, or used to. But the more I got to know him, the more I realized how much of a dead end that shit is. Because he belongs to Ian. All of him. And I'm pretty sure you know Ian belongs to him too. So if you can't deal with that, it's better to just cut your losses now, and leave them to it. Because if you try to get in the middle of it again, or try to fuck them up in any way, it's gonna blow up in your face. Because they will always choose each other. Over me. Over you. Over anyone else. It used to make me sad." Jack shrugs. "But now I think it's kinda beautiful."

"Then why the fuck are you still fucking him? That makes no sense." Trevor says, crossing his arms again. Defensive.

"Well, come on now." Jack laughs. "He's hot. And we have incredible chemistry. The sex is fucking amazing. But I always knew it was just sex." Jack pushed off the wall and came to stand in front of the desk. He put his palms flat on the dark wood surface and got right in Trevor's line of sight. "And after what you just pulled out there, I think my turn on Mick's Wild Ride has come to an end. So thanks for that, you dick." Jack laughed. "I won't come between them. It's too important to Mickey and I love him too much to stand in the way. So if that means I gotta find another hot guy to pull my hair, then so be it." Jack pushed off the desk and started walking backwards out of the office, never taking his eyes off Trevor. "So make up your mind, dude. Either you wanna be friends or you wanna disappear. But don't pull that shit again. Cuz this house doesn't mean all that to me. I will fucking destroy you. Get me? Fuck them up or try to come between them again, and me and you have some serious fucking problems." Jack saluted Trevor with two fingers. "Good talk." he smiled wide and he turned around and left the office, leaving Trevor angry and very confused in his wake.
Stalemate

Chapter Summary

Things are at a standstill....

Chapter Notes

I took some time off in the midst of the madness of the S8 premiere. since i'm not getting what i want from the show, i'm gonna do it my way.....

this is just a bit of a filler chapter, getting us from point A to point B.

xoxo

Mickey's had a crazy two weeks. It's been a totally chaotic clusterfuck, and he can't wait for this fucking birthday party to be over. Parties are supposed to be fun, but there in nothing fun about planning a party for a six year old's birthday.

Svetlana has been using him to do all the grunt work. Buying all the supplies. Paper plates and cups with Scooby Do on them, balloons, streamers, cheap toys to fill favor bags with. A huge cake (shaped like the Mystery Machine for fuck's sake!) and gallons and gallons of ice cream. Chips and dip and candy. Veggie and fruit platters, finger sandwiches. A giant fucking pinata in the shape of the damn cartoon dog. It's fucking ridiculous. He doesn't know if this is normal or not, because he's never experienced it, but it feels like a lot for one kid's sixth birthday. The party itself will probably only last a few hours, so what the fuck is with the weeks of preparation?

He had to take the day off to get all the last minute shit done, the party was the following afternoon. Matt was understanding, as usual. Mickey's glad for the day off, taking the opportunity to sleep in before his phone starts it's inevitable ringing.

He yawns, stretching out in his bed. He blinks slowly, grabbing his phone off the nightstand and checking the time. 8:30. Not too bad. He's got time for coffee and a shower before he's gotta hit the street. He notices with a tinge of sadness that Ian still hasn't texted him.

The last time Mickey saw Ian was that day at the halfway house. The day with the confrontation with Jack and fucking Trevor. What a mess that was.

After Mickey had said goodbye to Jack and followed Ian out of the house and gotten in the car, Mickey had anticipated and argument. He expected Ian to lay into him again once they were alone, like Ian always does. He can't let shit like that sit, he has to discuss it.

So Mickey was surprised when Ian said nothing. He turned the radio on loud and drove Mickey home in silence. Mickey didn't know what to say. Was he supposed to apologize? Was what he'd done with Jack that bad? Was he supposed to be angry at Ian too? He didn't know. So he just sat there, looking out the window until Ian pulled up in front of his house. Mickey had looked over at
Ian, but Ian refused to meet his eye, just stared out the windshield until Mickey had heaved a defeated sigh and slunk out of the car, ashamed and confused.

After that, Mickey had expected Ian to initiate contact once he had cooled down. Ian could never let an argument continue like this. He wasn't one to stew in silent rage. He was a screamer and a crier and a fighter.

So Mickey was scared. Scared that he had irrevocable damaged the tenuous connection he had made with Ian since he'd come home. Scared he fucked up the one thing he wanted to fix more than anything. Over a meaningless blowjob with a guy he doesn't even feel that way about.

Fuck.

Mickey's wanted to reach out to him the whole time, but he was afraid to make it worse. He figured Ian would call him when he had cooled down.

But that plan seems to have backfired, because it's been two fucking weeks with not a word. Because Yev's party is tomorrow, and Ian's going to be there. And it's going to be awkward as fuck.

Wonderful.

Mickey heaves himself off the bed and heads toward the bathroom.

--------------------

Ian is tired. Really fucking tired. He knows Caroline is going to notice. She's going to wonder if he's slipping. He's not slipping.

Is he?

Fuck, he's not even sure anymore.

He's sitting in the waiting room of Caroline's office on a Friday. It's the day before Yev's birthday party, and Ian has the day off. He worked a double earlier in the week, and Sue doesn't want him over-extending himself, so she gave him a long weekend.

Ian's not going to complain about that.

He is a little fidgety. He stretches his legs out, pulls them back in. He takes his phone out, scrolling through it mindlessly, then puts it back in his pocket. Only to take it out again a moment later and open up his messages.

He's been waiting for a text from Mickey since that day at Jack's half-way house. Ian was so angry in that moment. He felt betrayed. He felt like a fool. He didn't want to see Mickey, or talk to Mickey, or think about Mickey.

How could he do that? After everything they'd talked about? After Ian told Mickey what happened with Brian? After Ian told Mickey he still loved him? That he wanted to try, with them. That he still had hope.

Ian's not jealous. No. It's not that. If Mickey were picking up randoms at the club to get his rocks off, he could understand that. If he was picking up twinks in the park to suck his dick, Ian wouldn't care.
It was Jack. That was the problem. They are too close, Mickey and Jack. There is something more there, something deeper. And it bothers Ian in a way he can't explain. They are more than friends. More than fuck buddies. But less than boyfriends. Ian can't categorize it, and the ambiguity of that is what sent him over the deep end. If he can't define it, he can't gauge how much of a threat it is to him, to his relationship with Mickey.

And Mickey hasn't tried to contact him either. Mandy keeps telling Ian it's not what he thinks, this thing between Mickey and Jack. That he needs to talk to Mickey about it. That Mickey's giving him space. That Mickey doesn't want to push Ian, after all Ian has been through recently.

Which would make sense, to a rational person.

But Ian has never been rational. Especially not concerning Mickey. It's all passion and emotion. Raw energy. Nothing calculated or premeditated. Never has been.

So he hasn't spoken to Mickey since that day. Which is slowly killing him, he's sure of it. He doesn't know why he can't just grow a set and tell Mickey how he feels.

Jealous.

Insecure.

Afraid.

Ian sighs, looking at his message thread with Mickey, going back and forth in his mind. He was about to start typing out a message, when the phone vibrated in his hand, making him jump.

"Shit." he exclaimed, almost dropping his phone.

It was Mandy.

Ian rolled his eyes. It's not that he didn't want to talk to Mandy, he just had an idea where this conversation was going to go.

He swiped his thumb over the touchscreen and put the phone to his ear.

"Hey Mands."

"Hey Ian. Where are you? I thought you had the day off with me today? We were gonna run errands for Yev's party? Did you ditch me?" he can hear the smile in her voice, knows she's just fucking with him.

"Yeah, I ran away with a circus performer. He's going to show me the world." Ian laughed.

"Wouldn't surprise me." Mandy giggled. "But seriously, I woke up and you were gone. You never leave this early on an off day."

"Um, I called Caroline's office to see if she had any openings this morning." Ian says, not sure why he's uneasy about telling her this.

Mandy is silent on the other end of the line for a moment. Ian can hear her shuffling around. "Is this about Mick?" she finally asks.


"Well, I can't tell you anything I haven't told you already Ian. Just call him. He's waiting on you. He
doesn't want to push you. He thinks you're super fucking pissed at him, and he doesn't wanna push you farther away." she pauses for a moment, like she's choosing her words carefully. "Since you're down there already, why don't you run it by Caroline? She may have some insight I don't."

Ian smiled. Since when does Mandy advocate for Ian's shrink? It's a strange day indeed.

"Yeah, you're probably right. It's kinda why I asked to come in." Ian concedes. He's at a loss at how to fix this. Maybe an outside perspective will help.

"Okay, well, when you get back we gotta hit the road. We still need to buy Yev's gifts, and of course you'll have to wrap them after. I'm shit at that." Mandy laughs.

"Sure thing, Mands." Ian smiles.

Just then, Caroline comes out of her office, waving Ian over.

"Gotta go. I'll be home soon." Ian says, standing.

"Sure thing. See ya soon."

"Okay. Bye."

Ian hangs up with Mandy and makes his way towards Caroline's office. He's going to figure this shit out. It's gone on long enough.

----------------------------------

Mickey is sitting at the kitchen table, moving home fries around on his plate. He stabs one with his fork, running it through a puddle of ketchup. He pops it in his mouth, chewing thoughtfully. Tess looks over at him from the stove. "Well?" she asks.


"Yeah, that the paprika and the sage. Tasty, right?" she smiles brightly, dropping a couple eggs on his plate too. Over easy, Mickey's favorite.

Mickey returns her smile, grabbing the hot sauce off the table and coating his eggs liberally. He's taking his first bite just as Iggy comes out of the bathroom, freshly showered, shaggy hair sticking up in all directions. He sits at the table across from Mickey just as Tessa sets a plate of eggs in front of him.

"Thanks babe." Iggy smiles, picking up his fork and shoveling his scrambled eggs into his mouth. He looks over at Mickey and smiles, eggs all over his chin.

"Close your mouth, you animal." Mickey says with a disgusted grimace.

"You excited for tomorrow? Gonna be fun." Iggy says after he swallows.

"It's just a party for a bunch of little kids. No booze or anything. How much fun can it possibly be?" Mickey asks, sipping his coffee.

Tess finally finishes her own plate and sits down next to Iggy, running her free hand through his
damp hair. "Igg's been so excited for laser tag!" she smiles. "Been talking about it for weeks."

"Have not." Iggy mumbles, sipping his own coffee. "Kid's game."

"Fuck that, Igg." Mickey laughs.

Iggy looks up to see his brother's mischievous smile. "I'm gonna fucking wreck you at laser tag."

Iggy's face breaks out into a ridiculous smile. "Yeah? We can play?"

"Better fucking believe we can play. You think I'm shelling out all that cash so we can sit around with the moms and talk about PTA or some shit? We're gonna fucking play."

Iggy raises his hand high in the air, and Mickey high-fives him.

"Hell yeah. I'm gonna destroy you." Iggy laughs.

"You fucking wish." Mickey scoffs.

"Is Ian going to be there?" Tessa chimes in, rolling her coffee cup between her manicured fingers.

Mickey stiffens a bit at the sound of Ian's name. "Yeah, I mean, I think so. Haven't spoken to him in a while. But Mandy says they'll both be there."

"Trouble in paradise?" Iggy asks, only half serious.

"Don't start with me, Iggy. I don't know what's up with him, and I'd rather not talk about it." Mickey says, standing up to refill his coffee cup.

"Sorry bro. Didn't mean nothing." Iggy mutters, shooting his girlfriend a look. Tess just shrugs and sips her coffee.

"You should call him." Tess says after a few moments. Mickey is still standing by the coffee maker. He turns to look at Iggy's girlfriend. She just shrugs again. "I just have a feeling." she says ominously. "He's waiting on you."

Mickey just stares at Tessa for a minute. He's not sure what is up with Iggy's girlfriend, but her hunches, or intuition or whatever, is always on point. Bitch should work for the psychic friends network.

Maybe he should call Ian. This stupid shit has been going on long enough.

"Sure, yeah." he says, gulping down some coffee before heading back towards his bedroom with his mug. "Thanks Tess, maybe I'll do that."

"You better!" Tess calls out to his retreating form. "Otherwise that party's going to be awkward as fuck."

Mickey can hear Iggy and Tessa laughing as he closes his bedroom door.

That bitch is always right. It's kinda scary.
"So things with your sister are getting better, then." Caroline smiled. "If I am hearing you right, it sounds like Fiona is making an effort to give you the space you desire to live your own life, as well as trying to include you in family activities. Is that correct?"

Ian sighed, running a hand over his face. "Yeah, I guess," he said. "I just get so frustrated with her and Lip, they still don't trust me. Still giving me shit about living with Mandy. They still talk bad about her and Mick all the time. They just can't let it go."

Caroline nodded, looking down at her notes. "We've talked about this before, Ian. I think your family feels a little threatened by Mandy and Mickey. I think your siblings, Fiona and Lip especially, have some residual guilt from your first bipolar episode. They weren't there for you, but Mickey and Mandy were. That's what you told me, right?"

Ian nodded, playing with his fingers. "Yeah."

"Well, I think your family is just afraid that you don't trust them anymore. That you don't see them as your first line of defense in your fight against your disorder. That must be disconcerting for them, especially with how you all grew up. For a long time, Ian, it was the Gallaghers against the world. Now you are trying to do things on your own. I have a feeling your siblings, Fiona and Lip especially, see you standing on your own as you pulling away. And they see you leaning on Mandy and Mickey instead of them, as a sign that you don't need them or want them in your corner anymore."

Ian huffed out an irritated breath. "Why does it have to be one or the other? Why can't I have my family and my friends? Why do they make me feel like I have to choose?"

"I can't tell you that, Ian." Caroline said smoothly. "But if I can give you some advice?" she asked. Ian nodded again. "I would try sitting down with Fiona and Lip and really explaining your current issues with them. You told me you never told them about what happened with Brian, is that still the case?"

Ian's eyebrows knitted together, looking up at Caroline. "That old shit? Really? Why would I bring that up?"

"Because you know as well as I do, Ian, it has had a profound effect on you."

"No." Ian shook his head violently. "No. I'm over that shit. It's done."

"Ian." Caroline's voice was firm, but still kind. "Did you not just tell me a few minutes ago, that you are still struggling with panic attacks due to that incident?"

Ian nodded again, feeling his throat closing up, tears welling up in his eyes. Fuck.

"And did you not just tell me that you have yet to have a positive sexual experience since then?"

Ian nodded again, slowly losing his composure.

"I am not trying to upset you, Ian. I'm just suggesting that maybe if you were honest with you family about the reason you had to pull back a little, it may make it easier for them to understand your decision making process. You did open up to Mandy and Mickey both about the incident, did you not?"

"Yeah. They were both really great about it. Mickey especially. Like you said, he understands better
than anyone what I'm going through. But he hasn't been around, so..." he trailed off, forgetting that he hadn't told Caroline about his melt down at the half-way house.

"Oh." Caroline said, eyes narrowing. "Did something happen?"

"I, um, kinda freaked out." Ian muttered. "We kinda talked about maybe working on us, you know? Like working towards being together again?"

"That's good, Ian. If that's what you want." Caroline replied.

"Yeah, I do." Ian nodded, fidgety again. He pulled his hands into his lap, then cupped them over his knees. "But I, uh, told him I wasn't ready to be physical, you know, cuz I was still messed up over Brian. Mickey understood. He always understands." Ian cracked a tiny smile before his face went blank again. "But I told him not to wait for me, you know, for sex or whatever. Told him he could hook up with other guys."

Caroline let her surprise show on her face for a moment before she schooled her expression again.

"And you were comfortable with that arrangement?" she asked.

"I thought I was." Ian said, looking away from his therapist to let his eyes roam over the abstract art on the walls. "But he's not fucking random guys. He's not hooking up in bars or going on grindr. He's got this fuck buddy, from jail, and they are really good friends. It doesn't feel like a casual hook up to me. I think it's way more than that." Ian's eyes are burning, he's -this- close to losing it. He sniff, hard. "I, um, I guess I'm kinda scared that he'll decide he doesn't wanna wait. Doesn't wanna try. You know, like I'm not worth all this effort. That it may be easier to try something with this other guy instead."

"Ian, look at me." Caroline says. Her voice is soft, and so kind. Ian looks up from his clasped hands, tears finally slipping down his cheeks. "I don't know if you're right about Mickey. I don't know anything about his relationship with this other man. But I do know that you can't assume to know what someone else is thinking. You need to talk to Mickey about this. And you need to be honest. That is the most important thing. Did you mean it when you told him not to wait?"

Ian shrugged, wiping his eyes with an open palm. "Yeah, I mean. It's not fair to make him wait on me. Who knows how long it's going to take."

"But you want to be with him?"

"Of course I do."

"Well, then I think you should tell him what you just told me. About you fears and insecurities regarding his sexual partner, this friend." Caroline said.

"I know. I've been meaning to." Ian says "Just feel like such an asshole." he laughs humorlessly.

"You are not an asshole Ian, your feelings are valid. After enduring the kind of assault you did, it can take some time before you are ready to be vulnerable like that again. You take all the time you need, there is no pressure. It sounds like the only person pressuring you is yourself." Ian looked up, running a hand through his hair. Caroline gave him another kind smile. "But the main thing is communication, Ian. I know it's scary, but this kind of thing doesn't get better without talking."

Ian nodded again, sniffing again and wiping his face once more.

"How is it going with that other thing we talked about?" Caroline asked, writing on her notepad.
again, she paused, looking up and waiting for him to answer.

Ian cracked a smile, a big genuine one. "You mean the jerking off?" he laughed.

Caroline chuckled, blushing a bit. Ian always found it amusing that Caroline got all flustered talking about sex with him. It was usually the one thing Ian was never embarrassed about, and the fact that his therapist was all shy about it was kind of hilarious.

"Yes, Ian, the jerking off." she laughed lightly.

Over the course of the past month, Ian had slowly been getting back into his 'groove', so to speak.

In the immediate aftermath of his assault, Ian couldn't even get a boner without losing his composure. Just the feeling of his dick hard and throbbing would make him sick to his stomach. Vivid images of Brian's final assault would flood his mind and he would crumple in on himself. A mess of tears and snot and uncontrollable sobbing.

That shit is a sure fire way to kill a hard on.

But over the past few weeks, he's been able to cope better. Talking to Caroline about it has helped a lot.

And before that shit happened with Mickey, Jack and Trevor, Ian was heading back to feeling a little bit more normal. Because being with Mickey always made things easier.

Being around Mickey was like therapy all on it's own. Even though they weren't doing anything sexual together at the moment, just being in Mickey's presence was cathartic. It was like living his first crush all over again. Those butterflies in his stomach, that excited trembling in his body. And with no added stress or pressure to perform an actual sex act, it was really beneficial to his recovery. Made him feel normal. Made him feel safe.

He told Caroline as much.

"The jerking off is going well. I'm not having those same adverse reactions I was before. I haven't cried over my own boner in over a month." he smiled, because it really did feel ridiculous.

"That's good, Ian. I'm very happy for you. Do you think you'd consider actual sexual activity in the near future?" Caroline got right to the point.

"I dunno." Ian replied honestly. "I don't want to do anything physical with anyone but Mickey. But I don't see that happening, since we're not talking right now." Ian looked away, knowing what was coming next.

"Well, Ian, I think it's up to you to remedy that. You told me what happened between you and Mickey and the other men at the house that day. Your feelings are valid and you are dealing with them in a healthy way. The only thing I'd ask you to do different is to be honest with Mickey. Tell him about these new insights, and see where he's at. If he is the man you've been telling me about all these months, I think he will be open and receptive, and willing to go at your pace. But you won't know for sure until you ask him. That sound like something you could do?"

"Yeah, yeah. I know. We're actually supposed to see each other tomorrow. It's his son's birthday."

"Oh, that sounds nice. Maybe take this opportunity to get all this stuff off your chest, and the next time I see you, you'll have some progress to report." she beamed at him.
"Are you telling me to get laid, Caroline?" Ian laughed, wagging his eyebrows at his therapist.

Caroline blushed again, smiling slyly at Ian. "I am telling you to do what feels right to you, Ian, nothing more, nothing less. Take care of your needs, be good to yourself. And try to be open to the idea of letting someone in. It doesn't have to be Mickey, and it doesn't have to be sex. Just be open to the idea that you are worthy of love. You are worth waiting for. You don't own anyone anything, except yourself."

Ian smiled, nodding for what felt like the hundredth time in the hour.

"Okay then. Have fun at your party, and I'll see you in two weeks." Caroline stood up, putting her hand out for Ian to shake.

"Thanks, Caroline." Ian said, shaking her hand. "I appreciate it."

"It's my job, kid. Two weeks." she repeated.

Ian smiled at her one last time before leaving the office.

It's not like Caroline told him anything he didn't already know. But sometimes it made more sense coming from someone else.

He knew what he had to do.

He pulled out his phone as he was getting into the elevator.

But before he could even dial Mickey's number, he saw that he had missed a call from the man himself.

Ian hit the button for his voicemail and put the phone to his ear.

"You have one new message, received today at 9:17 am:

Hey man, it's me. I, uh, I know we kind of left things pretty shitty the last time I saw you. I feel like an ass for not calling sooner, but I wanted to give you some space. But Yev's party is tomorrow, and Mandy said you were gonna come. So I just wanted to check in and make sure we ain't got a beef I'm unaware of. You know, cuz if we cause a scene at the kid's party, Svet will have both our balls for appetizers." Ian heard Mickey's stifled chuckle over the recording. "Call me, man. Bye."

Ian looked at his phone for a second before ending the call.

It wasn't exactly an olive branch, but where Mickey was concerned, it was as good as such.

Ian made his way out of the building, shooting off a text as he walked.

me: yeah, man. we're cool. think we gotta talk tho. i'll b @ the party, wanna talk then?

Ian was just walking up the platform to get on the L when the reply came.

mick: sounds good man. missed ya.
Ian smiled to himself as he took up his spot on the train, grabbing the pole so he didn't lose his balance as the train lurched to life.

Ian missed Mickey too. Hopefully this would be the last of these freak out for him, and he and Mickey could finally start working on something real together.

For the first time in a long time, Ian was confident. He felt sure of himself and safe in his own mind.

He could do this. He could do this with Mickey. He could do this for Mickey. He could do this for himself.

He could fucking do this.
"You are late." Svetlana's clipped voice was the first thing Mickey heard as he stepped into Laser Quest.

"Jesus Christ. Get of my back." Mickey groused, stumbling a bit under the weight of all the bags he was carrying. "Colin was late picking us up, then he had to jump start the van. Then Tess forgot her and Iggy's gift at the house and we had to go all the way back to the south side."

"I do not care for your excuses." Svetlana shrugged. "Where is the pinata?"

Mickey rolled his eyes, shooting his thumb over his shoulder to where his brothers were just coming through the double doors, all of them weighted down with bags, Iggy carry the huge Scoobie Do pinata under his left arm.

"At least you make good pack animals." Svetlana muttered, moving past Mickey to get to his brothers.

"Bitch." Mickey said under his breath, dropping his bags onto a long table by the wall.

They had one of the event rooms of the laser tag place rented for three hours. Half that time to be spent in the hall, doing party type shit, Mickey guessed, and the other half the time slotted away for the actual laser tag.

Mickey's never played laser tag. They didn't do shit like this when he was a kid. But he's shot a fuck ton of guns, and it's gotta be pretty much the same thing, right?

He picked through the bags, pulling out bags of candy and containers full of cupcakes. He emptied the food onto the table just as Yevgeny came running around the corner, followed by a bunch of other little kids. They were red faced and screaming, laughing that high pitched maniacal laugh that can only come from a small child.

Yevgeny looked up as he rounded the corner, locking eyes with his father. He stopped dead in his tracks, his little band of followers slamming into him, almost sending them all to the floor.

"Hey kid." Mickey said awkwardly, giving his son a little wave.

"Whoa." the boy said, eyes wide. Then his tiny face split into a wide smile. "Daddy-Mickey!!!" he bellowed, running up to Mickey and wrapping his little arms around Mickey's legs. "You came!"

"Said I would, kiddo. Happy birthday." Mickey smiled, kneeling down to get a better look at the kid.
"Look at you, old man. Six whole years."

It was crazy to Mickey, how much the kid looked like him. Sure, he had blond hair, but it was more than that. His blue eyes were bright, yet dark. His eyebrows always arched high in a 'what do you want' kind of way. His mouth curled up into a smug little smile as he turned to the group of kids behind him.

"See, Seth! I told you my daddy was coming. My real daddy. My Mickey-daddy." Yevgeny turned back to Mickey, face still pulled into a wide, bright smile.

"Wouldn't miss it for the world, kid." Mickey smiled softly, running a hand through Yevgeny's hair.

Yeah, this party was gonna be pretty cool.

-----------------------------------------------

Ian shifted on his feet, following Mandy into Laser Quest. He wasn't nervous. Not really. He was just a little bit wary about how this was going to go down.

He wanted to fix shit with Mickey. But he couldn't help but think it was a bad idea to hash it out at his son's birthday party. In the presence of his ex-wife and her new husband. Surrounded by Yevgeny's friends and their parents, not to mention an unknown number of Milkovichs.

Ian was still a bit wary of the brothers. He was cool with Iggy now, but Joey and Colin were still pretty fucking pissed at him as far as he knew.

So yeah, Ian was a little keyed up. Who wouldn't be?

Mandy looked over her shoulder, giving in a reassuring smile as she led the way into the event room.

The first thing Ian noticed was the noise. It reminded him of the days when Debbie would run the daycare at their house. Loud screaming and that palpable buzzing energy that only comes when a bunch of little kids are running around. Ian smiled. He's always loved kids, and this party feels like coming home in a way. He misses being around kids all the time.

He misses being around Yevgeny.

Even though he hasn't seen the kid in years, he remembers everything about the short time he'd spent helping raise the boy. He remembers changing his diaper, giving him baths. Napping with him laying on his chest, his tiny hand curling into a fist around the collar of Ian's t-shirt.

But now, looking at the boy, he sees none of that baby left. Yevgeny is six years old. Where the fuck did the time go?

He looks a lot like Mickey, light hair aside. He even stands like him. He's got that 'don't fuck with me' stance, even at such a young age.

It's actually pretty amazing.

And it looks like he's a little bit of a leader. He's got a group of young boys following him around, listening to every word he says, waiting on him before going from one party attraction to another.
Ian has a feeling that it's always like that for Yev. It's not just because it's his birthday. Yev's the leader of the pack every day.

The thought makes Ian smile.

"Svet!" Mandy yells, bringing Ian out of his head as he follows her deeper into the fray.

"Mandy, good to see you." Svetlana says, pulling Mandy into a hug. She spots Ian over Mandy's shoulder, and her eyes harden just a little.

"Orange boy." Svetlana smirks. "It's been a while."

"Svetlana." Ian says, doing his best to keep up the eye contact under her harsh scrutiny.

Ian and Svetlana were never really friends. Ian never liked the way Svetlana treated Mickey. Like he had done her some kind of disservice by being gay. Like he had disappointed her when he couldn't be the husband she wanted. Svetlana never loved Mickey. Ian isn't sure if Svetlana's ever loved anyone. But she had expected Mickey to hold up his end of the bargain when they got married. Support her, take care of Yevgeny, cut Ian out of his life.

It was like, in her mind, the rape never happened. Like she put it out of her mind and decided to focus on the fact that Mickey got her pregnant, and he owed her. Owed her a marriage, owed her a future.

Ian never understood that. Any sane person could see that the day Yevgeny was conceived was a nightmare, for Mickey and Ian alike. At first he considered Svetlana a victim too. She hadn't had a choice. But the way she acted in the aftermath hardened him to her plight.

But Ian had never talked to Svetlana or Mickey about that day, so he really has no idea how either of them feel about it.

But Ian does know that Svetlana took any opportunity back then to put Mickey down, to insult him, or talk shit about him to anyone that would listen. She hated him for not being who she wanted him to be. And she hated Ian for being part of the reason Mickey refused to yield to her.

So seeing her again had Ian feeling all kinds of ways. None of them good.

Not to mention what she had done to Kev and Vee. That was a whole other story, equally sordid and vile.

But, Svetlana was Yevgeny's mother, and she was tied to Mickey for life. So Ian supposes he's going to have to at least be civil with her.

"Nice party." is what he settles on, because it is, in fact, not good to see her.

"I think is stupid." Svetlana shrugs. "But Zhenya likes, so we do."

Ian nods in understanding.

"I must go." Svetlana looks over her shoulder when a sharp scream rips out of the crowd of children. She nods at Ian and Mandy and make her way over towards the noise.

"Come on, lets put this shit down." Mandy says, motioning to the gifts they are holding.

Ian follows her to a table in the back corner. It is piled high with gifts. Ian puts his off to the side. It's a set of paints, and brushes as well as some good quality paper. Ian knows it's frowned upon to give
paints to a child Yevgeny's age, but he just loves the idea of the kid being an artist.

It's a little known fact that Mickey used to draw. Not anything spectacular, just things he saw in his everyday life. But he was fucking good at it. He used to draw Ian sometimes. Ian's not sure if Mickey draws anymore, but he likes to think Mickey passed that artistic gift onto his son.

Ian sees a large box with a card on it. It says "happy birthday yev, love Lauren & Javier. Ian had no idea Mickey was still in contact with them. Doesn't really talk about them. But it made sense, from what little he saw of their interactions while they were up visiting. They certainly seemed close.

There's another box, a longer one, with a card on it. Ian leans forward, not sure he read it right.

"Happy birthday kiddo, Love Jack."

What in the actual fuck? Yevgeny knows Jack? Yevgeny has a relationship with Jack? Fucking Jack?

Ian tries to remain calm. Now is not the fucking time. And it's certainly not the place.

Ian places his gift on the opposite end of the table, because he's petty like that, apparently.

He hasn't even see Mickey yet, and he's ready to tuck tail and run.

This party may not be that much fun after all.


This is harder than he anticipated. Mickey supposes he should have seen it coming, but he's been off his game since he got home. Less guarded, more hopeful. Letting himself believe that things could actually get better for him. Standing outside Laser Quest, smoking his third cigarette in the past twenty minutes, he realizes that nothing will ever be easy for him.

Svetlana is being cold. Colder than usual, and that's saying a lot. Mickey has no idea what he's done wrong this time. He's been nothing but accommodating since the planning started for this party. He's shelled out hundred of dollars, put in endless hours preparing and planning. Which is all well and good, it's his kid's fucking birthday, after all.

But he had anticipated that the day would be easier than it has turned out to be. Mickey has no idea what is up Svetlana's ass, but whatever it is, it's exponentially soured her usually bad mood to the point where Mickey's not ashamed to say he's avoiding her.

The door swings open and his sister steps out. She's wrapped in one of those really long sweaters, pulling it tight around her body to stave off the September chill. The wind blows lightly, tossing her hair around her head.

"Hey." she says, putting her hand out for his cigarette. Mickey rolls his eyes, but hands it over.

He watches her smoke silently for a moment, waiting her out. She obviously has something to say, or else she wouldn't have come out here.
"Ian's inside." she says, finally, handing Mickey his cigarette back.

"Figured. He said he was gonna come." Mickey replies, pulling on his cigarette one last time before stubbing it out on the brick surface of the building before looking over at his sister. "He's pissed at me." Mickey sighs, looking over at his sister. He shielded his eyes to protect them from the afternoon sun as he waited for her response.

Her face softened, crossing her arms over her chest. "Yeah, I heard. What the fuck is that all about?"

"Long story." Mickey mumbled. "Doesn't want me fucking around with Jack anymore."

"Are you guys working on getting back together?" Mandy asked, leaning up against the building.

"Dunno." Mickey shrugged, feeling exposed all of the sudden. He still wasn't that good at talking about his feelings, not even with Mandy or his close circle of friends. It was still a struggle, every time. "Don't know what he wants. It's hard to talk to him."

Mandy gave him a sympathetic look that would have pissed him the fuck off a few years ago. But now he just nods.

"Well, you gotta do it. But go easy on him. He's not doing so good right now."

"Don't wanna make it worse." Mickey says lowly, looking up at his sister through his lashes. "Don't want to hurt him anymore."

Mandy pushed off the wall and got right in front of him. She grabbed his face with both hands, pulling his head up so they were staring into each other's eyes.

"Just be honest. He's been having a really hard time since that shit with his ex, and I think he's having a hard time trusting anyone. He thinks he doesn't deserve to be happy anymore. I think he thinks you are going to end up with Jack, that you don't love him anymore." Mandy's voice was soft and low, and the things she was saying were breaking Mickey's heart.

He shouldn't have let this go on so long. He should have gone to Ian right after all that shit went down. He knows Ian better than that, knew how he'd react. He talked himself out of it, because he was afraid to hurt Ian more. Looks like he did it anyway, despite his best efforts.

"Okay." Mickey says, nodding. "Okay."

Mandy smiles at him, putting her hand on his shoulder. "You're going to fix it, Mick. It's gonna be okay."

Mickey nodded again before leaving his sister outside to go find Ian.

---------------------------

When Ian finally lays eyes on him, he's hit with an odd mixture of nervousness, anger, and relief. It feels like it's been months since he's seen Mickey. In reality it's been just under two weeks.

There had been no contact. Nothing. Not even one of their stupid texts.

Ian knew he was missing Mickey, but it didn't really hit him how much until he was watching him...
walking through his son's birthday party. A lot had changed in the past few years while Mickey had been away, but the more Ian thinks about it, the more he realizes that the way he feels about Mickey will never change. The things he loves about Mickey will never change.

Right down to the way he walks. Mickey's got this swagger. (even though Ian detests the word, there's no other way to describe it.) He walks like he owns the room. Hell, he walks like he owns the air he breathes. He's always looked so confident, so unafraid.

Even if it was mostly a front back when they were kids, Ian almost positive it's all real now.

And that is sexy as fuck.

Mickey sees him across the room, and his eyes comically bug out of his head. He's standing with Colin, who is giving Ian a blood-chilling death glare. Mickey says something to him, shaking his head, before patting him on the shoulder as they go in to separate directions. Colin over to the food table, staring Ian down the whole time, and Mickey making a bee line straight for Ian.

Ian takes a deep breath, letting it out slowly to calm his fraying nerves as Mickey comes up to him. He's finally there, standing in front of him. He's gone over this conversation in his head a million times over the past couple weeks, but now that the moment has come, he's at a loss.

"Hey." Mickey says, putting his hands in his pockets. He looks good. He's wearing nice jeans, they look new. Dark wash, loose fit. But he wears them well. Ian's sure his ass looks amazing in them. He'll have to take a peak when he gets a second. Mickey's got a white t-shirt on underneath a plaid button up. Yellow and brown, which doesn't sound like a good combination, but Mickey pulls it off wonderfully. He's got work boots on, laces loose. Ian wonders if these are the boots Mickey wears to work. Ian knows Mickey must look hot while he works. He's thought about it so many times before. He's conjuring up the image in his head when Mickey speaks again.

"Hello? Ian?"

Ian shakes himself out of his fantasy. He needs to stop doing that. His new meds make it hard for him to concentrate sometime. He gets lost in his thoughts a lot these days.

"Sorry." he says. "How are you?"

Mickey smiles at him. "Good. You know."

Ian smiles back. "I don't really though. Where you been?" because he doesn't see a point in beating around the bush.

"Wanted to give you some space after the last time we saw each other. Thought you'd call when you were ready, but you never did." Mickey looked away, rubbing his top lip with his thumb. "Thought you didn't wanna see me."

Ian shook his head violently. "No. Not at all. That's not why...." he cuts himself off as Yevgeny comes running up to Mickey, swinging his tiny arms around Mickey's knees. "Daddy-Mickey!" he screams. "Pinata!"

Mickey smiles down at his son, ruffling his blond hair with a tattooed hand. "Okay buddy. Did Momma say it's time?"

"Yeah! Yeah!" Yevgeny jumps up and down on the spot and grabs Mickey's hand, trying so hard to pull his father to the corner of the room where the pinata hangs from a hook on the ceiling. But Mickey doesn't budge. He plants his feet and raises his eyebrows at Ian as Yevgeny grabs on with
both hands and starts pulling with all his strength.

"Jeez, buddy, I can't seem to move. Think I'm stuck." Mickey chuckles, looking down at Yevgeny and back up at Ian with an amused smirk on his face.

Yevgeny pulls harder, starting to lean to the side with the force of it. He grumbles and groans, looking over at Ian. "Uncle Ian, help me move Daddy-Mickey!" he begs.

Ian smiles so wide, it feels like his face is going to split. "I dunno, Yev, he's a pretty big guy. Don't think I'll be able to help." he shrugs.

"Please! Uncle Ian, you gotta." Yev whines, never letting up on his tugging.

"Alright, let's see." Ian laughs. He's about to grab Mickey's free hand, but stops himself, looking over at the other man for some kind of cue. Mickey just smirks some more, waving the fingers on his free hand at Ian, arching his eyebrows in challenge.

Ian takes that as permission, grabbing Mickey's free hand. He starts pulling, and by now Mickey is actually resisting a little. He's standing there in the middle of the party room, Yevgeny pulling on one hand and Ian pulling on the other. Ian takes a moment to revel in how good this feels. Playing with Mickey and his son like this.

He hopes to have more moments like this in the future.

Finally, Mickey gives up on the game and Yevgeny and Ian lurch a bit, all three of them laughing.

"Alright." Mickey smiles at his son again before looking over at Ian, his face full of adoration. Ian knows it's for Yevgeny, but he likes to think Mickey will look at him like that too, some day.

They make their way over to the pinata just as Svetlana's husband David is getting out the stick. It's an old school pinata, not one of those stupid ones with the strings. Ian's glad they didn't go with that sissy shit.

Everyone is standing around the pinata now, kids and adults alike, waiting for Yevgeny to take the first swing. Kids are yelling and clapping happily. Svetlana and her husband are standing off to the side, watching with matching smiles on their faces.

Mickey picks up the stick and hands it to his son. He gives Ian one more bright smile before he turns to his son.

"Okay, slugger, let's see what'cha got."

Yevgeny beams up at his father, gripping the stick with both hands and turning to the pinata.

He swings hard, hits right on target on the first try. Candy and toys go spraying all over the hall. The room erupts into loud cheering. All the kids hit the floor in a second, scrambling for the goodies, nobody seeming to mind they didn't get a turn on the thing.

Ian backs up away from the chaos, chancing one more look at Mickey. He's standing off to the side, arms crossed over his chest, a soft, happy smile playing on his face as he watches his son. It's such a powerful moment to Ian, he's not sure what to do with it. Just standing there, watching Mickey watching his son. He never thought he'd be here. He never thought he'd witness this.

But it feel so natural.
It's fucking perfect.

---------------------------------

The party is pretty close to done now. Mickey is exhausted, but happy. He had kicked his brothers' asses at laser tag, let Yev win one round, and got his ass handed to him twice by Gallagher.

He wouldn't have it any other way.

The entire party is now gathered around the long table in the middle of the room, singing 'happy birthday' to Yevgeny. The kid is perched in his chair, up on his knees in front of the giant Scoobie Do cake Mickey had picked up earlier in the day.

He's surrounded by people he loves, mountains of gifts on either side of him. Mickey is struck in that moment by how lucky Yevgeny is. Mickey never would have guessed when the kid was born that this is how his life would turn out. He's well fed, healthy and happy. He's surrounded by people that love him. He's got both his parents in his life, and family he can count on, and a shit ton of friends.

Mickey thinks back to when he was first born. He couldn't even look at the kid. Made his skin crawl. The only thing he could think of when he looked at the baby was that awful day. Being beaten, being violated. He'd been destroyed that day, reduced to dust. He really didn't think he'd ever come back from that.

And he didn't. Not really. That person he used to be back then doesn't exist anymore.

Maybe that's why now when he looks at Yevgeny, the only thing he feels is love. Pure, never-ending love and adoration. No more pain, no more darkness.

If you would have told Mickey back then that he'd be here now, watching his son open birthday gifts, full of affection for the little man, he'd have laughed in your face.

But now, he wouldn't want to be anywhere else.

The song ends and Svetlana puts her hands on Yevgeny's shoulders, standing behind him, she kisses his cheek. "Make a wish, Zhenya." she says.

Yevgeny closes his eye tight and nods his head a few times, before opening his eyes and locking gazes with Mickey over the flames of his candles. Before Mickey could think too much on what that look could have meant, Yevgeny blew out his candles and everyone was clapping and cheering again.

The cake was gone in an instant. Totally decimated by the children and adults alike. Chocolate. Apparently Mickey and Yevgeny share that love as well. Can't go wrong with chocolate.

The gift opening went by in a hazy madness of yelling and clapping. Ooohing and Ahhing.

Mandy got him a skateboard. Svetlana was none too please, but Mandy got the kid a helmet and knee pads too, so Mickey thought Svetlana was being a little ridiculous. The kid was over the moon, and that was more important to Mickey than Svetlana's opinion.

Next he opened the gift Lauren and Javier sent from Mexico. Svetlana had been surprised when she
read the card aloud, raising her eyebrows at Mickey in question. Mickey just shrugged, as Yevgeny opened the gift. It was a huge kite. An expensive one. With a bunch of wooden tiers and colorful fabric flags. The kind that last forever, none of that cheap plastic shit. Yevgeny was super excited, going on and on about how high he was gonna fly it.

Next came Ian's gift. It was a huge paint set. It looked expensive as fuck. The paints were real, none of that crayola crap. Mickey's face morphed into a wide smile, thinking about his son doing anything artistic. Mickey himself used to love to draw, even though Terry had always told him drawing was for faggots. He'd gotten beat more than once growing up for his affinity for art. Maybe Ian remembered that about Mickey. Maybe he thought about Mickey drawing for him when they were teenagers. Maybe Ian was thinking of that when he bought that gift.

Or maybe Mickey was looking too deep into it, and Ian just picked it cuz it was cool.

But as Mickey looks up from his son's awestruck face and sees Ian staring at him, he knows he's right. Ian did this for Yevgeny because he remembers that small thing about Mickey.

The thought makes Mickey all warm inside. He can feel his face flushing hot, so he looks away before Ian can catch him blushing.

Svetlana pulls Jack's gift from the pile, and Mickey has to interrupt. "Uh, that one goes with mine." he mumbles, making eye contact with Svetlana over the table. She looks confused for a second before grabbing Mickey's gift and putting them together.

Mickey can see Ian eyeing him again from across the room. Except now, the fond gaze he'd been pinning him with before had been replaced with a dark scowl.

Fucking wonderful.

Maybe he didn't think this gift thing through.

Shit.

Yevgeny tears into Jack's gift first. It's really from Jack and Matt, but Yevgeny doesn't know Matt, so they didn't put his name on the card.

It a bat. For little league. A nice one. It's metal, as per little league rules. Mickey will buy him a wooden one when he ages out of the baby league. But this one is good, top of the line. Yevgeny gives a shriek of happiness, jumping out of his chair to do a little dance on the spot.

He settles after a moment, ready to tear into Mickey's gift. It's in a bag, because Mickey can't wrap for shit. Yevgeny pulls the tissue paper out of the bag, tossing it haphazardly to the side to reach the bottom of the bag.

It's a baseball glove. The best one Mickey could find. Matt had taken him out to get it, and they had spent over an hour with the salesman, going over pros and cons before settling on the Rawlings Pro. It cost Mickey over a hundred dollars.

But looking at his son right now, absolutely losing his shit over it, it was worth every penny.

"Oh my god!" Yevgeny screams. "It's just what I wanted! Thank you! Thank you!" he jumps up from his chair and runs full steam at Mickey, tackling his legs and gripping him so tight Mickey struggles to stay upright.

"You're welcome, kiddo." Mickey laughs, looking over at his sister, a little taken aback by it all.
She's taking pictures on her phone. Mickey will have to ask her to send him this one. "Glad you like it."

"I love it." Yevgeny smiles at him. "So cool."

Mickey reaches down and ruffles his hair. He feels good. About this party. About his son.

Things could be worse.


Yevgeny lets go of his father and returns to the table, tearing into the one last box that is waiting for him. It's the smallest one, the size of a hardcover book if Mickey had to guess. But why the fuck would Svetlana give the kid a book that big? He is just starting to get into reading....

"Uh, Mamma, it's a picture..." Yevgeny says, confused. Mickey looks over at the gift and sees it is indeed a picture. A picture of a black lab, if Mickey knows his dogs. "It's a picture of a puppy." Yevgeny continues, obviously at a loss.

"Yes it is, Zhenya." Svetlana smiles.

"But why?" Yevgeny asks.

But why indeed. Mickey is confused. And looking around the room, it's clear he's not the only one.

"That's your dog, son." David pipes up from behind Svetlana. He's got a huge, goofy grin on his face. Mickey bristles a little at the way he calls Yevgeny 'son.'

"But Mamma says I can't have a dog, cuz our yard is too small." Yevgeny says sadly. His eyes are a little wet and Mickey is instantly pissed. What the fuck are Svetlana and her husband playing at?

"Well, you can have this dog, at our new house, with the big back yard and the tree fort!" David yells jovially while pulling out a photo from behind his back. Looks like a real estate listing. The room goes quiet for a moment. Mickey takes a step closer to the photo. It's a huge house, blue colonial. You can clearly see the back yard, with a swing set and a tree house perched high up off the ground.

"We're moving?" Yevgeny asks, still at a loss.

"Yes, Zhenya." Svetlana smiles. "David opens new practice in Springfield. We move after New Years. Then you can get your puppy."

The room erupts into chaos again after that. Yevgeny seems happy. Jumping up and down and hugging his mom and step dad. Everyone is congratulating them and talking about the move. Mickey feels like he can't breathe. But he holds it together. He's not gonna fall apart here in front of everyone. He can feel eyes on him as he moves across the room. Mandy and Iggy, Colin and Ian. He can feel the pity and concern rolling off them in waves. But he doesn't have time for that shit right now.

He's gotta get out of there.

Now.
He walks up to Svetlana and David while Yevgeny is talking to his friends excitedly about his upcoming move.

"You spring this shit on me now?" Mickey barks, trying to keep his voice down, but mostly failing.

"It has nothing to do with you." Svetlana spits.

"He's my god damn son, Svetlana. I just got back, you've been dodging me the whole time, and now you pull this shit? At his fucking birthday party? Come the fuck on."

Mickey feels like the room is closing in on him. Like this hall, filled with screaming children and stinking of pizza and popcorn is going to swallow him whole.

"Adoption is finalized soon. David will open practice in Springfield, we will be happy there. We will be family. You will not stand in the way of my happiness." She crosses her arms over her chest defiantly.

"He's my fucking family too." Mickey says sharply. He's trying to remain calm. Trying not to make a scene. But it's fucking hard. "You can't just take him from me. Not this time, not now."

"Hey, listen." David pipes in, putting his arm around Svetlana's shoulder. "Springfield is only 3 and a half hours from here. We're not falling off the face of the earth. We could even work out a visitation with the lawyers, if you'd like. Two weeks in the summer, long weekends on the holidays..." he trails off when he sees the murderous look Mickey is giving him.

"You have no say. We do this." Svetlana cuts in. "Either accept it, or you will no longer see Yevgeny at all." she shrugs, like it doesn't matter to her one way or the other. "Thank you for helping with party. Yevgeny was pleased." and she walks away. Even though Mickey is not done fucking talking. Not finished fighting. She just walks away.

Mickey is reeling. He can't fucking breathe.

He walks to Yevgeny, kneeling down in front of him. "Hey buddy, I gotta go." he says, running his hand through his son's hair once more, barely containing the emotion bubbling up under the surface. "But I'll come by some time next week, and we'll try out that glove I got you, okay?" Mickey can feel his eyes stinging, that harsh burn in the back of his throat. He holds it in, just barely.

"Oh! Can Jack come too?" Yevgeny asks, excited.

Mickey nods sadly, "We'll see, okay, bud?"

"Okay, love you." Yevgeny hugs his father hard. "Thank you. I had so much fun today."

"Me too, kiddo." Mickey holds Yevgeny for a moment longer, suddenly wanting to stretch them moment out as much as possible. He finally pulls away, wiping his eyes harshly. He gives his son a wet smile and a wave. Yevgeny waves back enthusiastically, before running towards the pinball machine, where all his friends are.

He looks around for Iggy and Tess, but they are nowhere to been seen. Fuck.

He finds his sister standing off to the side, a hand over her mouth. She looks as shocked as Mickey feels. Ian is standing next to her, hands in his pockets, eyes averted.

"Can you take me home?" he asks, barely hanging on.
"Sure Mick, we can go." She says, shooting Ian a look. He nods, grabbing their coats and running over to say goodbye to Svetlana and Yevgeny.

Mickey is out of the building and standing by Mandy's car before Ian is finished in the hall.

He's pacing back and forth in front of Mandy's parked car, smoking a cigarette, trying to keep his tear at bay.

He's succeeding. Mostly.

He can't believe this is happening. He just can't catch a fucking break. First this shit with Jack, then his falling out with Ian, and now his son is moving four hours away and he'll never get the chance to build a relationship with him like he wants to.

Because he does want to. He wants to be there to watch him grow. He wants to teach him how to pitch a baseball and how to throw a punch. He wants to show him what good music really is, not that Russian garbage Svetlana always plays. He wants his son to come to him when he's upset, or when he wants to share something exciting.

He wants to be Yevgeny's father, not David.

If he had known this was going to happen when the adoption talk started, he would have fought harder. But he didn't know, and now he was stuck. There was nothing he could do. He dropped his cigarette to the ground and wiped roughly at his eyes with his palms.

Fuck.

He was about to pull another cigarette out of his pack when Mandy and Ian came out of the building.

Mickey turned around and stood in front of the back passenger door. He didn't want to face Mandy and Ian. Didn't want to answer the questions they certainly had.

"Nuh-uh." Mandy said, coming up behind Mickey and turning him around with a hand on his shoulder. "We gotta talk about this Mick. Did you know they were planning on moving?"

Mickey shrugged her off and turned back to the car. "Can we please just go?" he mumbled, trying to keep his voice level.

Mandy looked over at Ian, who was now standing next to them. He shook his head, silently telling her to drop it for the moment.

Mandy huffed out an aggrivated breath. "Fuck, fine." she growled. "But you are coming home with us, and we ARE going to talk about it."

Mickey's head shot up, ready to argue, but Mandy put her hand up. "Can we please just go?" he mumbled, trying to keep his voice level.

Mandy looked over at Ian, who was now standing next to them. He shook his head, silently telling her to drop it for the moment.

Mandy huffed out an aggrivated breath. "Fuck, fine." she growled. "But you are coming home with us, and we ARE going to talk about it."

Mickey's head shot up, ready to argue, but Mandy put her hand up. "Come home with us, or wait for Iggy. No in between."

Mickey's shoulders sagged in defeat. "Whatever, bitch." he said, avoiding her eyes.

He didn't want to talk. But he didn't want to be alone either. Not now.

"That's what I thought." Mandy smiled. "Get the fuck in." she unlocked the doors and they all piled into her car.

"I think we all need a drink." she said as she started the engine, driving them away from the party
and towards what Mickey hoped would be a long night with lots of drinking, and considerably less talking.

A man can hope, right?

The ride back to the apartment is silent, save for the sound of The Animals softly humming from the radio.

"House of the Rising Sun." Mandy murmurs. "You remember this, Mick?" she looks in the rearview mirror, trying and failing to make eye contact with her brother. "Mom used to sing this song all the time."

Ian is taken aback by Mandy talking about her and Mickey's mother. The topic has never come up in all the years Ian has known the Milkovich siblings.

"Yeah." Mickey's quiet voice floats up from the back seat, shocking Ian even more. He figured Mickey would shut this shit down immediately. "She used to sing this song while she was doing laundry and shit. Remember?"

"Yeah." Mandy has a small smile on her face, but keeps her eyes on the road.

They made it to their apartment in a little under an hour, with weekend traffic being light. Ian didn't wait for the siblings to get out of the car, wanting a moment to himself. He opened the door of Mandy's honda the minute she put it in park.

When he had decided that today would be the day he and Mickey would have their talk, he didn't consider the idea that their issues would be taking a back seat to what just happened at Yevgeny's party.

Ian had no idea that Svetlana and her husband were planning on moving. Looks like no one knew. Svetlana had blindsided Mickey in a room full of people. She probably planned it that way, so she wouldn't have to deal with him losing his shit on her. The more witnesses, the less chance of a full blow Milkovich meltdown.

That was a cold, fucked up thing of her to do. But it so like Svetlana that Ian can't say he's really surprised.

He left Mickey and Mandy to gather their shit out of the car, walking into the apartment building and climbing the stairs to their apartment.

By the time Mickey and Mandy are walking in the door, Ian already has the beer they just bought in the fridge, and the bottle of Jack on the table, three shot glasses out, ready and waiting.

Mandy walks into the kitchen, putting her purse down on the counter. She grabs one of the shots and holds it in her hand, waiting for her brother to join them in the kitchen.

Mickey finally enters the kitchen, dragging his feet a little. He looks uncomfortable, like he's regretting his decision to join them at all.

Ian doesn't want that. It hits him then, how stupid they both have been. Standing in the kitchen, holding a shot of Jack out to Mickey, watching him eyeing Ian tentatively, Ian just wants to grab him and hold on. He wants to tell him he's sorry. Wants to tell him he's forgiven. He wants to finally and
definitively put all this shit behind them and move on.

Mickey finally takes the proffered shot, holding it in his hand and looking from Ian to Mandy for some kind of direction.

"Okay." Mandy says, taking the initiative. "That shit back there was fucked up. Svet pulling that moving bullshit at the party. But let's just promise ourselves that we won't let Yev disappear from our lives. We won't let that happen, right?"

"No, of course not." Ian says quickly. He knows it's a little ridiculous for him to say anything, seeing as he let Yevgeny disappear from his life before. He'd been around, sure. But he hadn't helped out or hung around as much as he would have liked to. He let life get in the way, and let himself fall out of Yev's life. There are a lot of things Ian regrets in his life. The way he treated Mickey is at the top of that list, and not being there for Yev is up there too.

Mickey just nods sadly. It breaks Ian's heart to see him so low. Fucking dude can't ever have anything easy.

Ian knows now they need to talk tonight. They need to get their personal shit sorted, so Ian can be there for Mickey while he copes with losing his son. Again.

"Okay then. So let's drink to us. Family. We're going to stick this out together. Nothing's going to come between us anymore. You guys are gonna work your shit out, and then we'll deal with this moving crap." Mandy held her glass up, raising her eyebrows in anticipation.

Ian and Mickey dutifully clinked glasses with her and the three of them downed their shots.

Ian grimaced. Shit was powerful.

"Okay." Mandy smiled. "One more shot, then beers. I'm gonna put a movie in. You guys have any requests?"

"You still got 'Boondock Saints'?” Mickey asks, downing his second shot and dropping the glass down on the counter top. He looks a little better now, less frazzled.

"Uh, yeah, I think so. Haven't thought of that movie in a long time." Mandy muses, walking toward the living room. "Ian, grab the beers, I'm gonna see if I can find that old ass movie in my room."

Ian grabs the beers out of the fridge and makes his way to the living room, where Mickey is already sitting on the couch, tucked into the far corner, pretty much folding in on himself. Ian hates to see him like this. It reminds him of when they were kids. When they'd be hanging out at the Milkovich house and Terry would come home. Mickey would curl in on himself like that. Like he was trying to blend into the background, trying to fade away.

It broke Ian's heart back then, and it was breaking his heart right now. Ian wishes in that moment that they hadn't spent the last two weeks avoiding each other. Ian could be comforting him right now. Ian could be holding him right now.

But he's not, because Ian's not sure what they are doing anymore. This shit with Jack has him all twisted up and they need to deal with that shit before they can deal with any of this new fucked up stuff. Deal with Svetlana taking Yev away, deal with their own fucked up relationship.

But it looks like before they talk about anything, they are going to drink and watch a movie. Ian doesn't really want to watch a movie. He wants to get this shit over with.
But he knows Mickey needs some quiet time to process how he feels about what just went down at Yev's party before he'll be ready to talk. So Ian will drink beers and watch movies, so Mickey can get some time to put his thoughts in order. But they will talk, before the end of the night. Ian's not letting Mickey leave the apartment until they hash their shit out. He just won't let that happen. No fucking way. He's been waiting two weeks for this. It's happening.

Mickey forgot how much he loves this movie. The premise is ridiculous, but it's hilarious. And that dude from that zombie show is in it, and Mickey always thought he was hot. He plays a bad ass in this movie too, so Mickey's not going to complain.

He knows what Mandy's doing. He's not an idiot. She's plying him with booze and one of his favorite movies to put him in a good mood. To take his mind off the fact that his ex-wife has fucked him over. Again. She giving him some quiet time to mentally deal with that bullshit and prepare himself for the talk with Ian that is inevitably coming once the credits roll on this movie.

Mickey appreciate the reprieve. He's only half focusing on the movie, doing what he's supposed to be doing, getting his thoughts in order.

He's even taking it slow on the drinking. Even though all he really wants to do is get black out drunk and forget about his problems for the night. But if he's going to have this long, emotional discussion with Ian later, he wants to be coherent and articulate. He can't be those things if he's all sloppy and emotional. He needs to keep his head screwed on straight.

So he's only had those two shots earlier and three beers. The movie is almost over. Mandy has her head on Ian's shoulder, looking like she's about to nod off any minute. Ian hasn't looked at him once since the movie started, probably giving Mickey space. He most likely thinks Mickey's really uncomfortable right now.

But he's not. He's actually really happy to be there, with his sister and Ian. And he's ready to talk it out with Ian. It's time.

He even knows what he's going to say. He knows what he wants, and what he has to do.

The only thing he doesn't know is how Ian is going to react.

Looks like he's about to find out.

The movie comes to it's conclusion, and Mandy grumbles sleepily. "I'm going to bed. Mick, you're gonna stay tonight?"

Mickey looks between his sister and Ian, who's now flipping through channels, looking for something else to watch. It's not that late yet, Mickey could go home if he wanted to.

He doesn't want to.

"Sure." he says, nodding at his sister.
She nods back, stretching her arms over her head before pulling Ian into a hug. She whispers something in his ear that Mickey can't hear and Ian nods. Mandy gets up from the couch and makes her way to her bedroom. "G'night, losers." she says over her shoulder.

After she's gone, Ian and Mickey just stare at each other for a minute.

"You wanna watch another movie? It's not even 10:30 yet."

"Sure, man. You want another beer?" Mickey asks, getting up to go to the fridge when Ian nods. He reminds himself that he doesn't wanna get wasted. But he's also way too sober for the conversation that's coming right now.

He brings the beers back, putting them down on the coffee table while Ian starts the next movie. One of the million 'Fast and furious', if Mickey's correct.

The movie starts and for a while they just sit there, sipping their beers and watching in silence. Mickey lets it go on for about forty minutes, until he's pretty positive his sister is asleep, and they are as alone as they can be.

He takes a long sip of his beer and lights a cigarette.

Okay. Now or never.

He looks over at Ian, who's wholly focused on the TV.

"So." Mickey starts, trying to get his attention. "We gonna talk about this shit or what?"

Ian looks over at him, face blank. It unnerves Mickey. He doesn't like that at all.

"Talk?" Ian asks.

Fuck this.

"Yes, Ian. Talk. We haven't done much of that for the past few weeks. Not since that shit went down at Victory House with Jack. I know you're pissed. I knew you were that day. But I wanted to give you some space or whatever. Thought you'd come to me when you were ready, but you never did." Mickey sighs, taking a drag of his cigarette to calm his nerves. "Did you change your mind? About being friends? About building something more?"

Ian shakes his head, almost angry. "You changed your mind. You don't want shit from me. You get everything you need from Jack now."

"Okay." Mickey says slowly. He's got to do this right. "This is about me and Jack fucking around? You told me not to wait, for the sex stuff. You said you were cool with me fucking around with other dudes, 'til you were ready or whatever. You said that shit."

"Mick." Ian says sadly. "Jack's not just some random hookup. You guys have so much history. You can't tell me that the shit you have with him is casual. I've seen you together. It's like you're a totally different person around him."

"He's just a friend." Mickey says quickly. Seeing the disbelief in Ian's eyes, he tries to elaborate. "We have been fucking around since forever. I told you about jail. Well, when we were locked up we did this thing, you know, when one of us was depressed or sad, we did it. We called it 'the thing', like a joke. You saw part of it when you came over that day. It's stupid really, just a blow job and rapping
that Biggie song. It's just supposed to be fun, for getting all that nervous energy out."

"So he blows you when you're depressed and then you sing together?" Ian asks incredulously.

"It sounds weird when you say it like that." Mickey says, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Mick, that is weird. I don't usually go down on my friends to help lighten their mood." Ian sighs.

"I know, shit with Jack is all twisted up. Our friendship isn't normal. We were talking about cutting that shit out that day. The day you came over, we were talking about not fucking around anymore. I wanted to, I don't know, make a commitment to you, I guess. I know we're not together or whatever, but I wanted to show you I was serious. I was actually talking to Jack about that shit that day."

Ian squinted, like he was trying really hard to understand what Mickey was saying. "So you're telling me you were talking to Jack about how shit with me was fucking you up, and he sucked your dick to make you feel better?"

"Fuck, Ian, what do you want from me? You told me you don't want that from me. You told me you're not ready. You told me not to wait. If I wanted to get off I could. What exactly did I do wrong?" Mickey is frustrated, and confused.

"Mickey, shit. I know." Ian says. He turns to face Mickey fully, the movie playing in the background, unwatched and forgotten. "I know I told you to hook up if you felt like you had to, and that's not really what's bothering me. It's your relationship with Jack, I guess. I don't know what the fuck you guys are to each other. You look a lot closer than just friends. And knowing that you guys are still fucking, makes me wonder if you're even serious about working on us. I could understand if you were hooking up with random dudes at the club or whatever. But Jack's not random. He means something to you. And you mean something to him. I see it."

Ian tipped his head back, staring at the ceiling while he decided how he wanted to respond to that.

Finally he turned his head to look at Ian again. "You're right. He means a lot to me. We are super close, and sometimes that line gets blurred with us. But the only thing I can say to you is, it's just not like that between us. I don't love him like I love you. Never could. I understand it must look strange from the outside, but it's not like that. Jack would tell you the same thing. He knows better than anyone how much I love you. How much I've always loved you. I know you probably hate him right now, but he's your biggest cheerleader. He wants us back together, because he knows that would make me happy."

Ian scoffs, like he can't believe that shit for a second.

"Do you know what he did that day? After you stormed out and I went after you?" Mickey asks. "Have you talked to Trevor since then?"

"Fuck no. Why the fuck would I talk to him after that shit? It's like he said all that crap just to hurt me."

"Well, Jack went into the office after we left and told Trevor the fuck off." Mickey laughed. "Told me he told the guy to stop trying to come between us, because we belong together or some shit. Told him if he keeps trying to fuck with you, he was gonna beat his ass himself."

Ian looks shocked by that. Mickey gets it. He was surprised too when Jack told him that shit.

"Yeah, I know. Guess he told Trevor if you want any part of one of us, you gotta be ready to take us
both. Kid's crazy, right? But he gets it, man. He knows that no matter what went down between him and I, it would always take a backseat to me and you. He understands that."

"He does?" Ian asks, confused. "Then why is he always pulling that stupid shit with me around? The innuendos and stupid sex jokes? Why does he rub it in my face like that?"

"Jack's not as funny as he thinks he is." Mickey concedes. "I don't know why he does shit like that. Maybe he thought if he got you jealous enough, you'd make a move. He doesn't know the shit you're dealing with, though. I didn't tell him about your ex. He just thought you were keeping me at a distance because you were on the fence about it. I guess he thought he could force your hand with a little healthy competition." Mickey shrugged.

Ian rubs his forehead with his fingers, trying to process what he just heard. "So, you and him aren't doing that shit anymore?" he asks after a moment.

"Nah." Mickey says, sitting forward to grab his beer off the coffee table. He gulps down a few sips and sighs, wiping his mouth with his hand. "We decided to chill with that shit, since it was getting in the way of what I really want." he said, leaning forward to stub his cigarette out.

"And what's that?" Ian asks. "What do you want, Mick?"

Mickey smiles softly, putting his beer back down and scooting closer to Ian. "That's a stupid fucking question, Gallagher. What have I always wanted? You, dumbass."

Ian sighs, leaning back against the couch. "I'm sorry I shut you out." he says. "I just got it in my head that you had something serious going with Jack, and I didn't want to hear you say it out loud, didn't want to make it real. So I avoided it."

"You should have just asked, man. I know my relationship with him is odd. I get that. But you believe me, right? You know that I only want you?"

"I mean, I guess." Ian says. " Didn't think you wanted to deal with my stupid issues."

Mickey sighs again, inching closer to Ian on the couch. "Ian, when have any of your issues been a deal breaker? When have I ever told you you were too much to handle? Remember the day I got arrested? The day you broke up with me?"

Ian cringed, Mickey saw him physically cringe at the memory. "Yeah." he whispered.

"Remember what I said right before? Thick and thin? Sickness, health, all that shit?"

"Yeah, and I laughed in your face." Ian says sadly.

"Yeah, you did." Mickey chuckles humorlessly. "But my point is, I still feel that way. Always have. You're it for me, Ian. It's just the way it is. I mean, if you don't want me like that anymore, I'll do my best to move on, but I won't ever feel this way about anyone else. Jack knows that. I thought you did too....."

Mickey doesn't expect what happens next. Ian lurches forward, wrapping his long arms around Mickey's body, pulling him close. He buries his head in Mickey's shoulder, breathing heavy against his body.

"You mean that?" Ian murmurs, not moving away as he speaks. His words muffled by Mickey's skin.
"Yeah, man." Mickey says, bringing his hand up to rub Ian's back. "Thought you knew that shit."

"I don't know anything anymore." Ian says, pulling away to look in Mickey's eyes. He doesn't go far though, still wrapped up in Mickey arms. "I just thought maybe too much time had passed, maybe we couldn't go there again."

"Ian, we can do anything we want. There's nothing holding us back this time, except for us. My prick father is fucking dead. My ex-wife is remarried and moving." he sad quietly, running a hand through Ian's hair. Ian can see the sadness there, the thought of losing Yevgeny again. "You've got your bipolar shit under control, out from under your family's thumb. And neither of us is running from the fucking law anymore. Anything that ever stood in our way is gone now. It's just us and our baggage holding us back."

Ian sighs, then shudders as tears pool in his eyes. He blinks rapidly, trying to keep them at bay.

"Hey, fuck." Mickey says quickly. "Don't fucking cry. I'm trying to tell you if we want to do this, we can. Shit with Jack is done. I'm not fucking him any more. Haven't since that day. Promise. If you really wanna try this shit again, Ian, I'm all in. Okay?"

Ian drew in a deep breath, trying to stave off the meltdown that was clawing it's way through his gut. He let the breath out slow, a single tear escaping his eye. "Yeah, Mick." he breathed. "I fucking want that." he said, crumbling finally. The tears slipped from his eyes as he buried his face in Mickey's shoulder again.

Mickey huffed out a quiet laugh, continuing to rub soothing circles on Ian's back with his hands. Mickey rested his head on Ian's shoulder too, and they just sat there quietly holding each other for what felt like a really long time.

Ian finally pulled back, seeking out Mickey's eyes. "You really wanna do this?" he asked, rubbing his eye with his free hand.

"How many times you gonna ask me, man?" Mickey laughed lightly.

"I'm still pretty messed up, Mick." Ian says, because he wants Mickey to understand how serious this is. He looks away from Mickey's piercing gaze, trying to pull back all together.

"Ian." Mickey sighs, pulling Ian's face back to his. "I don't know how else to tell you this." he put two fingers under Ian's chin, so he couldn't look away. "I know you're messed up. I know your ex did awful things to you. I know you are having a hard time getting over it. I know all of this shit." Mickey let go of Ian's face so he could run a hand through his red hair. "But I wanna help you get better. I wanna be there for you and support you through this shit. You don't have to worry about me bailing or fucking off with some other guy." he pulled lightly on Ian's hair, a teasing look in his eye. "I'm not going anywhere."

Ian smiled, finally. Feeling lighter than he has in months. He feels a foreign feeling bubbling in his chest. Hope, maybe. Excitement, certainly.

He had no idea how this talk was going to go down. He had thought that they would argue. That Mickey would defend his shit with Jack and they would find no common ground. Ian was afraid Mickey would pick Jack over him, and whatever they were working on would have gone up in flames before it even had a chance to root.

But Ian was wrong. He had misjudged Mickey and his priorities. He has so much to learn about Mickey now. But he wants to. He wants to do this.
This is really happening.

Ian's face splits into a huge smile. "We're gonna do this." he whispers.

Mickey smiles back at him. It's a warm, affectionate smile that lights up his whole face. Ian would do anything to make Mickey smile like that more often.

"Yeah, we are." Mickey replies, resting his forehead against Ian's. They just look at each other for a minute, until Ian can't take it anymore. He closes the space between them, pressing his lips against Mickey's in a soft, gentle kiss.

The kiss was slow, chaste. No tongue, no heat. Ian couldn't help but think Mickey was holding back out of respect for Ian's current situation. That thought alone made Ian fall even harder. He pushed forward, wrapping his arms around Mickey's body and pulling him closer.

Mickey comes easily. He always comes when Ian pulls him. Ian can't believe he ever could have thought he didn't want this.

Ian pushes forward, turning his head to get a better angle, running his tongue over Mickey's bottom lip. Mickey gasps and Ian takes that opportunity to slip his tongue into Mickey's mouth.

The moment their tongues touch, it's like a switch has been flipped. Ian pulls Mickey flush against his body, tightening his arms until there was not a breath between them. He's got Mickey pinned against the back of the couch, everywhere their bodies touch, he's tingling. Mickey's hand went to Ian's hair, pulling lightly while they kissed. Ian remembers that was one of Mickey's favorite things to do when they were younger, pull his hair.

Mickey may be different now, but the things that made him Ian's Mickey were all still there.

Ian groaned low in his throat, pushing his tongue deeper into Mickey's mouth. He can't get close enough. He wants more. He wants it all.

Much too soon for Ian's liking, Mickey pulls away. He stays close, but the few inches between their faces is too much for Ian.

"Huh?" Ian asks dumbly, searching Mickey's face for a clue to what just happened.

"You okay?" Mickey asks.

Ian is confused at first, what the hell is he talking about. Then he remembers. Brian.

Shit.

"Uh, yeah." Ian replies. "I feel okay. We're good." he smiles, trying to convey how okay he really is.

"You're not feeling weird, like last time?" Mickey asks quietly.

Ian remembers last time. The last kiss they shared, when Ian had fallen apart, panic gripping him and ruining the moment. Of course Mickey would be hesitant after that.

"Yeah." Ian says, running a hand through Mickey's dark hair. "I'm good."

Mickey looks unconvinced, and it makes Ian sad. It's nice that Mickey is looking out for him, but he doesn't want to be treated with kid gloves. Like he's fragile. Like he's broken.

"Well, listen." Mickey starts, and Ian has no idea what he's going to say. He does have a feeling,
however, that Mickey is about to shut this shit down. "If we're gonna do this, how about we go about it different than before, huh?"

Ian pulls back then, staring at Mickey with wide eyes. What the fuck does that mean?

Mickey shakes his head, pulling Ian's hands into his lap. "I know you're not ready, you know, to fuck or whatever." Ian's eyes went wider at that, confused. "And I just quit fucking around with Jack."

Ian tried to pull his hand away, confused again, but Mickey held fast. "I don't think it would be a good idea for us to fuck right now. I mean, I wanna, of course. But we are both in a weird spot right now, and I don't wanna fuck up what we are trying to do by getting all mixed up in the physical shit."

Ian made a face. "Are you telling me you don't want to have sex with me? Or are you telling me you don't think I can handle it?"

"I'm saying that I want to do shit different this time. Sex has never been an issue with us." Mickey plays with Ian's fingers as he speaks, running his index finger along Ian's long digits. "We know we are good at that shit. It's the other stuff we have trouble with. I'm not saying we have to wait forever. Shit, I want you right now." he laughed, looking up into Ian's face. Ian can feel himself blushing. He smiles back at Mickey, relaxing in tiny increments.

"I'm just saying why don't we give it a little time? Let me clear my head a bit after shutting shit down with Jack, and give you a little more time to cope with your own shit. But we make a commitment to each other, right here, right now. We are in this shit together. We are working on us, no one else involved. I'll wait for you if you'll wait for me." Mickey looked away for a second before locking eyes with Ian again. "I kinda feel like a bitch saying all this shit." he laughed.

"No." Ian replied passionately. "You're right. You're so right, Mick. And I want that. I want to try this with you. Want to get better with you. For you." Ian twisted his fingers with Mickey's.

"Nah, Gallagher. Do it for you. All that other shit will fall into place. I'm just gonna be here to help you along the way."

Ian laughed, pulling Mickey to him again. He kissed him without hesitation. Working his mouth against Mickey's effortlessly. It was always so easy, kissing Mickey. So natural, so perfect.

"Who the hell are you?" Ian asks, full of wonder. "Here I was thinking I was getting all wrapped up with my south side ex, and here you come, all well adjusted and emotionally available. What the hell happened? You took me by complete surprise." he laughs lightly.

"Life happened, Ian. A lot of shit has changed over the past few years. You know that as well as I do. But it's not a bad change, right?" Mickey asks, and Ian can hear the hesitation in his voice. Maybe he's thinking about what Ian is thinking about. That day at the baseball field when Ian punched Mickey in the face, calling his caring 'whiny pussy crap', and telling him he wanted to south side trash he fell for. Ian had insulted Mickey that day. Shit all over Mickey for trying to take care of him.

Ian was sick back then, but it doesn't take the sting out of those words.

"No, it's not a bad change at all. You're amazing, Mick. You kinda blindsided me with all your growth. M'proud of you." Ian smiles.

"Yeah?" Mickey asks, unsure again.
"Fuck yeah. I'm lucky you even wanna try again with me, after everything I put you through." Ian says, wrapping an arm around Mickey and tucking him into his side.

"Wasn't all you, Ian. I was a dick for the longest time when we first started hooking up. I'll never forgive myself for the way I treated you. All because I was too much of a pussy to face the truth. I'm a fag. How hard is that to say?" Mickey grumbled, burrowing deeper into Ian's side.

"Hey," Ian says, wrapping his arm tighter around Mickey's shoulders. "That shit is done. All of it is over. I'm not saying we won't have to talk more about it all, but let's just agree that we were both pricks, and let it go. We're here now, so let's focus on that."

"Yeah." Mickey replies simply. He looks up after a moment of quiet cuddling to see the blank TV screen. "Movie's over." he mutters.

"Shit, we didn't even see it." Ian laughs.

"Let's go to bed. I'm a little drunk and a lot tired." Mickey says, standing up off the couch and pulling Ian with him.

"Okay." Ian replies. He wraps his arms around Mickey again, walking with him toward the bedroom, never letting go. They walk awkwardly together down the hall, laughing quietly and snuggling against each other.

When they get to Ian's room, they strip down to their boxers in silence. Ian gets in bed first, pulling the covers back and waiting for Mickey to join him. Mickey just stands there for a minute, watching Ian watching him. The look on his face gives Ian butterflies. It's like he sees right through him, into his very core. That look from anyone else would unnerve him. But he wants Mickey to see all of him. He wants Mickey to know all of him.

Ian smiles back at him, patting the bed. Mickey finally breaks the eye contact and crawls into the bed. Ian shuts off the lamp and pulls the covers over both of them, then wraps an arm around Mickey's middle. He pulls the other man's back flush against his chest, resting his chin on Mickey's shoulder.

"We're gonna be okay." Mickey says into the darkness.

Ian sighs, kissing Mickey's neck softly.

"Yeah, I think we are."

Chapter End Notes

"after the total and utter shit show of this past sunday's episode, i'm reminded of how grateful i am for fan fiction. the producers have lost their god damn minds, and i feel like it's a totally different show. i'm glad i can make up my own reality here, because the show obviously has gone off the deep end."
Chapter Summary

a little bit of boozing, and a little bit of bruisin...

Mickey's got a lot going on. It feels like that is just the way his life is going to be. The way it's always been.

But the chaos he is immersed in now is nothing like the madness he was accustomed to growing up.

It's been a week since Yevgeny's birthday party. A week since he found out his son would be moving three hours away, just out of reach. He was dealing with that as well as could be expected. The adoption hearing was coming up in November, and then the ball would be really rolling. Not that Mickey could do much about it. From what he understood, he could only go along for the ride and take what Svetlana allowed him to have. It was frustrating, but he was at a loss as to what he could do to change it. So he was doing his best to accept it. He called Yevgeny every few days, but had yet to see him since the party.

Things with Jack were also in a state of flux, which made Mickey uneasy. They had never been at this point in their friendship. At a point where they were making a concerted effort to foster their platonic connection, while stifling their physical one. Mickey's sure it will get easier over time, but they are just in the middle of that awkward stage. 'We used to fuck, but now we're just friends.' It's been an adjustment, but Mickey's willing to do the work. His friendship with Jack is too important to him to just let it fall to shit.

As if Mickey's plate wasn't full enough as it is, there is the whole Ian situation to contend with now. After the night of Yevgeny's party, where Mickey and Ian had yet another intense heart to heart, in which they decided to be exclusively, whatever the fuck they were now. Dating? Mickey wasn't sure it was that simple. All he knew was that he wanted Ian and no one else, and Ian seemed to feel the same way.

So they were taking it slow. Something they had never done before in the history of their time together.

Their entire relationship was predicated on an impromptu, angry sex act. That first time, with the crowbar, Mickey knew he was fucked.

And he was right. He hasn't been the same since.

So this 'taking shit slow' thing was uncharted territory for the both of them.

They'd seen each other a handful of times over the past week. Mickey showing up at Ian and Mandy's apartment after work, or Ian and Mickey meeting up for drinks at a bar halfway between the south side and Boystown.

It was strange to Mickey, this pseudo-dating, courting shit they were doing. He'd never done anything like this before in his life. Ian had been his only serious boyfriend, and they'd never gone out on real date together. And needless to say Mickey's never done that shit with anyone else. His
whole romantic life had been Ian, random fucks, and friends with benefits, like Jack and Javier. So this shit was all brand new to him.

But he'd do it.
For Ian, he'd do pretty much anything.

"So, what are your plans for tonight, then?" Jack asked, his voice muffled as he did god knows what on the other end of the line.

"Got that party for Kev down at the Alibi. Fucker got his GED." Mickey laughed, turning his blinker on and merging into the right lane so he could get the hell off the highway. Matt had let Mickey take one of the work trucks home for the weekend. To say that Mickey was pleased would have been quite the understatement.

"Really?" Jack asked. "Good for him. He's gotta be pretty happy."

Mickey laughed again. "You could say that. Last I knew the dude couldn't even read."

"People change, Mick. Sometimes even for the better, believe it or not."

"Speaking of which, how's it going over there? Sorry I didn't make it down there this week. Shit's been crazy."

"It's going. I'm chronically hard now that you don't come around so much." Jack laughed.

Mickey cleared his throat uncomfortably. They were still new at this, and Jack's jokes didn't quite hit the mark like they used to.

"Sorry." Jack said quickly. "I'm trying, Mick." he sounded sad. Mickey didn't want that.

"It's cool, man. Just gonna take a while. I know you're not supposed to be fucking with any of those dudes over there, but anyone at least worth pulling it out for?" Mickey tried to change the subject. Even though the idea of Jack hooking up with another dude made him feel off in a way he couldn't quite explain.

"Well, Mick, I'm not supposed to be pulling it out for anyone, according to Andy. But that dude's living in a dream world, cuz fucking is all that's going on around here. It's like fucking Fire Island, but with addicts." Jack laughed.

"Oh really?" Mickey laughed. "A bunch of gay dudes with newly working dicks, and all that's going on is fucking? Go figure."

"I know, right? Now that I can feel shit again, blowing my load is like a whole new high. Don't know how I went so many years without it. Heroin is dumb."

"Fucking A right it is. Remember that shit." Mickey said, finally pulling up in front of his house. "Gotta go. But don't think I didn't notice you dodged my question. You fucking someone over there?"

"Maybe." Jack replied. "How 'bout you, you fucking someone over there? Someone red, maybe." the teasing lilt to his voice was evident, even over the phone.

"Not yet." Mickey sighed. He killed the trucks engine and stepped out onto the sidewalk.

"Why the fuck not?" Jack asked. "You guys have chemistry up the ass, no pun intended."
"That pun was absolutely intended." Mickey shot back.

"Perhaps." Jack laughed. "But I'm serious, what the fuck are you waiting for. Did you not tell me on Monday that you guys are exclusively not fucking anyone else? Isn't that why I'm back to jerking off in the shower and flirting with dudes I really don't like? So you and the Red Devil can make a go of it?"

"I wish Javier had never told you he called him that." Mickey muttered as he swung open the door to his house and dropped his keys on the coffee table. He dropped onto the couch and cradled the phone with his shoulder so he could pry his work boots off his sore feet.

"It's funny cuz it's true. That dude is temptation personified. Look at what he does to you. Turning you into a one dick guy, without even giving you the dick. It's black magic is what it is."

"Fuck off." Mickey laughed, tossing his boots by the door and getting up to get a beer. "We're trying to do shit right this time. The sex has never been a problem, it's all the emotional shit that goes with it that is the hang up."

"I get that. I just hope you guys get there before his dick stops working. I mean, you're not getting any younger." Jack teased.


"Ah, Mick, you're fucking smitten." Jack sighed. "Your love gives me hope. Can't say I'm not a little jealous. That guy's had you on lock for so long, the rest of us never had a chance in hell."


"I know, I'm sorry. Just can't help but mourn what could have been, in another life. You're a good dude, Mickey. Ian's a lucky fucker. I hope he sees that shit this time, doesn't fuck you around again."

"Me too." Mickey replied quietly.

"I don't think he's gonna." Jack said brightly. "I think he realizes what he's got now. But you know, if shit don't work out, you still got friends that love you. And dial-a-dick. I'm always down to go down."

"Jack, come the fuck on." Mickey berated.

"Eh, I'm working on it. Give me some time to acclimate to our new reality. At least I don't say this shit in front of your sortof boyfriend."

"Yeah, at least there's that." Mickey replied sarcastically. "But I really gotta go. Gotta get a shower before I head down to the bar."

"Okay." Jack said. "Have a Jack and coke in my honor, and get your bubble butt down here for a visit before I break house arrest and come find your ass. I miss you." Jack added the last of the sentence on quietly.

"I miss you too." Mickey replied easily. Because he did. "I'll call you when I've got a free moment to get up there."

"You better, dick."
"Asshole." Mickey laughed.

"K, bye. Love you. I can still say that, right?" Jack asks. Mickey's not sure if he's joking or not.

"Of course you can. Love you too. Talk soon. Bye."

Mickey could hear Jack making kissy noises as he hung up the phone. That fucking kid. He was making the transition to 'just friends' hard, but Mickey didn't think he was doing it on purpose. It's just who Jack was. Dramatic and overly affectionate. Looks like Mickey's gonna have to do the heavy lifting as far as making the change goes. But he didn't mind, not really.

They'd get there.

Mickey thinks it's probably a good thing he and Ian had been taking it so slow. It gave him time to adjust to this new reality with Jack. Making the transition to purely friends has been harder than he anticipated. But they hadn't done shit together sexually since the last time they did 'the thing', which was good and bad.

Good, because now Mickey could focus all his energy on Ian. And bad because now Mickey could focus all his energy on Ian.

Not that Mickey minded waiting for sex. It's just that Ian turned him on so much, even after all this time. It was hard to hang out with the dude, literally, as in he had a boner 90% of the time. He's jerked off more in the past six days than he did during all his time locked up.

It's getting a little ridiculous.

Speaking of which, he better rub one out before he heads down to the bar for this party. It would be in bad taste to roll up to the Alibi with a giant hard on, right? Right.

Mickey heaves himself up off the couch and makes his way to the bathroom. Placing his beer down on the sink after a nice long sip, he turns on the shower and slips in.

He sighs as the hot water pours down over his tired body. He makes quick work of washing his hair and his face. He runs a soapy wash cloth over his body, down his arms and across his stomach, his legs and ass. He takes special care washing his junk, going slower than necessary, dipping under his balls and getting all the hidden spots. He tips his head back and sighs, dropping the cloth back down on the ledge.

Yeah, he's horny. Just the idea of seeing Ian tonight has got him all wound up. He spreads his legs a little and tips his head forward. He should have put some music on, he had a feeling it was about to get loud in here.

He doesn't even have to pull on a long ago memory to get him there tonight. All he has to think about is the last time he saw Ian. He imagines what could have happened if things weren't so complicated. If Ian weren't recovering from Brian, and Mickey hand't been all twisted up in Jack.

They would have kept kissing, until Mickey was a babbling mess, pulling at Ian, clawing at him because he can never get close enough. Then Ian would have manhandled him around until he was leaning over the back of the couch, face pressed into the fabric as Ian took him from behind, a hand on his hip and one in his hair, saying those deliciously filthy things he always said during sex.

Mickey moans loud as he pulled those images up as he stroking his leaking cock. Hard and fast, pressure just this side of painful. But it's just not enough for him today. Something's missing. He shifts on his feet, resting his left foot up on the ledge of the tub, leaning forward. His hands are still slick and soapy, so it doesn't take much to push one finger past his rim.

It's been way too long since he's gotten fucked. It's not that big a deal, but he realizes now that that is what he's craving. Not a blow job or a hand job. He needs to get fucked. Hard.

He imagines Ian, that day, what he would have done to him. He imagine's Ian's gloriously long fingers probing his insides instead of Mickey's. He imagines Ian's hand on his dick as he fucks into him with so much force that it makes it hard to breathe.

God, he wants it so bad.

He comes hard with a muffled groan, holding it in as best he can as the pleasure washes over him like the water from his shower.

He shakes his head a little at the intensity of it all.

Jesus fuck, he knows he promised Ian they'd take it slow, but this shit is not as easy as he thought it would be.

But it's okay. This is enough for now. He can do this. They need to play this right. It's way too important to Mickey to half ass it.

He rinses the remains of his release off his stomach and legs before he turns off the water and gets out of the shower, wrapping himself in a towel and grabbing his beer off the sink, making his way to his bedroom.

Now that he's alleviated that insistant pressure, he can get on with his damn day.
He's got a party to attend.

"You didn't have to come get me." Ian laughs as he pulls his uniform shirt off and tosses it in his locker. He made sure to bring his street clothes today, knowing full well he was expected at the bar as soon as his shift concluded.

"Get the fuck outta here with that shit." Mandy laughed, swiping at Ian's naked torso as he tried to dodge her flying hands as he pulled his t shirt over his head. "I told you I'd help you set up, not gonna leave you there to fend for yourself with your sister." Mandy gave Ian a sympathetic look that he would have hated coming from anyone else.

Thing with Fiona are still strained. Have been since he moved into the apartment with Mandy. Ian's not really sure why. It could still be the fact that Ian kept his problems with Brian to himself, or it could be the fact that he moved in with Mandy instead of coming home after his break up. Both reasons feel like bullshit to Ian. He's a grown ass man. He can make his own decisions and do what he wants. What makes him happy.

He thinks sometimes that when his siblings look at him, all they see his his disorder. A ticking time bomb, just waiting for the perfect moment to blow everything to shit again.
But he's more than that.
He's not Monica. Monica's dead.

He hasn't had a real slip in a long time. He takes care of himself. Takes his meds. Works out. Never calls out of work. Keeps to his damn routine. Doesn't drink too much, doesn't get high anymore.
weed doesn't count, in Ian's opinion. Caroline disagrees.)
He's doing good. He doesn't understand why that's not enough for his family. He doesn't really know what else he can do to show them that he's okay, that he's happy. Happier now than he has been in a very long time.

Mickey has a lot to do with that. Ian's sure that's another bone of contention with Fiona. She never really liked Mickey. It's not a secret that she doesn't like the idea of Mickey and Ian being together. She never has, for whatever reason. She always had a reason to dig on Mickey growing up, even when Mickey was doing his best to hold Ian together, none of it was ever good enough for her. Mickey wasn't good enough.

Ian is not looking forward to explaining to Fiona that he and Mickey are trying to make a go of it again. Not looking forward to the disbelieving looks or the snide, offhand remarks. Because there will be plenty of those. Fiona likes to be heard. Likes her opinion to be known. Likes Ian to know that she thinks he's fucking up. Again. Always fucking up.

'Are you sure? That doesn't sound like a good idea to me.'
'I think you should rethink that.'
'Why didn't you ask me first?'
'What are you thinking'
'This isn't like you.'
And then going in for the kill...
'Are you taking your meds? You seem off. Are you okay? You can tell me.'

Ian knows, somewhere deep in his heart, that she means well. That she feels better when she feels in control. The big sister, the one in charge. The one who can make it all better.
But that's not who she is to Ian anymore. She's just Fiona. His opinionated, overbearing sister, who loves him, but still smothers him. He's trying to accept her as she is.

He just wishes she could do the same for him.

He realizes he'd stopped changing when Mandy put a hand on his shoulder.

"See." she says, smiling softly. "This is why I came to get you. You get all in your head when you have to see them. Fiona especially."

Ian shrugs, finally pulling his jacket on. It's the middle of October now, getting colder every day. "Yeah, I guess." he mumbles, closing his locker and stepping toward the exit. "Thanks."

"Don't thank me yet." she laughs, following him out of the station. "I may end up punching her."

Ian laughs with her, waving to Sue as they exit the building.

Mandy's car is parked right outside the station. She unlocks the doors and they both slide in.

"You ready for this?" Mandy asks, a small smirk on her face. "I have a weird feeling about this party."

Ian made a face, unsure what to do with Mandy's comment. He'd had a strange feeling about it too, but wrote it off as anxiety about dealing with his family. Ian shrugged, tamping down the feeling and smiling at his friend. "We're gonna have a great time." he said. "I'm sure Kev with be handing out drinks like nobody's business, since he's the one celebrating."

Mandy laughed as she put the car in drive and merged into traffic. "Drinking for free isn't exactly
new for either of us, though, is it Ian?"

Ian shook his head, smiling fondly at his friend. He was being an idiot. He was psyching himself out. This party was going to be fun. He'd deal with Fiona like he always does, and go home with Mandy later and life would go on. Things were good for him right now. No reason to get all worked up.

Tonight could be fun.

If Ian could just let go for a second and enjoy it.

Easier said than done. But he was determined to fucking try.

The first thing Ian noticed as he walked into the bar, Mandy in tow, was the noise. Jesus fuck, it was loud in there. The jukebox was playing in the corner by the pool tables. Fucking Free Bird. Ian's eyes scanned the bar for Frank, because Free Bird was usually a good indicator he was in the vicinity.

He spotted his asshole of a father on the floor, in front of the aforementioned jukebox. He had half full glass of beer on the floor between his spread legs. He looked like he hadn't bathed in weeks. His long, stringy hair was plastered all over his face. His eyes were bloodshot and red rimmed. His clothes were filthy.

Frank had gone to shit after Monica died. Right after it happened, he had tried to get his shit together. He had stopped drinking, got a real job. Ian had seen it all before, and had no real hope that it would last.

He was right.

Franks did nothing to protect his newfound sobriety. He did no work to stay free of drink or drugs. He was just precariously balanced on the line between wasted and not, until some random occurrence sent him toppling over again. Ian can't even remember what it was that finally broke Frank that last time. Something stupid, surely. But since then, Frank has been his old self. A sadder, more broken version of himself that Ian had ever seen, but himself nonetheless.

Frank looked up at Ian from his spot on the floor as he continued to play air guitar. A vague look of what Ian thought was disgust washed over Frank's face, but was gone before it really registered with Ian. Before he had too long to consider what that look could have meant, he was grabbed from behind and spun around.

"Ian!!" Fiona screamed, louder than was warranted for the small, crowded space, even with Lynard Skynard blaring a few feet away.

"Hey Fi." Ian smiled as his sister wrapped him in a bone crushing hug. It was comforting to be held by Fiona, even though things had been strained between them for a long time. None of that mattered the moment they fell into that easy embrace. She even smelled the same, like V05 cherry blossom shampoo and Newports. It may be an odd combination to anyone else, but them smell always reminded Ian of home, of the safety of his sister's arms.

She pulled back first, cupping her hands on his cheeks like she did when he was little. Her eyes scanned his face, like she was looking for something.

"You doing good?" she asked, finally letting him go and stepping back.

"Yeah." Ian replied easily. For the first time in a while, it didn't feel like a lie.
Fiona's eyes traveled over Ian's shoulder, her expression hardening microscopically. "Mandy," she said. It wasn't said in a hostile way, but the warmth that was present in Fiona's voice a moment ago was gone.

"Fiona." Mandy replied. She rested her hands on Ian's shoulders for a moment. "I'm going to the bar, you want anything?"

Ian went to answer, but Fiona beat him to it.

"Did you really just offer him a drink? You know he can't drink." Fiona spat, her hands on her hips, her best 'mom' stance.

"Actually, Fiona." Mandy smirked "His meds changed months ago, he can have a fucking beer if he wants to. Maybe you should talk to him once in a while before you go policing his behavior." she tilted her head to the side, giving Fiona a piercing glare before turning back to Ian with a sunny smile on her face. "Coronas then. I'm buying the first round." and she bounded off to the bar, where V was talking animatedly with Debbie and Carl.

Fiona stood there slack-jawed for a moment before she looked back at Ian with a befuddled look on her face. "Is that true?" she asked quietly.

Ian nodded, clearing his throat. "Uh, yeah. When I checked myself in after my break up with Brian, Caroline and the psychiatrist at the hospital thought it would be a good idea to tweak my meds."

"Caroline?" Fiona asked, confused.

"My shrink." Ian replied, a little confused himself. He could have sworn he told Fiona all about Caroline. She's been Ian's psychiatrist for years. "You remember? I told you about her when I first started seeing her. After Mexico....." Ian trailed off, not to keen on reliving that dark part of his life.

"Oh." Fiona said. "Yeah, sure. That was a long time ago, you've been going the whole time?" Fiona couldn't mask the surprise in her voice. It irritated Ian a little bit, that she doubted his commitment to the treatment of his disorder.

"Yeah, I have." he replied simply.

"Gallaghers don't do therapy," came a voice from behind Ian. A hand clapped down on his shoulder with such force that he wobbled a little. He didn't have to turn around to know who it was. He'd recognize Lip's voice anywhere.

"Hey bro." Lip said, sliding up next to Ian and wrapping an arm around his shoulder. It was a little awkward, since Ian was taller than his brother now, but Ian didn't move to push him off. Instead, he found himself slouching a little bit to accommodate Lip. It felt like it had been ages since he'd seen his brother, and the contact was nice.

"Well, I think we established a long time ago that Ian is the exception to every Gallagher rule." Fiona said, smiling into her beer bottle. "I mean, come on now." she laughed.

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?" Ian demanded. He was getting pissed already. It always shocked him a bit how one off word from his sister could sour his mood in an instant. But before Fiona could reply, Mandy came up beside him, slotting his beer into his hand. He looked over at her, grateful for her impeccable timing.

"Mandy?" Lip said, surprised.
"Hey Lip." Mandy said. Her voice a little clipped.

"What are you doing here?" Lip asked, taking a single step forward.

"I was invited, like everyone else." Mandy shrugged, sipping her beer. "You do know Ian and I live together now, right? Did you think I'd stay away to protect your pride or something?"

"My pride?" Lip balked. "Like fuck I'm still hung up on you."

"Well, I did see you that one time at the bar, and you turned white as a ghost and ran the other way..." Mandy smiled, twirling her hair with one finger.

Lip's whole face turned bright crimson as he ran a hand through his unruly hair. "That was a long time ago." he muttered.

"Exactly." Mandy said. "And so was all that other bullshit between us." she put a hand on Ian's shoulder and took a few steps closer to Lip.

He looked around for some kind of rescue, but Ian was giving no help. He was enjoying watching Lip squirm too much to intervene. And Fiona had wander away as soon as Mandy had stepped into the conversation.

"Look, Lip." Mandy started, putting a hand on his elbow. "I don't want shit to be weird between us, cuz now that I'm living with Ian, we're going to be seeing each other from time to time. How about we just try to be adults, huh?"

Lip blushed again, looking away for a moment before locking eyes with her again. "Yeah, sure. You're right."

Mandy smiled, stepping back and grabbing her beer from Ian again. "So why don't you tell me what you've been up to for the past few years?"

Lip looked a little sick, and Ian felt for him. He knew from his own life that it was not always easy catching up with old friends when you have nothing really pleasant to report.

Ian was a little surprised when Lip actually started telling Mandy all the shit he'd gone through since he started college. He didn't expect Lip to be honest with Mandy. He just assumed Lip would pull something out of his ass to save face.

Ian decided he didn't want to bear witness to Lip confessing his sins to Mandy. And frankly, Listening to Lip go all AA kind of made Ian's eyes glaze over. He'd been hearing the 'one day at a time' spiel from his older brother for years now. It was a bit hypocritical, since Lip was not, in fact, sober. But he'd gotten a lot better in the past few years, so Ian let it lie.

He walked over to the bar where Kev and V were standing next to each other, pouring drinks in perfect synchronization for his younger siblings.

"Can I see some ID?" Ian laughed, putting an arm around Debbie and Carl from behind.

"Ian!" Debbie screeched, jumping off her bar stool and pulling Ian into a tight hug.

"Hey Debs, long time no see." Ian laughed. He set his beer down on the bar top and ran a hand over Carl's shaved head. "Hey bro." he said.

"Hey man. How you been?" Carl asked, taking a sip of whatever booze he was drinking. It was a
dark liquid, on the rocks. Probably whiskey.

"You know." Ian shrugged, taking a sip of his own beer. "Working mostly."

"Not what I heard." Debbie smirked.

"What are you talking about?" Ian asked.

"Fiona says you are living with Mandy." Debbie pointed over Ian's shoulder, where Mandy was still talking to Lip. "And that you and Mickey have been hanging out again." she smiled deviously.

Ian was about to answer when a hand slammed down in front of them.

"Mickey?" Kevin chimed in from behind the bar, hand still splayed out in front of Ian. "Where the fuck is that asshole? I invited him."

"He said he was gonna come. Congrats, by the way. On your GED." Ian replied, depositing his empty beer on the bar top. Kevin went about exchanging it for a new one without being asked.

"Thanks, shit was hard as fuck. But are you sure Mickey's gonna come? He better show up. Haven't seen his pale ass since he got back. Not cool." Kevin said, shaking his head.

"He's been busy. But he said he'd be here." Ian replied, unsure if Kevin was fucking around or not.

"You don't think he's pissed cuz of, um, you know, shit with Svet?" Kev asked, looking away for a moment before handing Ian his new beer and looking him in the eye again.

Ian huffed out a small laugh. "Nah, dude. I'm sure he feels bad for you, cuz of what she did, but he's not pissed you got with her. Why the fuck would he care?"

Carl and Debbie were both listening intently now, drinks sitting on the bar untouched.

"Yev." Kev said.

"Ask him yourself dude, but I'm pretty sure he's just glad you were around to look after the kid while he was away. He wouldn't ever be pissed about something like that. He's pretty cool with the new dude, her husband."

"Okay, yeah. David. Good. He seems like a good dude. Finally tamed the shrew." he laughed.

"You guys aren't pissed at her anymore?" Ian asked, surprised.

Vee piped in then, stepping in front of Kev and putting her elbows on the bar. "I hated her for a long time, Ian. A long fucking time." Vee's eyes were hard for a moment, her fists clenched together on the bar top. "But when we threatened her over the bar, you know, with immigration and everything, she caved pretty easily. She actually apologized. Well, as much as Svetlana ever apologizes, but the point is, we worked it out. She gave us our bar back, and we didn't get her ass tossed back to Russia. I don't think we'll ever be friends, but we wish her no ill will anymore. Is she letting Mickey see Yevgeny?"

"Sortof, but that's kinda a long story...." Ian trailed off. He didn't know if he wanted to get into Svetlana and David taking Yevgeny with them to Springfield.

"Oh that's great. Kid's smart, and such a wise ass. Must get that from Mickey." Vee mused.

"So he's not pissed at me for taking up with his ex?" Kev asked.
"Fuck no." Ian laughed. "I don't think he even considers that marriage a real relationship. Yev's the only thing to come out of that situation he gives a shit about."

"Thank god. I didn't want him pulling a gun on me or something." Kev sighed.

"Seriously?" Ian laughed.

Kev smiled sheepishly but didn't say anything else, wrapping an arm around Vee and pulling her out into the bar.

"He's been stressin that shit since we heard Mickey was back." Vee laughed over her shoulder as her and Kev went to stand next to Fiona, to talk about some bullshit Ian's sure.

Ian shook his head at Kev's absurdity. Like Mickey would do something like that.

Maybe the Mickey from before.
But not Mickey now.

Ian smiled at the thought, sitting between his younger siblings at the bar, ready to be regaled with tales of Carl's senior year in military school, and all of Debbie's stories about Frannie's preschool antics.

It felt good to be surrounded by his family. It really had been too long.

----------------------------------------

Even after being home for so long, Mickey still got a tingle of nerves parking the truck in front of the Alibi.

It's not just a neighborhood bar to him.

It holds so much more than that.

He's been drinking there since he was just a kid. Back when Stan ran the place and Kev was just a dumb idiot who helped out sometimes.
He'd had his first drink ever there. Terry had lined him and his brothers up at the bar and made them all shoot whiskey.

Mickey had been 11.

It was also the place where his whole life changed forever.
When he had come out, in front of Terry and everyone else. So horrified by the idea of losing Ian that death at his father's hand sounded like a better option.

It was also the place where he fucked some disgusting random bitch to try and rid himself of the gaping wound Ian had torn through his soul when he'd left him. He is filled with shame as he recalls that awful time.

Things were always so fucked up.

And here he was, standing outside that bar again, wondering just how fucked up shit was gonna get tonight.
Because it always got fucked up. That's just how life worked for Mickey Milkovich.
He sighed, staring at the night sky for a moment. He craned his head back and focused on the bleak darkness. No fucking stars.

He allowed himself a moment to miss Mexico. The stars there were beautiful. Strewn across the night sky, illuminating the endless sea.

Mickey sighed again.

Maybe he'd call Lauren and Javier when he got home, he missed them like crazy all of the sudden.

He shook off the last of his nerves and pushed his way into the bar.

His eyes scanned the room. Everyone and their fucking brother was here, literally. Ian's entire family, Frank included, all the bar regulars. He even spotted his sister talking to fucking Lip. Iggy and Colin playing pool in the back. Shit. It really was a party.

The hair on the back of his neck stood up, and he knew without looking that Ian was staring at him. He turned his head towards the bar, and sure enough, Ian was swiveled around on his bar stool, staring at him intently. He was seated between Debbie and Carl, who were both talking to him. They stopped speaking at the same exact moment, as they noticed Ian was no longer listening, enraptured by Mickey's arrival. The younger siblings turned their heads to see what the deal was, and Mickey suddenly felt like he was on the spot.

"Uh, hey." he said, giving a slight wave.

Ian was up and out of his stool before Mickey had pulled his hand back. He crowded his space in a way that would have made younger Mickey throw a punch, but now Mickey just wanted to crowd him right back.

"Hey yourself." Ian smiled, running a hand up Mickey's arm. It was like he was testing the waters, seeing how far Mickey would let him go.

Mickey didn't feel like testing the waters. He wanted to jump right the fuck in.

He surged forward and kissed Ian square on the mouth. No tongue. No urgency. Just a simple press of the lips.

Ian made a small sound in the back of his throat as Mickey pulled away. Mickey rolled his eyes and stepped up to the bar, nodding to Tommy and Kermit, who both looked like they had seen a ghost. Mickey smirked. "Hey Kev, can I get a Jack and coke." Mickey asked, slamming his hand on the bar a couple times to get the man's attention.

Kevin looked up at the sound of Mickey's voice. A wide, happy smile broke out on his face. He squeezed Vee's shoulder once and made his way over to Mickey.

"Mickey!" he bellowed, grabbing a glass without looking and filling it with Jack Daniels and coke from the soda dispenser. He handed it over, but when Mickey went for his wallet, Kev waved him off. "On the house man."

Mickey raised an eyebrow at that, confused.

"Hey man, we're cool, right?" Kev moved closer, leaning in so he could lower his voice.

Now Mickey was really confused. "What the hell are you talking about?"
Kev looked down and away, rubbing the back of his neck nervously. "Well, you know, when you got locked up, everything kinda went sideways. Svetlana was in a bad way, or at least that's how she made it seem. She's insidious, man. Slippery like a fucking snake. You heard about us, right? Me, Vee and Svet?"

Mickey nodded. Yeah, he heard all about it after the fact. Mandy had told him what little she knew about it while it was happening. How Svetlana had wormed her way into their lives, and then their marriage. How she had lulled them into a false sense of security with her feigned affection and clinical sexual prowess. How she had turned on them in the long run, and how they had to threaten her with Immigration to get their bar back.

He wasn't surprised in the least when he found all this out. It was a Svetlana move if Mickey ever heard one. Nothing she ever did was genuine. She had no loyalties and no attachments, except Yevgeny. Mickey was certain she would die for that kid. Or kill, for that matter.

"Well," Kev started, nervously rubbing a dirty rag over the bar top. "I just wanted to say I'm sorry, for moving in on your wife like that. I mean, I know you guys never loved each other, but she was all you had when you were locked up, and we took that away from you."

Mickey laughed at that. A loud, shocked sound erupting from his belly. "Is that what she told you? That she was there for me while I was locked up?"

Kev, for his part, looked very confused. "Well, yeah." he said.

"Fuck that shit." Mickey laughed again, sipping at his drink. "The only time she ever came to visit me was when she had jobs for me to do. Roughing up dudes for pay. I stabbed a guy in the eye one time, she got five hundred bucks for that. Some greasy asshole john of hers wanted to send a message. I sent that message. Never even got my cut from any of those jobs. She fucking kept it all. She didn't do shit for me when I was inside. She can go fuck herself."

Kev blanched, his whole face going white. "What about Yev?" he asked.

Mickey sighed. This conversation was way too heavy for a party. "What about him?" Mickey asked.

"Did you ever see him, before you, you know, bounced?"

"Once. She brought the kid up with her with Ian." Mickey said, doing his best to keep his emotions in check. The memory of Ian's visit that day, Ian's last visit, as a matter of fact, sat heavy in his mind. It was an unhealed wound he didn't think of often.

Leave it to Kev to dredge all that shit up.

Ian promising he'd wait, when they both knew he was lying. Staring into Ian's vacant eyes, looking for any shred of the man he loved more than life.

But Ian was a stranger that day. He looked right through Mickey, like he was a ghost.

That was the last time Mickey saw Ian before his escape.

It was the beginning of a very dark time for Mickey. And considering the trajectory of Mickey's life, that was saying a lot.

"So, do you wanna be in his life now?" Kev asked, blissfully unaware of Mickey's inner turmoil.
"I do, but she's got her new husband and her new life. She's taking the kid and moving soon. Three hours away. And her new dude's adopting Yev. So I guess I won't even be his father anymore. Not like I was much of a father to begin with."

"Mickey." Kev started, but Mickey waved him off, pushing his empty glass towards him. Kev filled it mechanically, pushing it back once it was filled to the brim.

"So if you are asking me if I'm pissed at you over the shit that went down with Svet, the answer is no. I know she's a conniving cunt, and she took you to the woodshed without you even knowing it. I know how shady she is, and how easy it is to be taken by her. And you never took her from me, because she never gave a shit about me. She used me, over and over, just like she used you. And I never gave a fuck about that bitch, besides the fact that she has my kid. No hard feelings, okay?"

Kev looked shocked for a moment, before cuffing Mickey hard on the shoulder, smiling widely again. "Shit, man. Mexico turned you into an insightful dude!" he said. "Glad we cleared the air, drinks on me tonight, okay?"

Mickey smiled, taking a drink. "I'm not going to argue with that."

---------------------------------------------------------------

Ian felt good. Really good. Better than he had in a long time.

The party was going well, all things considered.

Frank had left about an hour ago, saying he had to a meeting with someone important. Which was kind of hilarious, if Ian really thought about it. Who would want to meet Frank at 10 pm on a Friday in the south side, besides his dealer?

But that was neither here nor there, Ian decided, as he sat back in the booth, pleasantly drunk and blissfully happy.

After his initial greeting with Mickey, they had been attached at the hip. Going to the bar together to get fresh drinks, wandering over to the pool tables to challenge Mickey's brothers to a round of pool. Iggy and Colin were wary of Ian at first, which was to be expected. But most of that shit was water under the bridge at this point, and the men didn't seem to phased by Ian rolling up with their brother to play pool.

They were considerably less cordial by the time Ian and Mickey had beaten them three games to one. Ian decided that was enough for one night and returned to the table where Lip and Mandy were sitting with Debbie. Carl had fucked off to god knows where hours ago.

Mickey joined him after about a half an hour of drinking and talking with his brothers. When Iggy and Colin walked up to the table with Mickey, Mickey dropped into the seat next to Ian, grabbing his thigh the moment his hand was under the table.

Ian startled, looking over to Mickey's flushed face. He wasn't drunk, far from it, actually. It always took a fuck ton of booze to get Mickey wasted. He was pleasantly buzzed, if Ian had to guess. The casual touching being the biggest indicator.

Iggy reached over and playfully mussed up Mickey's hair. Mickey growled, batting his hand away.
"You'll thank Matt for me? Like you said?" Iggy asked. Ian wasn't sure what they were talking about, but Iggy looked pretty serious.

"Yeah, I will." Mickey nodded. "He'll be glad to hear you're happy over there."

"Who'da thought, two gainfully employed Milkovichs." Iggy laughed.

"Hey, I have a job." Colin said, punching Iggy in the arm.

"Kinda." Iggy laughed. "If you call being a bouncer at a titty bar and getting paid under the table 'gainfully employed'."

"Hey man, the blow jobs alone are enough to make that job worth it." Colin argued, pushing his brother with both hands to the chest.

Iggy laughed, pushing Colin back before turning to the table again.

"We're gonna get the fuck outta here." Iggy said, clapping his older brother on the shoulder. "Tess is waiting for me, and Colin here's got a marathon of 'Get Smart' to get back to."

"Fuck you." Colin said, shoving Iggy forcefully. "That show's a classic, you dick."

Ian shook his head at the absurdity of it all. He remember when he was a kid, being so afraid of the Milkovich boys. The brothers and the cousins put the fear of god in all the kids on the block. But now that Ian knew them personally, he thought, affectionately, they were just a bunch of dumb dorks. And he loved them all, in one way or another.

Who could have seen that coming?

"Okay dude, see ya at home." Mickey said, fist bumping his older brothers, while Mandy got up from her seat and embraced each of them, stumbling a bit under the weight of all the booze she'd consumed.

Iggy and Colin both hugged her, before pouring her back into her seat, and giving Lip a dual pointed glare. Lip acknowledged them with a curt nod and went back to nursing his beer.

Once the brothers were out of the bar, Lip gave Mickey an unimpressed look. "When does the lame 'over-protective brother shit end with you assholes?"

"Never, you dick. For someone that's supposed to be so smart, you're pretty fucking stupid most of the time."

Lip glowered at Mickey for a moment, then shrugged. "You got me there." he said, turning away from Mickey to continue the conversation he was having with Mandy.

Ian turned to Mickey, pushing both of their empty drinks to the middle of the table. "Having fun?" he asked.

"I'm not miserable." Mickey smiled. "Watching this." he pointed across the table to Mandy and Lip talking in hushed whispers. "Makes me nervous."

"Eh, they're just catching up." Ian shrugged. "Mandy's kinda serious about that Macy chick, from what I heard. Don't think she'd fuck it up to relive history with my idiot brother."

"I can hear you." Lip said. Ian didn't even bother to look over as he heard Mandy chuckling.
"I'm just saying, it's not all that."

Mickey laughed, giving Lip a scathing look. "Better not be."

"Oh right, Mick. Like getting back together with an ex is never a good idea, right?" Mandy laughed, giving the two men across from her a pointed look.

"Depends on the ex, doesn't it?" Mickey smiled, settling a hand on Ian's thigh again.

"Yeah, it does." Ian replied. He had a dreamy quality to his voice, making him sound like a teenage girl, but he couldn't fucking help it.

Mickey made him feel like a kid with a crush. Always had.

"Speaking of exes..." Lip trailed off pointing of Ian's shoulder toward the door of the bar.

Ian looked over, nervous.

And there he was.

Fucking Brian.

Shit.

Ian broke out in a cold sweat instantly. His anxiety peaked, clawing it's way up his throat and out his mouth in the form of a strangled gasp. "Fucking hell." he whispered.

Mickey looked over, groaning. "Seriously? Does this motherfucker have a death wish?"

"Seems so." Lip replied. "He's got some fucking nerve showing up here after he flushed your meds and put his damn hands on you."

Mickey shot Ian a look, obviously questioning him. Ian shook his head minutely. No, he hadn't told Lip or Fiona about Brian's assault on him. The rape. He didn't want them to know. Mickey nodded back in understanding. He wouldn't say anything.

"What do I do? Just ignore him and hope he goes away?" Ian asked, a tinge of panic evident in his voice, though he did his damnedest to conceal it. He didn't want to look weak, especially not in front of his family and friends, but Brian always made him feel small and out of control.

This was no different.

"We don't do a damn thing unless we have to." Mickey said, addressing the whole table, but squeezing Ian's thigh under the table in silent reassurance.

"Looks like we may have to." Lip muttered, watching with disdain as Brian sauntered from the bar, drink in hand, coming right over to their table.

"I'm gonna go get Fiona." Debbie said nervously as she slid out of the booth and headed to the bar.

Ian could see Kev asking Vee and Fiona something, probably wondering where the hell this asshole came from. Kev and Vee had never met Brian, but Fiona knew him, and the hateful look she was shooting him while speaking lowly to Kev told Ian that she was filling them in on all Ian's embarrassing personal bullshit.

Wonderful.
"Now everybody is going to know.

"Ian," Brian said in that sickly sweet tone of his. Always so fucking fake, this guy. Ian has no idea how he ever fell for that bullshit.

He's so stupid.

"Brian, what are you doing here? You hate the South side. Told me that shit over and over. I don't want you here." Ian said, trying his best to sound tough, when he was really feeling shaky and unsure.

"Well, I saw you tagged in some photos on Instagram, and I couldn't stay away. This what you do for fun now? Really slummin it, huh kid?" Brian laughed.

Ian could tell he was drunk already. Probably been drinking at another bar for most of the evening when he saw the post on the internet. Why he felt the need to see him, after so much time had past, Ian had no idea.

"I see you really decided to commit yourself to this kind of life, huh? Such a shame, you had such potential, but I guess you can't take the South side outta the boy. That's too bad." Brian almost looked apologetic, like it really was sad that Ian was happy in his old neighborhood with his family and friends.

"It's not sad, and it's not a shame. He fucking belongs here with us, where he's fucking happy." Mandy barked. Lip put a hand on her shoulder, but she shook him off. "You're not wanted here, so why don't you fuck off?"

Brian laughed. A gritty, angry sound bubbling up from his gut. He sipped his drink and eyed Mandy with minimal interest.

"Got yourself a guard dog, huh Ian? She's feisty, I like her." "You never liked me when I was trying to be Ian's friend before." Mandy replied sharply.

"Well, that's cuz I knew what was going to happen. Looks like I was right, too. You dragged him back down into the gutter with you. Even Philip's here. Guess the pull of poverty and vice is too strong. None of you ever really had a chance. Pity."

Ian could feel Mickey going stiff on his side. This was going to end badly. Ian had to do something.

He looked around the room. His sisters were standing with Kev and Vee and by the bar, all of their faces concerned and tight.
Mickey and Lip were both curling their hands into fists, both of them looking ready to pounce.
But Ian needed to do this on his own.

He stood up before he could think about it and got right in Brian's face. "You're drunk. No one wants you here. Why don't you just do yourself a favor and go before something happens." he said, struggling to maintain eye contact.

Some time had passed since his assault, but looking at Brian now brought it all back in vivid detail. That helpless, hopeless feeling. That fear. It was a dark, all consuming feeling of dread creeping up his spine as he stared down his ex. But he wouldn't cower. He wouldn't back down. Not this time.

Fuck this asshole.
He didn't even see it coming. Even if he should have anticipated it. He should have fucking known.

Brian punched him. A closed fist connecting with the side of his face.

He stumbled a little but didn't fall. He shook his head and spit some blood onto the floor.

A cacophony of stunned screaming echoed off the walls of the bar, everyone coming closer, but not stepping in just yet.

Lip and Mickey were at his side in an instant. Lip pulled Ian into his arms, but Ian shook him off. He needed to stand on his own two feet. He needed to end this himself.

"I did not just fucking see that." Mickey roared. "Do you have a fucking death wish, asshole? Coming into our neighborhood, our fucking bar, filled with our fucking people, and hitting someone we love. Someone I fucking love?" he pushed Brian hard, causing the other man to stumble.

"Who the fuck do you think you are?" Brian spat, righting himself. He brushed himself off, like Mickey's hands had dirtied him. "You're nobody. None of you people will ever amount to shit. I was giving Ian an out. He could have been somebody with me. But he's such a trashy little faggot he has no idea what's good for him."

Ian cringed. This was what Brian always did. Cut him down, make him doubt himself.

"If by 'being somebody' you mean a pompous abusive asshole, then yeah. But I think Ian's doing just fine without all that bullshit." Mickey snapped. "We may not have money or know when to use a salad fork, but we have heart and we take care of our own. Which is more than I can say for you, you prick." and he pushed him again.

Brian pushed him back, but Ian couldn't watch Mickey fight his battles anymore. He put a hand on Mickey's shoulder as his hand reared back to throw a punch.

Mickey looked over at him, concern and love in his eyes. "I got this." Ian said, nodding his head at Mickey's questioning gaze.

Mickey looked between Ian and Brian, seemingly struggling, but finally nodded.

"Okay, man. It's your fight. But I got you." Mickey said, stepping back to stand with Lip, fists clenching at his sides.

Brian scoffed. "This is fucking pathetic. 'I've got you'? What does that even mean?"

Ian smiled fondly at Mickey before turning to look at Brian, disgust replacing the love that was just in his eyes. "It means we take care of each other. We love each other, and we help each other hide the bodies." he smiled, a dark menacing smirk on his face. "And that's not hyperbole, Brian." Ian struck a hand out, quick like a snake and grabbed Brian around the throat. All the fear he'd felt before when faced with the other man's anger disappeared now that he was surrounded by support. Lip and Mickey on either side, he squeezed Brian's neck, staring into his eyes, unflinching.

"You ever come near me ever again, and we will end you, right Mick?" he called over his shoulder to where Mickey was standing with his brother, arms crossed over his chest.

"Yep." Mickey replied simply. "Still got that place, you know, where we can make our problems disappear. Not a issue, man."

"Good." Ian chuckled darkly. "This is your last warning, Brian. I may have been afraid of you at one..."
point, but that's shit's over now. You stay the fuck away, or I'll show you just how South side I am, you get me?"

Brian looked aghast. "Did you just threaten me?" he choked out.

Ian nodded, still squeezing his neck.

"I'm going to call the cops. You're little boyfriend just pushed me. You don't think I know he's on parole? I'm going to get his ghetto ass tossed back inside, then who are you going to have to protect you?" he squirmed, trying to get out of Ian's vice like grip on his neck.

"You say one word to the cops about Mick, and I'll go in and tell my own story. You think I don't have evidence of our last night together? Think I didn't have a full workup at the hospital?" he pulled Brian's face up close to his, staring into his eyes with malice. Mickey came up right behind him, close enough to hear and see everything. Close enough to step in if need be. Ian pulled Brian's face up with his free hand. Their faces were so close, Ian could smell the whiskey on Brian's breath. He could hear him wheezing for breath around Ian's iron grip on his wind pipe.

"Mick, what happens to rapists in prison?" Ian asked lightly, like he was asking for the forecast. His voice was low enough that only Brian and Mickey could hear him, although his family was closely watching.

"Nothing nice." Mickey smirked. "Most get raped themselves, or they get shanked. But you know, I still got friends on the inside. I could call in some favors for special treatment. I'm sure they'd love to make this punk's acquaintance. He'll wish for death by the time my boys are done with him." Mickey laughed lightly. "That I'd like to see."

Brian blanched. "You people never call the cops." he spit out stupidly.

"There's an exception to every rule." Mickey said, cracking his knuckles.

Just then Kev came over. "Ian, this dude giving you a hard time?" he asked warily.

Ian shook his head. "Nah, Kev, this is my ex, Brian. We're just gonna kick his ass real quick and throw him into the street."

"Oh, the ex." Kev's face darkened at that. He didn't know the whole story, but enough. He gave Brian a once over with his eyes. "Fuck you, asshole. I don't ever want to see you in this bar again. I will call the pigs on your ass so fast. Don't get blood all over the bar." and he walked away, leaving them to it.

"Do you get it now?" Ian asked. "You don't own me. You never even knew me. I don't want to see you ever again. I will not hesitate to call the cops, and if that don't work, I will chop you up into little pieces and Mick here will bury them down by the river, right Mick?"

"Anything for you, Gallagher." Mickey smirked.

Ian let go of Brian's neck and delivered a powerful blow to his face. Brian's head snapped to the side and part of a tooth went flying across the bar. Blood sprayed out of his mouth and nose as he fell to his knees with a dull thud. "Fuck." he muttered stupidly.

"Hey, what did I just say about getting blood all over my bar, you prick?" Kev yelled, grabbing Brian under the arms and dragging him bodily out of the bar. "Mick, get his legs, damn it. I want this asshole outta my place."
Mickey glanced over at Ian, searching his face for any kind of discomfort or panic, but he was feeling good. Serene in a way that only comes from winning a battle against a boogie man. And that's what Brian was, a comic book villain he had to defeat before he could really move on with his life.

And he did it. He stood up to that asshole and put him in his place. He was surrounded by his family and his friends and Mickey had his back.

He wasn't scared anymore.

So he just nodded at Mickey and watched as the other man crouched down and grabbed Brian's feet. Kev and Mickey hurried him out of the bar while Lip and Fiona crowded him.

"Oh jesus, Ian. Was he always like that?" Fiona asked, pulling Ian's face one way and the other to inspect the damage.

"Pretty much, yeah." Ian grimaced as Vee came back from behind the bar and handed Fiona and ice pack for his face. "Thanks." he said, cringing slightly as Fiona pressed the pack to his swollen face.

"Jesus Ian, what a fucking asshole." Lip muttered, standing off to the side.

"I know." Ian replied, because he honestly didn't know what else to say.

"You held your own, though." Mandy said, searching Ian's eyes in the same way Mickey had moments before. "You didn't let him push you around this time." she smiled.

"That's cuz he's got us to get his back now." Mickey said, coming up from behind Ian. He pulled the ice pack out of Fiona's hand to inspect the damage himself. "He tried doing it on his own last time. But there's nothing wrong with asking for help once in a while."

Ian nodded as Mickey pressed the ice pack back to his cheek. He hissed. That shit was going to look awful in the morning.

In the aftermath, Mickey, Kev and V stood by the bar pouring 'after fight' shots for everyone, Fiona and Lip pulled Ian aside.

"Ian, honey." Fiona said, her voice sadder than Ian had heard it in a long time. "What was that all about?" she kept her voice low and soft.

"I told you, shit with Brian got really dark towards the end. I, uh, really don't want to talk about it right now." he rubbed the back of his neck with his free hand, making brief eye contact with Mickey across the bar.

"Does Caroline at least know?" Lip asked, putting a hand on Ian's shoulder.

Ian nodded, wringing his hands a little, avoiding eye contact.

"And Mickey knows...." Fiona said, looking over at Mickey, who was talking to his sister.

"Yeah." Ian said.

"But not us." Lip concluded.

"It's kind of personal, and still really raw." Ian said lowly. "If I promise to tell you another time, can we just not do this now?"
Fiona nodded, unshed tears in her eyes. Without warning, she pulled Ian into a tight hug. Lip slapped him on the back. They just stood there for a minute, silently supporting Ian in any way they could.

Finally, Fiona pulled away, a wet smile on her face.

"Alright, well, let's get this shit cleaned up and we can all go home." Fiona spoke after a moment of everyone just staring at each other. That seemed to break the weird tension in the room and everyone scattered to various corners of the bar to clean up the mess.

Mickey was on his hands and knees. It always surprised him how long it took to clean up blood. It just spread everywhere. He had on a pair of rubber gloves Vee had given him, a bucket and a rag.

How he got stuck cleaning up that prick's blood, he has no idea. But he's got a clear view of Ian on the other side of the bar, wiping down tables with his sister, so he's content for the moment. He knows the confrontation with Brian has taken a toll on Ian. Even if he's keeping it together at the moment, he's sure it will catch up to him at some point. Mickey feels hyper-vigilant, like he has to be on guard at all times, to see if he can prevent Ian's breakdown before he spirals like he usually does.

Right now he looks fine. Laughing and smiling with Fiona, Mandy and Vee.

Mickey returns to his work, dumping his rag in the bucket and going at the blood puddle with renewed vigor. The faster he cleans this shit up, the faster he can take off. It's well past one in the morning now, and he's fucking tired.

Maybe he'll ask Ian to stay over tonight. It would be nice to have him around.

He's happy with how things are going, but he wants more. He always wants more when Ian's concerned.

He sighs and continues his scrubbing when he looks up and sees Fiona and Lip staring down at him.

"Can I help you?" he asks, sitting up on his knees and staring up at them. Fiona's got her hands on her hips and Lip's smoking a cigarette, going for casual nonchalance and failing.

"Well, we were just wondering what you're doing with Ian." Fiona said. Never one to beat around the bush. Mickey could respect that.

"What do mean, what am I doing with Ian? And how is that any of you two's business."

"Well, we aren't sure what really happened with that Brian douche, but he obviously did some fucked up shit to Ian. And he didn't come home after. We think he needs to be with us, but he insists on staying with Mandy, and hanging out with you again. We just want to know if you intend on being there for him, or if you are going to leave him hanging. We need to be ready to pick up the pieces if you fuck him over again." Fiona's face was hard.

Mickey knew this really wasn't about him at all. He learned a long time ago that the Gallaghers, the older ones especially, project their personal shit onto outside targets. Fioana and Lip feel like they failed Ian, so they attack Mickey for failing Ian instead of facing their own blame.
Okay, Mickey didn't think that up on his own. Lauren had said that shit during one of their late night talks about his history with Ian. But it made sense.

Point in case, this bullshit he was dealing with right now.

But instead of rising to the bait and engaging Ian's siblings in this pissing match over Ian's loyalties, he just threw his rag into the bucket and stood up, grabbing the handle and making his way over to the bar.

He could hear Fiona and Lip following him over there and turned on the spot. They were both in his face and he backed up, feeling cornered.

"Listen." he said, looking over Lip's shoulder to where Ian was still chatting with his sister, totally unaware of the shakedown he's enduring at the moment.
"I'm not going to tell you any of Ian's shit. It's his personal story, and he'll tell you if and when he wants to. As far as what's going on between us, it's none of your damn business. But I will tell you this: I am not the person you remember anymore. That guy I was is fucking gone. And if Ian wants to take a chance on us again, there's nothing you can do to change that. You're certainly not going to scare me off with your fucking bullying. If you think you could scare me after I dealt with Terry my whole life, you're delusional." he scoffed, scooping up and unattended shot of the bar and tossing it back.

"We're just trying to protect him." Lip said, giving Mickey a meaningful look.

"I get that, but you're trying to protect him from the wrong guy. The guy you're pissed at I just dumped on the sidewalk outside. You're mad at him, and you're mad at yourselves for not being there for Ian when it went down. But you can't baby the dude, that will just push him away again."

Fiona made a face and opened her mouth to speak, but Lip beat her to it. "He's fragile now man, we can all see it. He won't fucking tell us anything. We want to help him."

Mickey sighed. "Listen, dude. I don't know what other way to say this. He wants to do this his way. Living with Mandy, taking shit slow, getting back into family shit with you guys on his own time, on his own terms. When he was with that asshole, he had no control over his own life. He felt fucking powerless. I know what that feels like. I don't think either of you do. Not really. So let him do this, however he needs to. If you love him, you'll stop second guessing all his shit and just fucking support him. Like I'm trying to do."

"So what, are you trying to get back with him? Is this what it's about for you?" Fiona snapped, obviously still irritated.

"Again, it's none of your fucking business what goes on between Ian and me. You think you know everything, about our history together and our relationship. But you only know the shit Ian's told you and whatever you made up in your head to make it easier to blame all his shit on me." he sighed again, looking over into Ian's siblings' judgmental eyes. "Fuck. You guys are relentless assholes. Here's the fucking deal. Ian and I are hanging out again. We are not together or whatever. He needs a friend in his life, someone he can count on. I'm going to do that. I'm gonna be there for him til he tells me to fuck off."

Fiona's eyes softened at that. She looked over to Lip, who just shrugged.

"We just want to protect him." Fiona implored. "We haven't done that enough."

Mickey looked them over, before giving a shrug of his own. "Maybe not. But it's too late for that shit
now. You gotta let it go and just try to do better this time." he coughed uncomfortably. "That's what I'm trying to do." he said quietly. "Seems to be working okay so far."

Fiona looked shocked at that, looking over at Lip, who looked just as confused.

"Just be careful. We don't know what happened to him, and we are worried."

Mickey felt for her in that moment. He knew the horrible details about what Brian had done, and he thought Ian's family was right to worry. But he also knew Ian hadn't told them for a reason, and he would never violate his trust like that.

"Ian's a big boy. Just let him know you're there for him and let him come to you when he's ready. Like I said, you push him him and he's gonna push back." Mickey said.

Just then Ian wandered over, a curious look on his face. "Everything okay over here?" he asked, eyes drifting from Mickey to his siblings. He stepped closer, his hip brushing Mickey's as he looked at Fiona.

Fiona nodded, looking up at her brother. "Yeah, Ian. Just thanking Mick for standing up to that prick. But looks like you had it handled. Good for you. Fuck that guy."

Ian gave her a small smile. "I can't believe it took me this long to stand up to him." he said sadly.

Mickey looked over at him, putting a hand on his shoulder. He couldn't give a fuck in the moment that Fiona and Lip were watching them like hawks right now. "Ian, I know better than anyone here how hard it is to stand up a guy like Brian." Mickey took a steadying breath, not really wanting to talk about this, but needing Ian to understand. "He's not too different from Terry, is he?"

Ian looked away, tears in his eyes.

Shit.

Mickey didn't want to make him cry.

He was trying to help.

"Shit, Ian. I didn't wanna upset you. I'm just saying, dudes like that are hard to shake. They're vicious and vindictive and they go for the throat every time. It's hard to hold your own with them. But you fucking did it. It took me fucking years to stand up to Terry. You put Brian in his place twice now. You're strong, Ian. Tough motherfucker. You did that all on your own. M'proud of you." Mickey smiled.

Ian looked up, tears streaking his pale face. "Yeah?"

"Fuck yeah. You did good." Mickey smiled again, pulling Ian into his arms even as Fiona and Lip looked on, shocked.

Fiona and Lip exchange incredulous looks. Mickey is positive he just blew their minds with this shit he just spit. But the days of denying his feelings and hiding from people was over for him. Ian needed support, Mickey was gonna give it to him, regardless of the rapt audience he had at the moment. Was it a lot to say in front of the Gallaghers? Fuck yeah. Did it make him feel vulnerable and kinda like a tool? Sure. But the real question was: did it help Ian? If the answer to that last question is 'yes', then he did his fucking job.

"Everything okay over here?" Mandy asked, walking back from the back room, wiping her hands on
a towel before tossing it on the bar.

"Yeah." Ian nodded, looking between his siblings and Mickey again.

"You ready to get outta here then, I gotta be up before noon, Macy's gonna pick me up."

Ian looked unsure as he nodded, looking at Mickey again.

"Hey, Gallagher, I was gonna ask you before all this shit went down, you wanna crash at my place tonight? We could watch a movie or something." Mickey kept his voice strong and sure under the scrutiny of Ian's siblings.

He'd be okay with whatever Ian decided, but he wanted to offer. He wanted Ian to know he wanted to spend time with him.

Ian's face bloomed into a huge smile, a bit distorted by the swelling under his left eye. The sight made Mickey's heart squeeze uncomfortably. He hated seeing Ian hurt.

"Yeah, Mick. I'd really like that." Ian said, his eyes darting down to Mickey's mouth then back up to his eyes.

So Mickey wasn't the only one desperate for a kiss.

Good to know.

Ian and Mickey said goodbye to everyone. Ian doling out hugs to everyone in quick succession, while Mickey let his sister hug him for a nanosecond before pushing her off. He said awkward goodbyes to Fiona and Lip, them watching him warily as he made his way to the door with Ian.

"Hey Ian, don't be a stranger, okay? We miss you." Lip said. His eyes were searching Ian's for something, looking a little bit lost after this strange encounter with Ian's ex.

"Yeah, we're gonna take Franny trick or treating next week. You should come. Have a Halloween party back at the house after. We're all gonna be there." Fiona added on.

"Sounds good, Fi." Ian said from his spot by the door.

"Okay then, let's get the fuck outta here." Mickey said, shooting a final wave over his shoulder before leading Ian out into the chilly street.

-----------------------------------------

It didn't take them long to get to Mickey's house from the Alibi. It was a cool October night, but the sky was clear and the moon was huge, lighting up the street more than the streetlights. They drove Matt's truck through the neighborhood, each street corner holding significant memories. Ian and Mickey running scams, chasing each other down alleys, shotgunning beers and smoking joints.

It hits Mickey in that moment how long he and Ian have known each other. Even before they started dating, their lives had been intertwined. He even remembers a tiny Ian with a mop of curly red hair on his little league team. Ian had been such a dork back then. Mickey smiles at the memory.
"What?" Ian asks as they walk in the gate and make their way up the stairs. Mickey fishes his keys out of his pocket and unlocks the door, letting Ian go in ahead of him.

"I was just thinking about how long we've known each other." Mickey replies, taking his coat off and kicking his sneakers into the corner by the door.

"A long fucking time." Ian laughed. He removed his coat and shoes and sat on the couch. "You ever think back then that we'd end up here? Like this?"

Mickey laughed, walking past Ian and into the kitchen, coming back with two beers and a bag of frozen peas, which he handed to Ian. He flopped down next to him on the couch and lit a cigarette.

Ian leaned back on the couch, peas on his swollen face, and sipped his beer.

"You mean, did I think when I was a punk ass kid getting kicked out of our little league, that I would fall hopelessly in love with the dorky redhead playing second base? No, I didn't see that one coming." he took a drag off the cigarette before passing it to Ian. Ian tossed the peas on the coffee table so he could focus on smoking and drinking.

"Hopelessly in love, huh?" Ian asks, eyeing Mickey over his beer bottle.

"Yep. Not a single fucking thing I can do about it." Mickey confirmed, unashamed.

"Is that a bad thing?" Ian asked, his eyes open and hopeful, although a bit distorted by his forming bruises.

"Hell no. It may not have always been easy, but it was totally worth it. Even if we never get back to where we were before, Ian, being with you changed me for the better. I fought it tooth and nail every step of the way, but it happened. And here I am now. I wouldn't be who I am today if I never loved you. I may have took the long way around, but I got where I was supposed to be. Don't you feel that way?"

Ian looked away for a moment before locking eyes with Mickey again. "I think I got a little lost there for a while, but I have a feeling I'm back on track now."

Mickey smiled, nodding.

"You did good there, back at the bar." Mickey said, changing topics. "Held your own with that fucking asshole."

"It's easier to stand up for myself when I know I don't have to do it alone. Sorry about saying that shit, you know, about you burying him down by the river. It was outta line to bring you into it like that." Ian mumbled, sipping his beer.

"It's all good, man. It's not like you lied. I would help you end that fucker in a heartbeat. You know that. I know crime's not our go-to answer for everything anymore, but sometimes you just gotta go medieval on someone. Especially a dick like that who just won't take a fucking hint."

Ian smiled. "You really are something, Mick. I'm so glad you're back. So glad you're willing to give me a shot, just be in my life. I know I don't deserve it..."

"Ian, don't do that. Don't say that shit. We talked about this already. We both did fucked up shit. You think I don't say that shit to myself? I never thought I was good enough for you."

Ian opened and closed his mouth a few times before settling on keeping quiet. He wanted to hear
what Mickey had to say.

"There were so many times I was certain you were going to walk away for good. I did so much shit to push you away. But you always came back."

"I pushed you too much back then. To come out. To commit to us. It wasn't fair." Ian said.

"Maybe not. But you didn't do it to be a dick. You just didn't understand how serious it was." Mickey shrugged.

"I should have, though." Ian interjected. "I should have listened to you. It's all my fault, what happened with Svetlana." Ian turned away, his eyes welling up again.

Shit, all he does anymore is cry.

"That shit was not your fault Ian. Just like it wasn't my fault. We weren't doing anything wrong. It took me a long time to accept that shit. Accept that I'm gay. But I am, and having sex with you is not a crime punishable by death. So let's lay the blame for that shit at Terry's feet. We didn't do anything wrong."

Ian nodded, scrubbing his face with his open palms. He winced, forgetting how tender his flesh was. He grabbed the peas again, pressing them to his face while he spoke. "I just hate to see you suffer. It was so bad back then, with the marriage and the kid. I could see you were in so much pain, but all I could focus on was how I felt. Like, in my mind you were choosing Svetlana and Terry's bullshit over us. But now I know that fucking retarded, you were choosing life over death. Your life and my life, cuz I have no doubt that prick would put a bullet between my eyes without a second thought."

Ian took his beer and Mickey's and set them down on the table so they could give each other undivided attention.

Mickey shuddered, just the idea of Terry hurting Ian sending cold chills down his spine. He had to remind himself in that moment that his homophobic asshole father was fucking dead, and could never hurt him or anyone he loves ever again.

"None of that shit matters now." Mickey said emphatically. "He's dead and we're here. After all the bullshit we've been through, we're still here. That's gotta mean something, right?"

Ian was fixing him with an intense stare. "Yeah, Mick." he breathed. "It sure as fuck means something." and he closed the distance between them and kissed him hard. He dropped the peas on the floor as he crowded Mickey against the back of the couch, pressing their chests together as his mouth worked against Mickey's.

Ian ran a hand up Mickey's side, up under his t shirt to feel the soft flesh of his back. Mickey gasped at the contact and Ian slid his tongue into Mickey's waiting mouth.

Mickey's mind went blank as Ian's tongue tangled with his own. White hot electricity shot down his spine and he was instantly hard.

Ian kissed him like his life deepened on it, hot and desperate. And fucking amazing. Ian's tongue moved against Mickey's, running along his lower lip before dipping back in. His hands shot into Mickey's hair, pulling tightly, causing Mickey's breath to catch. Mickey pulled back to pull his shirt off, but paused, searching Ian's expression. "This cool?" he asked. "You're okay?"

Ian smiled, warm and affectionate, before nodding. "Fuck yeah. I want this."

Mickey nodded, pulling his shirt over his head and tossing it over the back of the couch. "You
he said, staring at Ian.

Ian complied, pulling his shirt over his head and throwing it on the floor with Mickey's.

Mickey took a moment to appreciate Ian's naked chest. Kid was still hot as fuck. He ran a hand down Ian's chest, wrapping his arm around his waist and pulling him flush to him again.

They fell back into each other, hands roaming over newly exposed skin. Ian's hands were everywhere. Caressing his back and shoulders, trailing over his collar bones, tracing the heart emblazoned across his chest. He paused his movements to pinch one of Mickey's nipples, causing him to arch his back and break their kiss with a moan.

Ian groaned, pulling Mickey flush against him again, like he couldn't stand an inch between them. Mickey was dumbfounded by how incredible it felt just to feel Ian this way again, skin on skin. He has no idea how he went so many years without this.

He hopes he never has to go without it again.

Mickey shakes off the negative thought before it has a chance to root in his mind. Ian is sucking and nipping at his neck, wiping his brain clear of all thoughts.

"Fuck." Mickey grunted, tipping his head to the side, giving Ian more room to roam.

"God, Mick." Ian murmured into his neck. "So fucking good, missed this so much. Missed you so much."

"Yeah, me too." Mickey said, pulling Ian's face out of his neck and directing him back to his mouth. He kissed him hard, full of passion and want.

Ian pushed Mickey down so he was laying against the end of the couch. He slotted his body between Mickey's spread legs and started rutting against him.

Mickey was so hard it was borderline painful. But there was no way he was going to stop this.

And there was no way he was going to push Ian either. He had to let Ian steer this ship.

"God." Ian sighed, pulling back to stare at Mickey with lust blown eyes. "I want you so bad."

"Want you too. Always. You know that." Mickey nodded, grinding up against Ian's crotch.

Ian moaned, pushing back with equal force, but a sudden cold rush went up his spine, collecting in his skull as the world started to shrink around him. He shook a little, trying to maintain control as his heart started to pound for a totally different reason.

Fuck.

He can't do this. Not yet.

The realization hits him like a fucking truck. A wave of shame and embarrassment flows over him as his eyes start to sting.

He shook his head again, goosebumps breaking out on his naked torso. He pulled back fast, almost toppling off the couch.

Mickey sat up, wide eyed, putting a hand out to catch Ian before he landed on the floor. "Ian?" What's up? You good?" he asked, his voice dripping with concern. He scooted close again,
wrapping his hand around the back of Ian's neck, trying to maintain their eye contact.

"Don't think I'm ready for sex, Mick." Ian said, sounding sad and a little embarrassed. He looked away, starting to pull back.

Mickey stopped Ian's motion with the hand that was still on the back of his neck. "Okay."

"Okay? What do you mean okay? None of this shit is okay." Ian said, anger building.

"How about we try something? Go a little old school?" Mickey asked, sliding his hand down Ian's chest until he got to his waist. He ran a hand over his hip and squeezed slightly. Ian closed his eyes, sucking in a breath through his nose.

"Mick." Ian whispered. "What are you doing?"

"You trust me?" Mickey asked.

Ian nodded. "Of course."

"Then let me do this for you."

Mickey slipped his hand over Ian's stomach and went for his zipper.

Ian's breath caught in his throat and he tilted his head back.

"Eyes on me, Gallagher." Mickey said simply.

Ian's head shot back, locking eyes with Mickey as he undid his pants and pulled out his dick. He stroked it slowly, keeping his eyes on Ian. "Good so far?" he asked.

Ian kept his eyes on Mickey, ripples of pleasure rolling up his spine. He nodded.

"Good." Mickey smiled. He scooted impossibly closer, taking his hand away for a moment, causing Ian to grunt. "Patience." Mickey laughed. He quickly undid his own pants and pulled out his own hard on. He leaned back against the couch again, pulling Ian to hover over him more. He took them both in hand and started stroking them together. It wasn't particularly easy or sexy, but fuck it felt good.

Ian huffed out a breath at the feeling. It was incredible. Their achingly hard cocks pulsating together Mickey's strong grip.

Mickey pulled his hand back again, causing Ian to furrow his brow. Mickey raised a single eyebrow and smirked at Ian before spitting in his palm. "You too." he said, motioning to his hand.

Ian laughed before rolling his eyes and spitting into Mickey's open palm. Mickey nodded, smirking again, before wrapping his wet hand around their dicks together.

He pumped them slowly, maintaining eye contact with Ian the whole time.

"Remember when we used to do this all the time?" he sighed, swiping his thumb over their tips to mix their precum together, adding to the slick slide of his motions. "At the dugout? Shit was so fucking hot. You always turned me on so much."

Ian's heart swelled at that. Mickey would never have told him that years ago.

All of Ian's love-struck memories we wiped from his mind as Mickey squeezed their cocks together,
stroking firmly, quickening his motions.

Ian closed his eyes and tipped his head back, losing himself in the sensation.

Then his heart starts to race and he feels out of control and scared again.

Shit.

"Ian." Mickey's voice is low and far away, but it pulls him back from the brink. Ian opens his eyes. "I said eyes on me, Gallagher. Let me do this for you."

Ian nodded, keeping his eyes on Mickey like he was told. He was swept up in it all over again, just watching Mickey's face. Full of white hot lust and adoration. His pupils were blown and he had a thin line of sweat trickling down from his hairline.

He was fucking gorgeous.

Any fear or anxiety Ian had been feeling evaporated as Mickey's sure hand brought them closer to the edge. Ian started thrusting down lightly into Mickey's fist. Mickey nodded, biting his lip. "That's it." he murmured.

Mickey's hips were rocking too, as much as they could pinned down in the small space of the couch. It was incredible, having Ian looming over him like this again. He was hot and desperate and it was all for Mickey.

Ian's orgasm snuck up on him. Lost in the perfect rhythm of Mickey's hand and the slight upward rocking of his hips, Ian's vision went white for a moment and his whole body trembled with ecstasy as he came all over Mickey and both their dicks.

"Fuck yeah." Mickey groaned, releasing Ian's dick to focus on bringing himself over the edge. But Ian slapped his hand away, gripping his erection in his big hand.

"So good to me, Mick. Always take such good care of me, fuck. Come for me?" Ian buried his face in Mickey's neck. Sucking a mark into his collarbone while Mickey ran a hand through his hair.

"Fuck. Shit." Mickey moaned, coming all over Ian's hand.

They laid there for a moment, Ian still sprawled on top of Mickey, Mickey still running his hand idly through Ian's hair. Ian kissed Mickey's neck once more before pulling back and falling back onto the couch.

They tucked themselves away, and Mickey grabbed some paper towels from the kitchen to clean up the mess they'd made. He wiped them both down as best he could before tossing the paper towels in the trash and grabbing two more beers out of the fridge.

He plopped back down on the couch and handed a beer to Ian before leaning back against the back of the couch.

Ian looked over at a sated Mickey and smiled. "Thank you." he said, gripping Mickey's thigh and squeezing.

"You thanking me for a hand job, Gallagher? Kinky." Mickey laughed, sparking up a cigarette and taking a drag before passing it to Ian.

Ian swatted at Mickey's leg playfully. "No, you dick."
Mickey swatted him back, before reaching over and pulling Ian back down to lay out on his chest. Ian rested his head over Mickey's heart, just listening to it beating for a moment before he spoke again.

"You, just, it seems like you always know what to do to make me feel better these days. You never push, you're always there for me. You're so fucking patient now, it's unbelievable." Ian took one last drag off the cigarette before passing back to Mickey to finish.

"Ian, I'm just trying to be the kinda guy you deserve. I shoulda been doing it all along, but I was just too fucked up back then. Not that I'm not still fucked up, cuz I am." Mickey laughed. "I've just been through a lot in the past few years, and I realized some shit."

"Yeah? Like what?" Ian asked, rubbing circles on Mickey's arm. He squeezed his bicep and looked up into his face. Mickey looked tired, like the party and the aftermath had taken it all out of him.

"Like," Mickey sighed, staring back at Ian, running his hand through his hair. "Like, no matter where I go or what I do or who I meet, I'll always love you over anyone else."

Ian smiled, going in for a kiss, but Mickey pulled his head back. Ian looked up, hurt and confused, so Mickey kept speaking. "But if you couldn't or wouldn't be in my life, I'd be okay without you. I'll always love you, Ian, but I don't need you to survive or to be happy. Not anymore."

Ian frowned, feeling hurt, and tried to pull away again. But Mickey held fast, keeping Ian's eyes on him.

"Ian, my happiness doesn't depend on you anymore."

Ian shook his head, trying more forcefully to pull away. "Mick, stop." he whispered. "If you don't want me anymore, just let me get up so I can go."

Mickey's eyes were searching Ian's, and he shook his head too. "Let me finish." he said.

Ian looked wary, but stopped pulling away.

"The biggest thing that has changed in my life in the past three years is that I don't need to rely on you for my happiness. I can be my own person and have a good life. But if I can have you in my life, then my life will be complete in a way it never could without you. I don't need you anymore, Ian. But I fucking want you. And that is better, trust me."

Ian settled against Mickey again, thinking of his words.

When they were kids, they were so dependent on each other. It was borderline unhealthy, how much they leaned on each other. Mickey especially fell apart when Ian left him. Ian knew that. The fact that Mickey could live a happy, healthy life without him was a good thing, even if it made Ian sad in a nostalgic way. He selfishly enjoyed being the center of Mickey's universe. He liked being the most important person in his life, above his family, above his son. It was a bit of a power trip. Made him feel special and important in a way nothing else ever had.

Ian knew now, that shit's not normal. He shouldn't want to have that much sway over anyone. He shouldn't want to be able to make or break another person on a whim.

Ian smiles, finally understanding what Mickey's saying.

"You love yourself now." he said lowly. "You finally see your own worth, you don't need me to validate you anymore."

"Don't turn it into some weirdo psycho babble bullshit, man. I'm just saying. I don't need you to hold
me up anymore. I can stand on my own. I just wanna stand next to you. Like, all the fucking time."

Ian did kiss him then. He surged forward and kissed him hard. Mickey chuckled into his mouth as their tongues met. Ian sighed, feeling a little light headed. Mickey always made him feel that way.

Ian pulled away, locking eyes with Mickey again. Mickey had this amazing look in his eyes. Like he could see everything Ian was feeling. And he felt it too.

Love. Adoration. Forever.

"That was a fucking crazy party, man." Mickey changed the subject. He sat up and pushed Ian off of him, standing up from the couch. He stubbed out the cigarette before grabbing their beers in one hand and held out the other for Ian to take.

"Yeah, it was." Ian replied, letting Mickey drag him back toward his bedroom. "I can't believe Brian showed up. I can't believe I let that prick get to me again."

Mickey opened his bedroom door and shoved Ian toward the bed, dumping their beers and shit on the bedside table. Ian shed his clothes and laid back, watching Mickey slowly undress.

"You held your own with that prick. Overall I thought it was pretty standard for a party in the south side."

"Yeah." Ian laughed as Mickey got on the bed with Ian. They fell into each other immediately. Mickey curling into Ian's side and Ian wrapping an arm around his shoulder.

"You know what they say..." Mickey said, yawning.

"What do they say?" Ian wondered, slouching into the mattress.

"It aint a party 'til someone's bleeding or crying." Mickey laughed.

"Well, fuck. I guess we know how to fucking party."

"Damn right we do." Mickey laughed.

They sat up for another half hour, drinking the last of their beers and talking about the night's events, until Ian yawned. Mickey got up without another word and shut off the light, falling back into Ian's arms like it was second nature.

And it was. It was where he belonged.

In the dark, Ian pulled Mickey's face to his and kissed him one last time. "G'night, Mick. Thanks for everything tonight."

"Don't thank me, man. How many times I gotta tell you? I got you."

Ian smiled, kissing Mickey one last time, before burying his face in his hair and relaxing totally against his body.

He fell asleep in Mickey's arms, secure in the knowlege that he had Mickey too.
Chapter Summary

Ian and Mick brave the horrors of halloween.

Chapter Notes

i've kind of been MIA for the past little while. life gets in the way sometimes and i lose my creative spark. but i'm back now, let's get to it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Ian has always love Halloween. Ever since he was a little kid, running around the neighborhood with Lip, egging cars and smashing pumpkins, he's relished the holiday.

His family never had money for costumes or candy, so trick or treating had always been a bit of a makeshift endeavor. They had been sheet ghosts one year, the next they were nerds, with button up shirts and glasses from the dollar store. Baseball players with old little league uniforms, or zombies with dirty clothes and cheap make up. But it had always been so much fun, to pretend to be someone else for the night, to run amok, getting in to trouble and gorging themselves on candy while watching horror movies into the early morning hours.

Now that he's older, it's taken on a different feel. But it still brings a smile to his face. He's got plans for the first time in years, and he's excited. Really excited.

It's been a few weeks since Kev's party at the Alibi. Since he stood up to Brian and spent the night with Mickey. Ian feels more secure in his relationship with Mickey than he ever has, even though they are not officially together, nor have they had sex.

But none of that shit makes a difference in how he feels. They are growing an emotional connection they had never had the luxury to have before. Ian is convinced they are headed in the right direction, finally.

Caroline had been wary when Ian had told her about the confrontation with Brian. She was of the mind that they should have involved the police. Ian left out the part where he threatened to murder his ex, but his therapist was still adamant that he shouldn't engage his violent ex in any way.

But Ian had to disagree with his therapist on that one. He had to end that shit with Brian himself, on his own terms and in his own way, or he was never going to get over it. Now that it was truly over, Ian felt lighter than he had in months.

He hadn't had a panic attack in weeks. Even more importantly, in Ian's mind, he wasn't struck dumb with irrational fear every time he found himself in a sexual situation. He could jerk off freely now, when the mood struck him. It was a strange thing to count as a victory, but that's what it was, so he was proud of himself.

Not only that, but fooling around with Mickey was no longer the daunting experience it had been the first few times they reconnected. He could now separate his fears and trauma over his assault from
his healthy and desired connection to Mickey.

They hadn't had sex yet, but Ian was sure when the opportunity arose, and both of them wanted it, he wouldn't be held back by his past anymore. That thought alone was enough to send a jolt of electricity up his spine.

He was walking down N. Wallace, heading to his childhood home to help Fiona pass out candy to trick or treaters. Trick or treating only lasted for about an hour on the south side, and then his sister was throwing a party at the house. Everyone was expected to be there. The whole family, Kev and Vee and their girls. It was a tradition that Ian had skipped out on over the past few years. But he was determined to start doing these small things with his family again, reestablish the familial connection he had allowed to erode over the past few years.

He turned the corner, about a block from his house, when he ran into Mickey of all people. He had a bag in his hand and was walking fast, head down.

"Mick?" Ian said, shocked to see him. "I thought you were working?"

It was late Friday afternoon, Ian had worked a double the day before, and therefore had a long weekend. He was looking forward to seeing all the little kids in costume, then letting his hair down surrounded by family and friends. He was curious as to what Mickey was doing out of work, and so close to his house.

"I was working, but Matt let me off early. Lana invited me to trick or treat with them and Yev, and they live not far from Victory House, so I was gonna swing by and see Jack. He's been hounding me for a visit all week." he smiled sheepishly and rubbed the back of his neck.

A cold shiver ran down Ian's spine, and not due to the weather. It was actually unseasonably warm for Chicago at the end of October. No, the cold uneasiness was a result of Mickey's plans to see Jack that night.

Jack was still a sore subject to Ian. Mickey told him over and over that he had nothing to worry about. And Ian didn't want to be that person that gave their loved one a 'me or him' ultimatum. That would be unfair. Jack was a very good friend to Mickey, and Ian wouldn't want to take that away from him, regardless of his own insecurities and jealousy.

"Oh. Well, have fun. Give Yev a hug for me." Ian shrugged, going to walk around Mickey before the other man could see the stricken look on his face.

"Gallagher, wait." Mickey stepped to the side, trying to catch Ian's eye.

Ian shook his head, not wanting Mickey to think he was some bitch. He went to move around Mickey once more, but he was stopped by a hand on his elbow. "C'mon man." Mickey pleaded. Ian sighed before turning around to face Mickey again. He tried to keep his face passive, even as a torrent of emotion was raging just under the surface.

Mickey fidgeted for a moment, messing with the bag on his shoulder, avoiding Ian's eyes.

"I, uh, know your sister's having that thing at your house later tonight and all, but I was wondering if you'd wanna go up to the north side with me? I mean, I don't really feel like walking all over that uppity neighborhood with Svet and her fucking man, but Yev's really excited, so I gotta go. I just thought, maybe you'd wanna tag along? Mandy told me I could find you down here."

Mickey trailed off, biting his lower lip.

Ian's whole body flushed, a hot sweat breaking out on the back of his neck as he blushed like a
virgin.
Mickey wants to hang out.
Mickey want Ian to go trick or treating with him and his son.
Ian's heart melts into a puddle. He's ready to say yes right then, before he remembers the second half of what Mickey had just told him.

"If you're taking Yev trick or treating, why are you going to see Jack? Why would you want me to go there with you?" he asked, because he just couldn't help himself.

Mickey rolled his eyes, smirking. "Really, dude? That tired shit again? Jack's my friend. Sometimes friends hang out. He called and asked me to swing by after I took Yev around, wanted to see pics of Yev all dressed up. We were just gonna hang out for a half hour or whatever. Thought you could come with, and we could go to Fiona's together." Mickey ran a hand over his mouth, eyeing Ian. "I mean, if you want to. Don't gotta do shit with me. Just an idea." he rambled.

Ian smiled.

"You're going to Fiona's party? How the hell did that happen?" Ian asked, genuinely surprised.

Mickey shrugged, pulling his cigarettes out and lighting one. He took a drag before passing it to Ian, who took it gratefully and inhaled deeply. They were standing a few feet away from each other on the sidewalk, and Ian was hit with a sudden desperation to close the distance. So he did. He stepped right up to Mickey, close enough to feel his body heat, and passed the cigarette back.

"C'mon man, we gotta get on the L before we miss the whole thing. We gotta be there when Yev's ready to go or that bitch will leave without us." Mickey turned on the spot and started walking, Ian slightly amused that he just assumed Ian would follow him.

He did, of course.

The fell into step easily, walking side by side down the sidewalk, passing the cigarette back and forth. The sun was setting, the sky a mixture of pinks and oranges. The moon was already out, standing out in stark contrast to the sky, full and beautiful. It was going to be quite a sight tonight.

"Your sister invited me to the party, the night of Kev's GED shit." Mickey said, taking a last pull off the butt before tossing it into the gutter.

Ian looked over at him, eyebrows raised. "Why didn't you say anything? That was weeks ago."

Mickey shrugged again, looking up at the moon hanging overhead. He couldn't remember the last time he looked up a full moon in Chicago. He thinks of the moon hanging low over the ocean in Mexico. He sighs.

"I didn't think I was gonna go," he replied. "I didn't know Svet was going to let me go along tonight, I didn't know Jack was gonna call. I just figured I'd hang out at the house, on the porch with a bat, you know, ready for asshole kids if they wanted to egg the house or whatever." he laughed, before growing serious again. "But when Svet did call, and offer me this chance to hang with Yev, I couldn't think of anyone else I'd wanna go up there with, and I remembered Fiona's invitation, and figured we could make a night of it."

Ian's whole face split into a giant smile. "That sounds awesome, Mick. I'm glad you asked me."

They climbed the steps to the train, getting there just in time to hop onto a north bound train before the doors slid shut.
Ian didn't know how the night was going to turn out, but he had a feeling it was going to be
When Mickey got the call from Svetlana to join them trick or treating, his first instinct was to say no. He'd been dodging her and David since Yev's birthday party, unsure of how to deal with them now that he knew they were moving away, and there was nothing he could do about it.

The adoption was coming up so soon, and the closer it got, the more uneasy Mickey became about the whole thing. He felt out of control, and he hated it.

He had never been a very good father to Yevgeny. Hell, he thought he hated the kid for a long time. But after Ian took him on that impromptu road trip during his psychotic break, Mickey couldn't deny his feelings anymore. No matter how the child came to be, he was here, and he was Mickey's. From that moment forward, Mickey had tried to make more of an effort. It hadn't been easy. Just being around the kid brought up all kinds of fucked up feelings. About his father and Svetlana, about Ian and the rape. It was a constant reminder of the worst day of his life.

But none of that shit was Yevgeny's fault. He was an innocent victim in all of that mess, just like everyone else. It took Mickey a long time to get to that point, and by the time he did, he was in jail and Yevgeny was gone. While he was on the run in Mexico, Svetlana had refused to make any kind of contact with him. The only news he'd ever gotten was through Mandy, and that was sporadic at best.

Now, here he was, back home in Chicago, doing better than he ever has in his life, and now Svetlana was taking his son away again, for good this time. She was taking him away, giving him a new name, and severing any remaining ties Mickey has with the boy.

She says now that they won't cut him off. She says now that Mickey will still be his father. But Mickey knows better than anyone how things change. Once they are so far away, the calls and visits with get fewer and farther between. Soon, Mickey will only see his son on Christmas and his birthday, if he's lucky. And there's really nothing he can do about it. He can't fight Svetlana, or her husband's expensive lawyer. What judge in their right mind would side with Mickey over a fucking rich ass dentist?

David was well known and well liked in Chicago. Mickey was a notorious thug and felon. It was a no brainer.

So Mickey had decided he was going to take as much as he could get, for as long as he could get it. Whatever Svetlana and David were willing to give him, Mickey would accept it and be grateful.

He may never be the father he wants to be, but he refuses to just leave the kid, like he never mattered at all.

Because he does matter. Mickey fucking loves him. If this is all he can have, he'll just have to deal.

So, hell yeah, he told Svet he wanted to go tonight. Told her he'd meet her wherever she wanted. Promised to be on his best behavior.

Having Ian with him would probably help him keep his cool. When Mandy had mentioned he'd be at Fiona's, Mickey figured it wouldn't hurt to request his back up. Seeing him without having to go to the house was an added bonus. Mickey wasn't sure how he was going to deal with all the Gallaghers later at the party. But if Ian was willing to go see Jack with him, Mickey figures going to the
Gallagher Halloween party is a fair compromise.

He was a little surprised Ian agreed to go see Jack with him at all. He knew Jack was a bit of a thorn in Ian's side, but Mickey hoped it didn't stay that way forever. If he and Ian were going to keep working on their relationship, Jack and Ian were going to have to bury the hatchet. Mickey wasn't going to give either one of them up without a fight. And fuck them both if either of them thought he was going to choose.

He watched Ian pull his cell phone out of his pocket and hit a few buttons. He put the phone to his ear and Mickey faced forward again, not wanting to creep Ian out with his staring while he was trying to make a phone call.

Ian fidgeted around in his seat, trying to find a comfortable way to sit on the shitty hard plastic seats. The phone rang about a half dozen times before the call finally connected.

"You're ditching me, aren't you?" his sister's voice traveled to his ears.

Ian cringed, pinching the bridge of his nose with the fingers on his free hand. "Not really." he said.

"Not really? Then where the hell are you? We're supposed to be handing out candy as we speak, I'm sitting on the porch by myself right now, plastic pumpkin filled with dollar store candy. Where the fuck are you?" she didn't sound mad, more amused than anything.

"Well, it's kind of a funny story." Ian said, resting his head on the window of the train car and looking over at Mickey, who was rifling through the bag he had with him. Ian looked down. The bag had candy in it too, and some other strange things. A pumpkin carving kit and some random toiletries. Deodorant and shampoo, razors and toothpaste. Ian craned his head to get a better look, momentarily forgetting his sister on the phone. His eyes past over some vitamins and prescription bottles, before settling on a brand new bottle of KY and a box of fucking condoms.

What the fuck?

"Ian?" Fiona chirped. "Are you still there, asshole?"

Ian tore his eyes away from Mickey's bag, unsure what the hell it was for. "I'm sorry, Fi. What did you say?"

"I asked you why the hell you aren't here like you promised, you said it was a funny story, then just fucking spaced out. Where are you?"

Ian chanced a look at Mickey again, who had abandoned his mystery bag for the moment and was scrolling through messages on his own phone, paying Ian no mind.

"I ran into Mickey down the street from the house. He asked me to go up to the North side with him and bring Yev around trick or treating. Then we were gonna swing by your party later. Is that okay? I'm sorry I bailed on you, it's just, I never got to see Yev all dressed up or anything before." he said the last part lowly, not wanting to upset Mickey or bring up the fact that Yev would be long gone next Halloween.

"Oh." Fiona said, her voice softer now. "No, Ian, that's fine. I think it's nice of you to go with him. I'm sure it's going to be weird for him."

Ian pulled the phone away from his face for a moment to stare at it. What the hell did Fiona just say? Was she actually concerned for Mickey's well being? Huh?
"Uh, thanks Fi." Ian said, because for once he was at a loss with his sister. She had been acting strange in the weeks following Kev's party. She no longer took any and all opportunities to slander Mickey, actually listening when Ian brought up the other man. Keeping all her snide comments to herself. She actually hadn't said an unkind word about Mickey in a while, now that Ian's thinking about it.

How the hell did that happen?

"Well, have fun and take pictures. I'll see you here later, though? You are still gonna come?"

"Yeah, Fi. Wouldn't miss it. Promise." Ian smiled.

"K. Have fun." his sister replied.

"Will do. See ya soon." Ian said before hanging up and putting his phone back in his pocket.

Mickey finally looked up from his phone, closing his messages and slipping his phone into the front pocket of his hoodie.

"What's with the bag?" Ian couldn't help but ask. He eyed the reusable grocery bag situated between Mickey's spread legs.

"Ah, shit." Mickey said, sitting back in his seat and kicking the bag lightly. "That's shit Matt gave me today to hand over to Jack. He gets him all the shit he needs, cuz they aren't allowed to work over there for like the first three months. Kid's broke. Just necessities." he ran a hand through his hair before nervously nudging his nose with the knuckles on his 'U-Up' hand. "He usually goes up there himself on Fridays, but since it's Trick or Treat tonight, Lex wants him to stay at home with her and hand out candy."

Ian nodded. He didn't know much about Jack's home life or his parents, but he did know that the kid's addiction had taken a serious toll on his parents' marriage. Ian could understand that, his own parents' addiction had almost torn his family apart many times.

Ian also knew that Matt had been a kind of father figure to Mickey, and Mickey looked up to him and wanted to please him. So doing him this favor was a no brainer, really.

But something still didn't sit quite right with Ian, so he had to ask.

"Does Matt always buy his kid condoms and lube?" Ian asked, trying to keep his tone level.

"Yeah." Mickey shrugged. "I guess he does. Trust me, I asked him the same shit when I saw those. But I guess Matt's one of those dads that has no boundaries. He knows Jack's gonna be fucking around, even if he's not supposed to be. He just wants him to be safe."

"Kid can't keep it in his pants." Ian bit out, blushing a bit at his own outburst.

Mickey smirked, dipping his head to catch Ian's averted gaze. "He's a young gay dude living in a house full of other young gay dudes. What would you do if you were him?"

Ian sighed. Fuck.

"Yeah, I guess. If I were him and I wasn't all twisted up over you, I'd be playing the field too."

"Fuck yeah you would. Besides, where he sticks his dick is none of our concern. As long as he's not wagging that shit in our faces." Mickey laughed.
"Anymore." Ian muttered, looking at his hands in his lap.

"What's that, mumbles?" Mickey asked, poking Ian's side.

"I said, he's not waggling his shit in your face, anymore." Ian repeated, feeling heat creeping over his cheeks again.


The rest of the ride to the north side was silent, both men lost in thoughts about the other, and all the outside circumstances that continued to test them.

--------------------------------------

"Why the hell does she want us to meet them here?" Ian asked, confused. They were standing outside a large stone building with a Star of David emblazoned along the sloped surface.

"This is David's synagogue, I guess." Mickey shrugged, inhaling off his third cigarette since they'd disembarked the train. "I guess David doesn't really like the idea of trick or treating. Something to do with Halloween having pagan origins. Whatever the fuck that means. So he talked Svet into some kinda compromise. Yev has to go to some hour-long Jewish spiel before he can go out and get his candy. I guess a lot of the parents that go to this place are having their kids do it." Mickey stuck a thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the synagogue behind them.

"How do you feel about all that? About the religious shit David's getting Svet and Yev into?" Ian asked carefully, unsure if it was even his place to ask.

Mickey shrugged again, looking away from Ian. "Doesn't really matter how I feel or what I think, man. Yev won't even be my kid by this time next month."

Ian's face snapped up, stepping closer to Mickey so their faces were inches apart. They haven't talked about the adoption. Ian unsure how to broach the topic, and Mickey feeling too vulnerable and sad to talk about it at all.

"Don't say that." he whispered. "He'll always be your son."

Mickey shook his head, stepping back. "No. He won't. Svetlana is taking him away from me in all the ways she can. Can we please not do this tonight?" Mickey pleaded, his sad eyes finding Ian's finally. "I just wanna enjoy the time I have with him. Please, Ian."

Ian nodded, feeling helpless. He hated seeing Mickey looking so defeated. What the fuck was he supposed to do to make this better?

Before Ian could think of anything to lift Mickey's spirits, the doors to the synagogue opened up and a flood of small children came barreling toward them.

They were all dressed up. But Ian couldn't help but notice that there were none of the usual horror themed costumes. No witches, no zombies. There were a lot of animals, some princesses, and a slew of kids in uniforms of all kinds.
They were cute, there was no denying that.

Mickey's eyes traveled over the painted faces, searching for any sign of his little boy. He saw Svetlana and David before he even laid eyes on Yevgeny. Svetlana slid up next to him with the grace of a snake. David right behind her, holding her purse like a fucking tool.

"Mikhailio, you came. I thought you would, what's the word? Blow us up?"

"Blow you off." Mickey sighed, annoyed. "And no. Why the fuck would I ditch Yev? Told you I was coming."

Svetlana said nothing, just shrugged, her eyes finally settling on Ian. "Oh, you brought you boy-toy. I knew you two could never let go of each other. Nothing matters to you as much as your orange boy." Svetlana smirked.

"Shut your fucking mouth." Mickey snapped. This is not why they are here, to hash out old shit that doesn't fucking matter anymore.

If Svetlana really believes Ian had anything to do with Mickey not wanting their marriage, she's more fucking delusional than Mickey ever thought. He never understood Svetlana's open hostility towards Ian. Like if it weren't for Ian, Mickey wouldn't be gay? She can't really believe that's how it works. Jesus.

"That's not why we're here." Ian piped in. "We just wanna see Yev. That's it."

Svetlana's cold eyes traveled over Ian's face. If she was trying to intimidate him, she was shit outta luck. He hasn't been scared of her in a long fucking time.

"Fine." she spit out, clearly wanting to get this over with a soon as possible. "I invited you, Mikhailio, but I should know by now, you can't go anywhere without your orange lover. You boys are like a gay two-for-one. So my mistake." she smirked again, looking them up and down with open disdain.

David cleared his throat in warning. Svetlana and the men stopped taking pot shots at each other long enough to notice who was joining them. Yevgeny had found his way over to them, surrounded by a group of other kids.

"Mama, can we go now?" he asked brightly.

Mickey's eyes bugged out of his head when he saw his son, shooting Ian an incredulous look.

"Do you see that shit?" he whispered harshly.

Ian had to try really hard to supress the laughter that was bubbling up his throat. Yevgeny was dressed as a cop.
An adorable little cop.
But a cop nonetheless.

Ian could see Mickey's blood boiling in misdirected rage, so he decided to take the lead on this one. He got down on one knee so he was eye level with the little boy.

"Are you a police officer?" he asked, catching Mickey's scoffing in his peripheral vision.

"Sure am, Uncle Ian." Yevgeny said proudly. "Mamma and Daddy-David said police are the heroes
of the whole world." he tapped his tiny hand on the plastic badge on his chest. "They take away all the bad men so they can't hurt little boys like me or Seth. Seth's a fireman, see him?" he pointed to another little boy across the courtyard.

"Yeah, buddy, I see him. You ready to go trick or treating, little hero?" Ian asked, smiling fondly.

Yevgeny nodded eagerly and grabbed Ian's hand, dragging him up the street.

Mickey shook his head. "Was that your idea?" he asked Svetlana, falling into step with her and David as Ian lead Yevgeny up the street. "Heroes of the whole world? Seriously?"

"Yes." Svetlana said. "I must work very hard to make sure Zhenya does not turn out like you, or your father, or your brothers. Or your sister for that matter."

"Don't you fucking talk about Mandy." Mickey growled.

Svetlana scoffed quietly before continuing. "He has bad genes. Violent, addict," she paused, looking Mickey up and down with a cold appraisal. "Deviant genes."

Now it was Mickey's turn to scoff. "Like you are so much better."

"Maybe not, but I try. But I will do anything I can to make sure Zhenya is not destroyed by your inferior genetics, or my past. I will see him become someone. He will be more."

Mickey was stunned silent.

What could he really say to that? He had a shitty upbringing, maybe he did have bad genetics. Terry was his father, after all.

But that didn't mean he was gonna ruin the kid, like she seemed so sure he was going to.

"So you think dressing him up like a cop for Halloween is gonna keep him from being a criminal?" he asked, confused.

He watched as Ian and Yevgeny walked up to the first house, holding hands. Ian knocked for him and the door swung open, revealing an old lady with a huge bowl of candy.

"I will do whatever it takes to make sure he has better. Make sure he is better. It starts small. Make police his friend, instead of his enemy."

"Is this your line of thinking?" Mickey asked David. That dude never had a word to say.

David finally looked over at Mickey. "I don't think it's a bad idea for him to like the police. They have always been helpful to me. He will not be a criminal, so the police will be helpful to him too. He will never know your kind of life. This should please you." and that was all he had to say, looking away from Mickey.

Mickey's heart sank at that.

Yeah, he did want Yevgeny to have a better life than he'd had. He wanted him to have everything. If that meant Mickey had to let him go, then it looks like that's what Mickey's going to have to do.

He sighed sadly as he watched Ian and Svetlana taking Yevgeny around to the different houses. David kept his distance from Mickey for the remainder of the trick or treating excursion. Mickey found himself gravitating toward Yevgeny without even noticing it. Svetlana stepped aside, joining her husband while Ian and Mickey took up charge of the candy-aquiring mission.
Ian smiled softly, eyes wandering down to his hand, which was clasping Yevgeny's tiny one tightly. He looked over to his right, seeing Mickey's smiling face in profile, Mickey's left hand secured around Yevgeny's other hand. Mickey was clutching Yevgeny's plastic bucket full of candy in his other hand.

"Oh, Daddy-Mickey, do we have to be done? I wanna go more." Yevgeny whined. How a kid throwing a hissy fit could be cute, Mickey couldn't tell you. But it was. The kid was adorable.

"Yeah, buddy." Mickey said, looking over at Ian, who had the same sad look in his eyes as Yevgeny did. Looks like he didn't want this to end either.

Mickey had to admit, rough start aside, he had had a really good time bringing Yevgeny around this posh neighborhood. The assholes gave out full sized candy bars, not those awful 'fun size' ones. What the hell could possibly be fun about a candy bar that was over it one bite? Stupid size is more like it.

"Oh." Yevgeny said sadly.

"But we had so much fun tonight, Yevvy." Ian said, stopping their forward motion as they got to where they were parting ways for the night. Svetlana, Yevgeny and David would continue on up the street to hit a few more houses before heading home, while Ian and Mickey were going left, on to Victory House.

"I did too." Yevgeny said, looking between Ian and Mickey as his mother and step-father finally caught up to them. "I wish I could stay longer." he sniffled. "I miss you." he sniffed again, harder. It broke Mickey's heart to see him sad. He knelt down right next to Ian, pulling the little guy right to his chest.

"I miss you too, buddy. Always."

Ian knelt there on the cold concrete, watching Mickey quietly lose it. It was like the weight of the whole situation was finally crushing him as he held his son like he would disappear the moment he let go.

It almost felt that way.

Mickey pulled away after a moment, discreetly wiping his eyes and standing up. "Thanks for letting us tag along with you, kiddo. I know it's not fun to hang out with your uncool parents.

Yevgeny shook his head solemnly. "No, Daddy-Mickey. You and Uncle Ian are the coolest. I had so much fun." he ran up to Ian and wrapped his tiny arms around his legs. "Thank you."

Ian wobbled a little, but kept his balance as his face split into a huge smile. In this moment it was just him, Mickey and Yev. It was like a dream come true.

But good shit never lasts, and soon Svetlana was pulling a difficult Yevgeny back toward their house while Ian and Mickey watched them go, helpless. Yevgeny would turn back to wave every few steps, just to make sure they were still watching his retreat.

And they did watch. Neither of them moved a muscle until Yevgeny was out of sight. When he was finally gone around a corner, Mickey let out a breath he'd been holding for what felt like an eternity.

"Every time." he said sadly. Ian just looked at him, unsure what he was saying.
"Every time, I think it's going to get easier. Seeing him, knowing he's going to be gone soon. Knowing he won't be mine anymore. I think I'll get used to the idea, that I'll be able to accept it somehow. But it never gets any easier. It gets fucking harder," he bit out, losing his composure. He adjusted the bag of Jack's shit he's been carrying around for the past hour on his shoulder and kicked a rock in the street, sending it soaring through the air before it connected with a plastic mailbox and shattered it.

The smashed mailbox fell to the ground in pieces, breaking Mickey's shitty mood into splinters. The absurdity of it all bringing much needed levity to the situation.

Mickey looks up at Ian, unshed tears in his eyes and a shocked expression on his face.

"Shit, Mick." Ian laughed, suddenly hit with a case of inappropriate giggles.

"Shit is right, Gallagher, we better get the fuck outta here." Mickey said, just as the porch light of the house they were standing in front of came on. "Fuck, run!" Mickey yelped, taking off down the street.

Ian laughed breathlessly as he chased Mickey down the street and toward Victory house. It was like they were kids again, causing trouble and finding solace in simply running down the street together. Doing their damnedest to outrun their troubles.

They had only run for a few blocks before stopping on the sidewalk, both of them bent over and panting from exertion.

They stood there for a moment, catching their breath and laughing quietly before they headed back down the street, walking the rest of the way. They didn't speak again, instead opting to shoot each other small glances and occasionally shove each other.

It was crazy, how that moment felt like no time had passed at all. Like all the shit that had torn them apart didn't exist in that moment. No Terry, no bipolar, no jail. Just Ian and Mickey walking down the street, lost in each other.

It felt nice.

But before they knew it, they were coming up in front of a huge house, and Mickey stopped and turned up the walk.

This is not the first time Ian has been to Victory House, obviously. The last time he was here has left a bitter taste in his mouth, but he's trying to let that shit go, so he swallows his nerves and follows Mickey up the walkway.

The house is decked out for the holiday, that's for sure. The wrap around porch is covered in fake cobwebs and the front steps are littered with carved pumpkins.

The front yard has a scarecrow on a long wooden pole, and an array of cardboard tombstones littering the yard.

It's obvious to Ian that this house is home to a bunch of gay dudes, it's by far the best decorated house on the street.

Ian follows Mickey up the steps and waits behind him while Mickey knocks on the door. It takes a while before anyone answers. The boys stand on the porch shuffling from foot to foot, Mickey fiddling with the bag on his shoulder. He's been carrying it around for over an hour now. Ian
chides himself in that moment, he should have offered to carry it for a while.

The door finally swings open and they are met with a short kid Ian has never seen before. He's got dark brown hair, almost as dark as Mickey's, but it is much longer, swept over his head to one side like one of those emo kids, covering the left side of his face. He's small too, maybe 5'3. He's wearing a superman t shirt and a red cape. Ian suppresses a chuckle.

"Hey Mickey." the kid smiles, opening his arms like he's waiting for Mickey to hug him. Ian's eye widen at that. Who is this kid? How does Mickey know him?

"Hey Rowan, what's up dude?" Mickey replies, going in for the hug.

Ian is a little shocked. He has to keep reminding himself that Mickey does this sort of thing now.

Mickey pulls back and tugs on the kid's cape a little. "What the fuck is this shit?" he laughs.

Rowan blushes a little, turning his face down a little and running a hand through his hair. "It was Jack's idea."

"Of fucking course it was." Mickey laughs. "Rowan, this is my friend Ian. Ian, this is Jack's roommate, Rowan."

Ian steps forward and puts his hand out for the kid to shake. Rowan takes it eagerly. "Well, hello there." he says flirtily. "Jesus, Jack knows all the hot guys. How unfair is that?" he laughs.

Ian chuckles.

They follow Rowan through the hall and into a large living room. There are two over stuffed chairs facing the couch and a coffee table in the middle. There is a flat screen TV over a fireplace and a a card table set up in front of the bay window.

"Speaking of, where the hell is that asshole? I got all his shit from his dad." Mickey says, dropping the bag down on the coffee table in the living room and rotating his sore shoulder. He'd been lugging that shit around too fucking long.

"He went up to our room to grab some movies. You guys wanna watch one? I got like all 9 Saw movies." Rowan said, hopeful.

"Nah, man. We got a party at Ian's sister's house we gotta go to." Mickey said, looking over his shoulder at Ian who was hovering by the entry to the room. "Come sit down, asshole. You're making me nervous." he pointed to one of the couches and Ian came over dutifully and sat down.

Nervous is a good way to describe how Ian is feeling right now too. He hasn't seen Jack since that day he freaked out. The day Trevor laid into him and him and Mickey had their falling out. He's not eager to repeat that shit.

But he knows he needs to at least be on civil terms with Jack. Now that he actively pursuing a relationship with Mickey again, he needs to make peace with Jack. So he's fucking trying. He's going to give the kid a chance, try to get to know him. Find what lies beyond the heroin and the fact that he used to fuck Mickey. There's more to him than that. Ian just has to figure out what that is.

"Oh, well, another time then." Rowan says, flopping down in one of the chairs opposite the couch.

"Yeah, man, sounds good." Mickey says, just as Jack comes bounding down the stairs, arms full of
Jesus fuck, Mick. I didn't expect you to be here already." he laughs.

Jack is wearing a similar outfit to Rowan, a Batman t shirt and a black cape. His messy brown hair is sticking up in all directions, a little black mask that should be on his eyes holding the curls back like a head band.

"Hey Ian. How you doing?" Jack asks, dropping the DVDs on the coffee table and flopping down next to Rowan. The chair is big, but it's still a tight squeeze. They look a little ridiculous.

"I'm okay. Thanks." Ian says, unsure of what else to say.

"That's good." Jack smiles. "Oh, is this the stuff my dad was supposed to drop off?" he asks, jumping back up and rummaging through the bag.

"Yeah, man. He wanted me to tell you he'll be by later in the week." Mickey said. "He also wanted me to ask you, and I quote 'take it easy on the lube, that shit's expensive.'" Mickey laughed.

Jack actually blushed at that, shooting a glance at Rowan that did not go unnoticed by either Ian or Mickey. "Dad doesn't understand shit about lube. We have that argument all the time."

Mickey huffed out a laugh at that. Even Ian cracked a smile.

Before Jack could say anything else, Rowan's phone went off. He looked at it and cursed under his breath. "Damn it. Eli needs a ride home from work. I gotta take the house van and go get him." he grumbled.

"Where is everyone else?" Mickey asked, just then noticing the house was oddly empty. Every time he visits Jack, the house is teeming with dudes.

"Andy took them all down to the drop in center. Trevor's having a Halloween party." Rowan said, pulling a hoodie off the back of the couch and slipping it onto his shoulders.

"How come you guys didn't go?" Ian asked, curious.

"Eh, I'm not really a Trevor fan." Jack said, wrinkling his nose, and fucking winking at Ian. "And Rowan and me stick together, huh kid?" he lightly punched the guy in the shoulder as he walked around the couch to get to his shoes by the door.

Ian is positive that Jack is not a Trevor fan due to Trevor's never ending attitude concerning all things Mickey. Ian finds it oddly endearing, that Jack always has Mickey's back like that. He's a good friend to Mickey, sex aside. Ian is having a hard time coming to terms with that, but he's fucking trying.

"Hell yeah we do." Rowan replied. He pulled his sneakers on and came back into the living room to grab his phone off the coffee table. "Nice meeting you guys." he nodded to Ian and Mickey before stopping in front of Jack and dropping a kiss on the top of his head. "Be right back, don't start the movie without me." he said, ruffling Jack's hair on his way back to the front door.

"I wouldn't dream of it." Jack laughs over his shoulder as Rowan leaves the house.

After the door slams shut and they hear the van start up, Mickey looks over at Jack, eyebrows raised. "You hittin that?" he asks, blunt as usual.
Jack has the decency to look a little embarrassed. "It's complicated?" he answers, more like a question. "I mean," he looks over at Ian before he continues. "I like him, he's really cool. But it's all really new to me. I've never been attracted to a trans dude before. It's different."

Ian nods without even knowing he's doing it. It is a bit different, if Ian stops to think about it. Which he usually doesn't.

"So, you are fucking him?" Mickey asks, genuinely curious. Not jealous. No. Not really....

"No, not yet. I mean, I let him blow me or whatever, but I haven't returned the favor." Jack makes a face Ian can't really decipher. "I mean, I could, I just don't know what to do. It's actually a little confusing, and kinda embarrassing. I don't want to fuck it up or make him feel weird."

"Just talk to him." Ian surprises himself when he says that. Mickey and Jack both look over him, obviously shocked too. Ian shrugs. "I mean, communication is important with anyone, but with a guy like Rowan, you need to talk about that shit. Especially if you like, wanna be respectful or whatever. I stuck my foot in my mouth more than once, with, erm, Trevor. So, yeah...." Ian trails off, wondering why the hell he opened his stupid mouth to begin with.

But Jack smiles at him, and open, bright grin on his face. "Thanks, Ian. That's good advice. Don't know why I didn't think of that. Duh." he smacks his own head lightly and rolls his eyes.

"Aren't you, like, not supposed to fuck your roommate?" Mickey asks, trying to steer the conversation away from the intricacies of sex with a trans guy.

"Yeah."

"Yeah." Jack sighs. "But I mean, everyone around here is doing it. Why the fuck not? I'm being safe or whatever. Hence the condoms. I know Rowan was a hooker before he came down here. He's had a full workup since then, but I wanna be sure. You know?"

"Shit's dangerous, kid. Gotta be careful." Mickey said, maintaining eye contact. Jack blushes again and looks away.

"Yeah, yeah." Jack says, waving him off. "Like you never fucked without a condom." Jack gave him a meaningful look.

Ian looked between the two men, locked in an odd stare off for a moment, before Mickey broke first and looked away.

"If you're talking about jail, that shit was different and you know it." Mickey said, stern.

"Well, sure." Jack shrugged. "But it's not like we were exclusive fuck buddies then either. You had your side bitch, remember?" Jack smirked.

Mickey blanched. Fuck. He never told Ian about Cassie. It's not that the thought hadn't crossed his mind, it's just that things have been so crazy since he got back, there hadn't been a good time for it. He's been so busy trying to help Ian rebuild himself after Brian, talking about his time in prison hadn't really seemed like a good idea.

"Jesus, Mick." Ian said, curiosity and a hint of sadness in his voice. "How many people were you fucking in there?"

"Oh shit." Jack said, no longer smiling. "You didn't tell him about Cassie?"

Mickey glared at Jack, giving him his best 'shut the fuck up' eyes.
"Cassie?" Ian asked, now profoundly confused.

"Thanks, Jack. Real fucking smooth." Mickey sighs. He was going to tell Ian all that shit, someday, but he didn't want to do it any time soon. What happened to him in jail and the circumstances surrounding his escape were things he didn't like to think about, never mind talk about. Shit, he barely even discussed that stuff with Jack, and he was there. But now it looks like he's going to have to rehash all that old shit he's worked so hard to bury.

"Mick, who's Cassie?" Ian repeats.

Mickey shrugs. "Just a CO at the prison Jack and I were at."

Ian raises his eyebrows, waiting for Mickey to continue. But he doesn't. He clears his throat and stands up. "We can talk about it later, after the party. You wanna come back to mine tonight?"

Ian nods, not really wanting to let that shit go right now, but unsure how to push it without being a dick.

"I'm gonna hit the can, and we can go." he walks down the hall without waiting for a response.

Jack gets up off his chair and comes over to Ian, sitting down next to him. He turns his body so he's facing Ian fully. It's hard for Ian to take him seriously when he's dressed up like ghetto Batman, but Ian keeps a straight face.

"Don't be too hard on him about Cassie, okay?" he says.

Ian gives him a confused look. What the hell happened and why would Ian give Mick a hard time about it?

"What are you talking about?" Ian asks.

"Shit with that bitch was fucked up. But Mick doesn't see it that way. He's going to try to justify her shit and make excuses for her. But don't fall for it man. I think you're smarter than that. He's in denial. You'll understand more when you hear the whole story."

Ian shakes his head, more confused. "What the hell, man. What happened?"

Jack sighs, leaning against the back of the couch. He crosses his arms over his chest and just stares out into space for a moment before replying.

"A lot of fucked up shit." is all he says before Mickey comes back into the room, wiping his hands on his jeans.

"You ready?" he asks Ian.

Ian nods, standing from the couch.

Jack walks them to the door. "Thanks for bringing me this shit, Mick." he pulls Mickey into a hug, holding him tight for a moment.

"Don't mention it, man. You know I got you." Mickey replies, pulling back. He runs a hand through Jack's hair in an affectionate gesture not lost on Ian. He pulls his mask down over his face and smacks his forehead. Jack laughs and smacks him back, pulling the mask off and tossing it over his shoulder haphazardly.
"Ian, man. Thanks for coming. I know it's still a little weird, but I hope we can be friends. If Mick likes you this much, you've gotta be a hell of a guy. Hope we can be friends too, someday." he says it so genuinely that Ian is taken by complete surprise.

He believes him. He honestly believes Jack wants to be his friend.

That's a shock.

Jack puts his arms out, and Ian surprises himself by falling into his arms and letting the kid fucking hug him. It's strange how not strange it feels. For months now, he's been wary of this kid. Unsure who he was to Mickey and unsure how much of a threat he was to Ian. But after spending this short amount of time with him, Ian finds himself actually liking the kid, against his better judgement and all his self preservation instincts. It's hard not to like Jack.

Shit.

"Alright, well, don't be strangers. I need all the sexy men I can get in my life." Jack laughs as they walk out onto the front porch.

Mickey laughs and Ian surprises himself again by joining in.

"I'll call you." Mickey says as he makes his way on to the walk, Ian trailing behind him.

"Sure thing, Mick. Bye." he waves at them one last time before closing the door.

"He's a fucking trip." Mickey laughs as they make their way down the street toward the L.

"He's actually growing on me." Ian confesses, unsure of why he feels the need to tell Mickey that.

"Is he?" Mickey asks, hope evident in his voice as he strolled down the sidewalk with Ian, each of them smoking cigarettes. The street was quiet now, all the earlier chaos of trick or treating long over.

"Yeah, I mean, he seems like a genuinely nice kid. And he cares about you a lot. He said some stuff to me in there that had me rethinking all the shit i thought I knew about him." Ian shrugged, taking a drag of his cigarette as they inched closer to the train.

"Said things like what?" Mickey asked.

"Just things." Ian replied vaguely. "We can talk about it later."

Mickey nodded. He didn't really want to let it go, but he wasn't too keen on starting a heavy conversation with Ian right before they rolled up to his family's house.

They walked in silence for a few moments. It never ceases to amaze Ian how easy silence with Mickey always is. Neither of them feeling uncomfortable. Neither of them rushing to fill the void with meaningless chatter, just happy to spend a moment in each others' presence, quietly soaking up the other man.

They made their way to the L in good time, hopping on a south bound train and falling into seats near the door.

Before they knew it, they were disembarking and making their way down the streets of the south side again.

This neighborhood had changed so much since Mickey had gone to jail. Every time he walks down
these streets, he's torn between his bank of childhood memories of this place, and the sparkling new reality he's hit with each and every time. The streets themselves are cleaner, the houses no longer in a state of disrepair and neglect. There are coffee shops and yoga studios. A fucking dog park. Walking side by side through streets they knew like the back of their hands, they no longer heard gun shots, or saw used needles in the gutters.

It was surreal as much as it was welcomed. Mickey didn't want anyone he loved to have to live like that. Before, he didn't know it could be any other way. Now he knows better, and he hopes to never have to go back to that shit.

But it's also hard, looking around a place you've called home forever, and feeling like you no longer belong there.

They finally make their way to Ian's childhood home. The house is lit up inside, loud music floating out the cracked windows. There are carved pumpkins lined up the steps, and orange fairy lights strung up along the rafters of the porch. It looks like a ghetto version of the Victory House they just left.

It makes Mickey smile.

Ian grabs his hand before they start up the steps. "You ready for this?" he asks.

Mickey smiles. "As ready as I'll ever be to deal with your fucked up family."

Ian laughs lightly as he pushes open the door, pulling Mickey in behind him.

The house was in total chaos. Fiona and Vee were dancing in the corner by the TV. Pink Floyd flowing out of the speakers as Fiona and Vee swayed softly, holding hands and drinking beers. Kev was hovering by the kitchen bobbing his head to the loud music, spatula in hand. Carl and Debbie were planted in front of the TV on the couch, watching a gory horror flick on mute, since Fiona had the music on so damn loud. Liam was sitting in the corner with the twins, playing what looked like a very intense game of Operation.

Mickey took it all in. It had been years since he'd stepped foot into the Gallagher house. Thinking back on it, he hasn't been to this house since the day of his arrest. The day that fucking cunt Sammi chased him down the street with that gun, ripping him away from Ian when he had already been losing his white-knuckle grip he had on the other man. It had been the final straw that tore them apart for good.

This house holds so many memories for him. Some really good ones, and some really fucking bad ones. But that's all they are now. Memories. He's hear now, with Ian, starting something new. Making new memories. Hopefully these ones won't be so fucked up or tragic. But knowing them, it's really a toss up.

"Ian!!" Fiona screeched, loud and sloppy, beer sloshing out of her bottle and spilling down the front of her t shirt. She was wearing a shirt that said 'witches do it better', whatever the hell that meant, and a black pointy hat. She ran up to Ian, dragging him into a bone crushing hug.

Ian went with it, falling into her arms easily, rolling his eyes a bit at Mickey. Mickey sniggered a little, putting his hand up to cover his smile.

"Hey Fi, happy Halloween." Ian laughed.

"Where you been?" She asked, taking a sip of her beer and nodding at Mickey. Mickey nodded
back, no need for pleasantries with Ian's sister. She probably didn't want to be pleasant to Mickey anyway.

Whatever.

"We took Yev trick or treating, like I told you earlier, then we swung by Mick's friends' house for a minute to drop off some stuff."

"Friend of Mickey's?" Fiona balked. "What were you dropping off, guns or drugs?" she laughed maniacally at her own joke, looking over at Vee, who was giggling a little, the bunny ears she was wearing bobbing on her head.

"Jesus, Fi. How drunk are you? Why do you always have to be so rude to Mickey?" Ian asked, exasperated. He hoped this would go better. Fiona had been more receptive to Ian's relationship with Mickey over the past few weeks. She had cut down on her trash talk about Mickey, and she had seemed encouraging on the phone earlier. Ian was having a hard time reconciling the Fiona from this afternoon with the snarky Fiona he's looking at now. She must be pretty wasted.

"Eh, I'm sorry." Fiona said, putting her beer down and walking over to Ian. "It was a stupid joke, I'm drunk. Forgive me?" she put her arms out, and Ian rolled his eyes before falling into his sister arms again. She always got super huggy when she was drunk. He squeezed her for a moment before pulling back and looking into her eyes. "I'm not really the one you need to apologize to."

"Ian, it's no big deal." Mickey waved him off as Kev came in from the kitchen with two beers for him and Ian, and a plate of quesadillas.

Fiona shook her head, letting go of Ian to walk over to Mickey. She put her hands on her hips and leveled Mickey with an appraising look.

Finally, she cracked. Sighing with her whole body, she crossed her arms over her chest and huffed out a breath. "Hey Mickey, sorry about that shit. Old habits die hard, I guess. I didn't mean to insult you."

Mickey waved her off, just like he had with Ian. "It's whatever, Fiona. You don't know me anymore, you're just going off the shit you knew about me before. If this was a few years ago, you'd have been right. But I don't do that shit anymore." he shrugged.

Fiona nodded. She made her way to the couch and flopped down, patting the empty spot next to here. It was a tight squeeze, but Ian and Mickey slipped in between Fiona on the far end, and V on the right.

"Okay. That's good." she said, looking from Mickey to Ian then back again.

"Where's Lip?" Ian asked, desperate to take the focus off of Mickey.

"He's at some lame AA Halloween party." Carl chuckled from his seat on the floor. "Could be here watching Texas Chainsaw with us, but he's out there trying to hook up with hot newcomers."

Fiona reached over and swatted at Carl's head. "Shut the fuck up, he's just trying to do the right thing. He knew we were all gonna be drinking."

"So is he sober again now?" Ian asked, confused.

"Who the fuck knows." Fiona said, sipping her own beer. "He is today, and that's all that matters, right? One day at a time? That's a thing, right?"
"I'm not sure that's what that means." Mickey mumbled into his own beer.

"Oh well, more beer for us." Kev said, flopping down on the couch next to his wife, taking up way too much space, plastering Mickey and Ian together with hardly any room to spare.

"So, how are you guys doing?" Vee asked. "Ian, how's the new apartment?"

"Well, if any of you had taken me up on my offer to come over for dinner, you'd know." Ian said, half joking.

"We meant to, it's just so far. And we're busy." Fiona said, clicking through horror movies on netflix. "Mickey, how about you? Been over to Ian's new place?"

"Uh, yeah. I helped them move in. And I go over once in a while for dinner and movies."

"How's your sister?" Fiona asked, not taking her eyes off the TV.

"Mandy's good. She's got a new job, really likes it. Happy to be living with Ian." Mickey smiled, thinking of his sister. He should probably call her. It's been a while since they hung out.

"That's nice." Fiona replied absentmindedly. What the hell was she doing right now? Ian was confused. Was she actually curious? Or was she setting some kind of trap for Mickey to fall into?

"How about you? What are you doing for work?" she asked coolly.

There it is.
That's what she's aiming at.

Mickey cleared his throat, feeling all eyes in the room on him.

Did all these people really expect him to still be running guns and drugs? Pimping girls? Is that what they thought of him?

"I, um, I work construction." he muttered, fidgeting on the couch. Ian slid his hand under Mickey's and pulled it between the couch cushions. Out of sight of anyone else, but enough to ground Mickey immediately.

"You do?" Fiona couldn't mask the total shock in her voice if she tried. Ian smirked.

"Yeah, one of my old jail buddy's dad runs a successful construction company, took a chance on me. It's working out well. I, uh, I'm good at it, and I like it. So it's not so bad."

"That's good, Mickey, that's real good." Fiona smiled. And she sounded like she actually meant it.

Ian let out a breath he'd been holding since his sister started grilling Mickey. He knows Fiona is just looking out for him. He knows she probably sees Mickey as a tie to Ian's past, a tie to Ian's past mistakes. Someone that could drag him backwards. But if she would just give Mickey a chance, she'd see what Ian does, that Mickey has come a long fucking way, and the only thing he's gonna do is hold Ian up.

Hopefully they can hold each other up.
Ian smiles, hoping that's the end of it.

"How about Yev?" Kevin asks, because of course it can't be that easy.

Fiona finally picks a movie. 'The Fly'. She starts it as Ian gets up to grab them a couple more beers.
"We saw him tonight." Mickey said, gratefully accepting Ian's offered beer. "Svetlana had him dressed up like a fuckin' cop." he laughed.

"No way, really?" Carl laughed from his spot on the floor.

"I know, right? It's like she does that shit to spite me." Mickey laughed.

"Maybe he just wanted to be a cop." Debbie said.

"Maybe." Mickey said. "You guys wanna see?" he asked quietly.

And then Ian watched on, delighted, as Mickey shared the photos they had taken earlier of their excursion around the north side with Yev, and Debbie showed Mickey and Ian pictures of Franny dressed up like a butterfly. Ian really wishes he could have seen that in person.

Once Mickey get started talking about Yev, he has a hard time stopping. Fiona and Vee badger him with questions about his little league and his laser tag birthday party, and all the craziness of trick or treating. Mickey has a small fond smile plastered to his face the whole time, but it slowly disappears once he gets to the end of the story.

"I'm sure as fuck gonna miss him when they move to Springfield." he says.

"Moving? What are you talking about?" Fiona asks.

"The adoption's gonna be final next month. After that, Svet and David are taking Yev and moving to Springfield. He's gonna do some dentist shit down there I guess. Already bought a house, got the kid a fucking puppy." Mickey's mood was taking a serious nose dive. Thinking about losing his son always sucked, but talking about it made it way more real.

"Sorry, man. That's shitty." Kev says, leaning forward and clapping Mickey on the shoulder.

"It's what's best for Yev, I think." Mickey shrugs. "He's gonna have anything he needs or wants. He's gonna be happy and loved. I mean, I love him, but I'd never be able to do half the shit David can do for him. Besides, I'm super fucked up, don't wanna mess the kid up anymore." Mickey forced a laugh, unsure why he'd said so much.

Looking around the room at the sad and stricken faces, he was certain he'd gone too far.

Fuck.

"Well, how about that movie?" Fiona said, after a long, drawn out awkward silence.

"Sounds good." Vee agreed, a little too brightly.

Fiona wasted no time starting up 'The Fly'.

And Mickey's outburst of honesty was forgotten for the time being, as everyone got sucked into the movie and the free flowing drinks.

About half way through the movie, Mickey had to piss like a racehorse. The room had been quiet for
the duration of the movie. 'The Fly' was one of those old flicks that always had all the Gallaghers enraptured. Mickey wasn't sure why. It was an okay movie, but the special effects left a lot to be desired.

He slides out from under the arm Ian had wrapped around him five seconds into the movie and made his way to the downstairs bathroom, empty beer in hand. He dropped the empty in the recycle and hit the can. He pissed quick, sauntering over to the fridge to grab another beer, then made his way out onto the back porch for a smoke. He dropped down on the top step gracelessly, legs spread, leaning back on one elbow. He chugged about a quarter of the beer before placing it on the step next to him and pulling his cigarettes out of his pocket. He had just slipped one between his lips when he heard the back door open and close. He sighed, irritated with the intrusion. He had wanted a little bit of solitude for a moment. It's not like he had anything against the Gallaghers, or get togethers in general, he'd gotten over that shit a long time ago. He didn't give a shit if these people disliked him or not. (although it would be nice if they didn't hate him, it would make it a lot easier to hang out with Ian.) But he didn't like having to constantly defend or explain himself to these people. He didn't owe them anything.

But since he was in their house, as a guest of their brother, he figured he should suck it up and mentally prepare himself for another grueling interrogation. He didn't bother to look over his shoulder, knowing whoever it was would make themselves known soon. He took another gulp of his beer and pull of his cigarette, blowing the smoke into the pitch black night.

"Got another one of those?" Fiona's voice carried from behind him as she dropped down on the step next to him, hugging her knees to her chest. Mickey still didn't look over at her, staring across the yard as he pulled his cigarettes back out and passed one and the lighter over to Fiona. She took it and lit it, passing the lighter back to Mickey and taking a sip off her own beer. They just sat there for a while, ignoring each other while they smoked. Finally, after smoking about three quarters of her cigarette, Fiona broke the silence. Still not looking at Mickey, she spoke into the night.

"I blame myself, sometimes. For Ian's first episode."

It was a shock for Mickey to hear that shit. He thought Fiona would have something to say to him, but this was not what he expected. He stayed silent, waiting for her to continue.

"You know, it wasn't easy, raising all these kids with no help. Lip and Ian did what they could, but they were little, you know? I feel sometimes like I left them to raise themselves while I took care of the little ones."

Mickey nodded, because he couldn't think of anything to say.

"I always thought they could take care of themselves, and they looked out for each other, so there was that."

She took a long pull off her beer, staring sightlessly into the yard.

"When Ian told me he was gay, I thought that would be his biggest obstacle in life. Like, that would be the part of himself that gave him the most shit from the outside world. People can be cruel, you know?"
"Yeah, I know." Mickey said quietly.

Fiona looked over at him for a moment, before setting her eyes back on the yard. "When he started whatever he started with you back then, I thought you were going to destroy him." she chuckled. "He's just so soft and loving and all he wanted was to be cared for. And he fell for you, of all people. And then I thought it would be you that broke him. Not being gay, but being gay for Mickey Milkovich." she laughed lightly again.

Mickey didn't know where the fuck this was going, but he knew he couldn't tell her to fuck off, or run away. He just had to hear her out.

"But out of all the shit that I thought was going to break Ian, the bipolar was never on my radar. I mean, we knew it was a chance one of us would have it. But I never thought it would be Ian. I didn't see it coming, I wasn't there when it started. I'll never forgive myself for that." she shook her head, running a hand through her long hair. "There's a point here, I promise." she said, taking one last drag off her cigarette before putting it out on the porch step and tossing the butt into the yard.

She finally looked over at Mickey, staring deep into his eyes.

"I have been worried about Ian for a long time. Being gay, being bipolar, being in love with you. There was just so much chaos in his life. I just want him safe and happy. I didn't think he could have that with you." she looked away again, this time playing with her fingers in her lap.

Mickey shook his head. "You're probably right, if we're talking about me before prison. I was in no position to give Ian the support he needed back then. I was grasping at straws. It was fucking scary, but I couldn't just give up on him. I had to try. I wanted to try."

"See, that's what I never saw back then. I thought you were trying to undermine me, take Ian away from the family. But you were floundering, just like we were. Trying to hold him close while he was pulling away. We all saw each other as the enemy, when we were all supposed to be fighting the same thing. The fucking disease. Now that Ian's got his shit under control, he was doing better. But he was never really happy." Fiona turned on the step and locked eyes with Mickey. "With any of those other guys or on his own, he was okay, but when he's with you, it's like he's, I don't know, more present. More alive. I can't really explain it. All I know is that you make him happy in a way nothing else can. And even if you didn't know what the hell you were doing, you never gave up on him, and you never abandoned him."

Mickey nodded again, struck dumb by Fiona's words.

"I know I've kinda been a bitch since you started coming around again, and I'm sorry. I was hurt because Ian cut us out of his life for a while. But I know you had nothing to do with that. That was all his ex. It was just easy for me to fall into that old dynamic with you, and that's not right. And if Ian stays happy and healthy with you around, then that's good enough for me. I don't think I have to warn you not to hurt him." she smiled.

"Nah, been there, done that. Not going back." Mickey replied. He took a sip of his own beer and stood up, ready to get back to the movie, ready to get back to Ian.

"So, we're cool?" Fiona asked, standing up too.

Mickey opened the door for her and she stepped inside.

"Sure, Fiona. We're cool." Mickey replied.

"Cool. I, uh, saved you some snickers bars from trick or treating." she smirked.
"Oh, we're definitely cool now." Mickey laughed, following her inside.

The movie was winding down, and people were starting to get restless. Debbie had gone upstairs to check on Frannie, Carl had taken off after getting a text, hauling ass out the door while grabbing a coat off the hook and throwing a wave over his shoulder.

When the credits started to roll, Fiona got up and switched the light back on, grabbing empty beer bottles with both hands and stepping into the kitchen. Kev and Vee scooped their sleeping daughters off the floor, gathering their things up to head home for the night.

Mickey shifted on the couch and looked down at Ian. He was passed the fuck out, curled up into Mickey's side. His face was soft and relaxed. He looked peaceful.
Mickey hated to wake him, but he was kind of pinned to the couch. He reluctantly moved, shaking Ian a little with his free hand.

"Gallagher, c'mon man. My arm's asleep." Mickey mumbled, smiling softly. It wasn't even that late. It was barely after ten.

Ian muttered something in his sleep, shifting to the side, curling further into Mickey's side. He was leaning his whole body on Mickey's sleeping arm now. The limb felt dead. Mickey needed to get Ian off of him.

"Come on, Ian. Wake up, man." Mickey shook him harder, pushing him back and forth with his free hand. The motion waking up Mickey's arm slightly. Pins and needs shot from his shoulder down to his fingertips. "Fuck." he winced. He hated that feeling.

"Mick?" Ian mumbled. He slowly opened his eyes, blinking sporadically.

"Hey." Mickey said dumbly. He ran a hand through Ian's hair, uncaring as to who was watching.

And someone was watching.

Fiona was standing by the front door, seeing Kev and Vee out for the evening. She kissed both little girls and hugged Kev and Vee, all the while keeping an eye on Mickey and her brother.
Mickey was being so tender with Ian. It's not the first time Fiona's seen Mickey's soft side, but it still manages to surprise her that he lets it show so easily now.

It reminds her of when Ian first got sick. Mickey wouldn't leave his side. When Fiona had to go to work at the diner, Mickey would stay with Ian at the house all day. He was the only one who could get Ian to eat. He was the one that stripped Ian down and lugged him into the shower, jumping in with him and washing him when he was too low to do it himself. One day, she came home from work and found him in the boys' bedroom, chain smoking and watching Ian sleep.

At the time, Fiona had been angry, that Mickey could get through to Ian when neither she or Lip could. She felt left out of the loop, and that had scared her. She was supposed to be the one to take care of him. She was the one who was supposed to be there for him. It made her sad and uncomfortable to watch someone else do it.

But now, looking back on it, she's just happy Ian had someone taking care of him. Who knows what
could have happened if Mickey hadn't been there.

"What time is it?" Ian asks, sitting up and rubbing his eyes with the heels of his hands.

"About 10:30, kiddo." Fiona says, giving both boys a fond smile.

Ian yawns, stretching out on the couch, crowding Mickey with his long legs.

Mickey laughs, finally standing up and stretching himself. "You still wanna come over? Or you gonna stay here?" he asks.

Mickey wants Ian to come home with him. If he's being honest with himself, he wants Ian around him all the time. But now's not really the time for all that sappy shit.

"Hell yeah." Ian smiles brightly, no longer tired. "I mean, if you still want me to." he shrugs, trying to play it cool.

Mickey scoffs, pushing Ian away with a flat palm to his face. Ian chuckles, pushing back.

Fiona huffs out a laugh, walking behind the couch and resting her hand on the top of Ian's head. "You guys are damn adorable. Get the hell outta here so I can lock up." she pushes Ian's head away and he blushes.

The boys get up and gather their things from the coffee table. Mickey pockets his cigarettes and his phone, suddenly remembering he's supposed to call Lauren and Javier before the night is over.

It's not too late, he decides. He'll do it once they get home.

Fiona sees them out, standing with one hand on the door while she hugs her brother with her free hand. "Thanks for coming. It was really good to see you." she says, holding her brother tightly with her one free arm.

"Thanks for having us, Fi, I had a really nice time. It was great to see everyone." Ian said, finally pulling back.


Mickey nods, "Sure. Was fun."

Fiona smiles one last time at them before they head down the stairs and into the night.

The walk to Mickey's house from Ian's doesn't take long. It's a journey they've taken together countless times over the years. It feels like no time has passed at all as they make their way through the south side. Like none of that shit that tore them apart happened at all. It's just Ian and Mickey wandering through the neighborhood, heading somewhere where they can finally be alone.

Mickey shoves his hands in the pockets of his jacket, trying to stave off the chill in the air. The later it gets, the more the wind whips through the streets, scattering dead leaves and garbage around their feet.

Ian pulls the hood of his jacket over his head, stealing a glance at Mickey, who's already looking at him. Both boys blush and look away.

God, they're idiots. Mickey smiles. He kinda likes being stupid with Ian.
Always has.

They bound up the creaky steps of the Milkovich house, and Mickey almost forgets he has to unlock it, pushing on the door. He's momentarily stymied, until he remembers his keys.

"Still can't believe we lock this shit hole now." he laughs.

"Not that much of a shit hole anymore, though, is it?" Ian says, nudging Mickey with his shoulder.

"Guess not." Mickey says, finally opening the door and stepping inside, Ian right behind him.

"Igg? Tess?" he calls into the dark house. He gets no response.

Ian follows Mickey deeper into the house, dropping down on the couch with a thud as Mickey searches for his brother and Tessa.

"Not here." he says, coming back down the hallway.

"Maybe she dragged him to some crazy Halloween party." Ian says, sitting forward and slipping his jacket off, draping it over the back of the couch.

"Maybe. That where Mandy is tonight?" Mickey asks, wandering into the kitchen and coming back with two beers.

Ian takes one, popping the cap and dropping it on the coffee table. "Yeah, she went to some fancy party at a bar on the north side. She's with her new girlfriend. I mean, I don't know if they're exclusive or whatever. Just been hanging out a lot." Ian rambled.

"You mean that girl from her work? Marcy?" Mickey asks, dropping down on the couch next to Ian and draping his legs over his lap.

"I think her name is Macy, like the store? But yeah, her." Ian nods, running a hand up Mickey's calf while sipping his beer in his other hand.

"Gotta say, I didn't really see all that coming." Mickey laughed, turning the TV on. One of the million 'Nightmare on Elm Street' movies playing on a cable network.

"What? Mandy hooking up with a chick? I mean, she said she'd done it before..." Ian trailed off, curling a hand around Mickey's ankle.

"Yeah, but that was normal girl shit. Don't they all fuck with other girls?" Mickey asked.

"I don't think so. I think that's just something you picked up while you were trying to turn yourself straight with girl on girl porn." Ian laughed.

Mickey swatted at him with the back of his hand. "Fuck off. That shit was just a cover."

"Yeah, okay. But I'm just trying to tell you, that's not how girls usually are. They don't just suddenly turn gay or bisexual. It has to be there already."

"What are the odds, Terry's got two rainbow kids." Mickey cackled. "Fucker must be rolling in his grave."

"Good." Ian said. "I hope he's seeing all this shit. Now there isn't a fucking thing he can do about it." Ian was surprised by the heat in his voice. But Mickey didn't seem to be, he just nodded, staring off into space for a moment before turning to Ian.
"I just want her to be happy." he said quietly. Ian almost didn't hear it.

He looked over at Mickey, a smile on his face. "Yeah, me too."

"And if some chick named after a department store can do that, then so fucking be it."

They clinked their beers together at that, smiling at each other.

"Ah, fuck." Mickey said, grabbing his phone and a cigarette before setting back on the couch next to Ian. He shuffled closer, so they were almost on top of each other, and muted the TV.

"What are you doing?" Ian laughed, moving to shuffle over, but Mickey stopped him with a hand on his thigh.

"Don't move." he said, unlocking his phone and going to his photo gallery. Ian watched on as he pulled up all the pictures they'd taken tonight while they were trick or treating with Yevgeny and send them off to a number Ian didn't recognize.

After the pictures had been sent, he opened up his video chat and hit send on a contact photo of a bunch of sea shells.

"Mick, what the fuck are you doing?" Ian asked, even as the phone was ringing.

It only took a couple rings before the call connected.

Ian looked up into the phone screen Mickey was now holding in front of both of their faces.

It was Javier.

Okay....

"Mickey! Hola. Dónde has estado?"

Mickey smiled fondly at Javier on the phone, before shooting a look to Ian and turning back to the phone.

"Alrededor. He estado muy ocupado." Mickey replied, stunning Ian. It made sense to Ian that Mickey would have learned some spanish while he was in Mexico, but he'd never really heard him carry on a conversation before."

"I can see that." Javier smirked, eyeing Ian.

Ian looked from Javier to Mickey, wondering what the hell they were saying about him.

"Están juntos ahora? Tú y el diablo rojo?" Javier asked, his smile lighting up his whole face.

"Working on it." Mickey said, returning his smile and laying his free hand on Ian's thigh.

"Hola, Ian. How are you?" Javier asked.

"Good, Javier, thank you." Ian said, giving the man a smile of his own. Ian did like Javier. From the little time they had spent together on his visit to the states, Ian could tell he was nice, and he was a good friend to Mickey.

Besides, it was easier to like Javier, since he was so far away. Easier to let his jealousy go when the perceived threat was out of the country.
Ian knew it wasn't fair to think that way, but he couldn't help it. All these men in Mickey's life were constantly making Ian feel like he had to earn Mickey's attention. It was a shitty feeling, and probably a stupid way to think, but Ian can't help the way he feels.

"Where's Lauren?" Mickey asks, pulling a drag off his cigarette.

"I'm right here, Mick." Lauren pops out of nowhere and sits on Javier's lap, taking up more than half the screen with her face.

"Hey L." Mickey says. His voice is dripping with love and affection for these two people. Ian likes the idea of Mickey having some many people to love in his life.

And they obviously love him back.

"Did you get the pictures?" Mickey asked, still running his hand up and down Ian's leg. It almost seemed like he forgot he was doing it.

"We did." Lauren said, laughing. "Your son was a cop for Halloween?"

"Don't remind me." Mickey groaned. "That was his fucking mother's idea. Told me she's trying to make sure he doesn't turn out like me."

"That's a dumb idea." Javier said bitterly. "You are one of the best men I know."

"Damn right." Lauren agreed hotly.

Mickey could always count on them to have his back. Even if he thought they were wrong this time.

"I don't know about all that." Mickey said, letting go of Ian's leg to rub his eyebrows with two fingers.

"What do you think, Ian?" Javier asked. "I think our Mickey values your opinion the most."

Ian blushed, looking at Lauren and Javier's expectant faces.

He then looked over at Mickey, grabbing his hand that was still nervously toying with his face and clutching it with his fingers.

"I think you're amazing, Mick. And we are all lucky to have you in our lives."

"Here, here." Javier cheers, toasting Lauren with some bottles they are drinking. "I'll drink to that." Lauren adds on, as they sip on their drinks.

"Okay, okay, enough of that shit." Mickey laughed.

"So, tell us all about it. C'mon, I've never been trick or treating." Javier pleaded.

So Ian and Mickey fell into easy conversation with Lauren and Javier. They told them about Jack and Yevgeny, about the party at the Gallagher house, about stupid little things they had been doing together.

The conversation flowed smoothly, and Ian found himself liking Mickey's friends more and more. This was the most he'd ever spoken to them, and he could see now why Mickey loved them so much.

They were funny and kind, and they really listened. Javier asking Ian questions about his work and
his family. Things he had only mentioned in passing during their visit, Javier had remembered enough to comment on.

Mickey was lucky to have friends like this.

And now, Ian supposes, he's lucky to have them too, even if only by proxy for the time being.

"Okay, guys, we're gonna go. We had a long fucking day." Mickey laughed.

"You will call again soon." Javier said. He did not state it as a question.

"Of course." Mickey replied easily, rolling his eyes at Ian, who smirked. "I call you guys all the time."

"Keep us updated on Jack." Lauren said, peaking her head around Javier, who was taking up most of the screen. "And that stuff with Yev."

Mickey cleared his throat, feeling shitty again all of the sudden. "Yeah, sure. Bye guys. Te amo."

"Te amo." Mickey friends replied in unison. Lauren blew some kisses while Javier waved enthusiastically, and the call was ended.

"You have some amazing friend, Mick." Ian smiled. He put his hand on Mickey's thigh, rubbing small circles there while he stared into his eyes.

"Yeah." Mickey smiled back. "I do." He wrapped his hand around Ian's where it sat on his thigh. "And you do too, now. Lauren and Javier love your ginger ass. They never stop talking about you. Always asking me when I'm gonna bring you down for a visit. They're fucking nuts."

"I'd love to go to Mexico with you." Ian said without much thought.

"That's not what you said last time." Mickey muttered, sliding Ian's hand of his leg and sitting forward to grab his beer again.

"Mick, come on." Ian sighed.

"Yeah, okay. Sorry, that was shitty." Mickey conceded. "We talked about that shit. It's done. I, uh, it just still stings a little." he rubbed his lip with his fingers.

"I get it. And I'll never stop being sorry about how shit went down back then. I have been sorry since the moment I watched you drive away." Ian said, voice trembling.

He didn't want to do this again tonight. Rehash all their old shit.

But all it took was one odd word from Mickey and Ian was on the defense again, pleading his case and begging forgiveness.

"I know." Mickey sighed. "I'm sorry too. For a lot of shit."

Ian nodded, gulping down some of his beer before setting it on the coffee table. He didn't want to get too drunk, and he'd already had a few at Fiona's.

"I had fun tonight." he said, gazing over at Mickey lounging a few feet from him. He had his feet up on the coffee table, hands cradling his beer in his lap, head laid back on the couch cushions.

He looked good.
Really good.

The sweatshirt he'd been wearing all day was hanging unzipped on his shoulders, over a faded black Led Zeppelin t-shirt. Ian's positive he's had that shirt the whole time they've known each other.

"I did too. Thanks for coming. I don't know how I would have handled shit with Svetlana if I had to do it alone." Mickey huffed out a laugh. "I'm not ashamed to say she still scares the shit out of me, all these years later."

"Yeah, she's still pretty fucking intimidating. Wonder how David handles it." Ian mused.

"Russian stoicism." Mickey muttered, causing them both to erupt into laughter.

"Yev had fun, though." Mickey said wistfully. "Can't believe she dressed him up as a cop. It's gotta be some kind of sacrilege, dressing up a Milkovich as a pig." he chuckled.

"He was cute." Ian laughed. "Looks just like you." Ian's eyes were shining, reliving the memory of walking down the street hand in hand with Mickey and Yevgeny. In another life, that could have been them. A happy family, the three of them.

"He's a good kid." Mickey said, looking away.

"You're still gonna see him, Mick." Ian said, reading Mickey's mood. "He'll always be your son, and you will always be in his life."

"I dunno. I mean, it's not really up to me." Mickey said, looking over at Ian.

"It's gonna be okay, Mick." Ian said. He couldn't stop himself when he saw the stricken look on Mickey's face. He pulled him to his chest and wrapped his arms around him tightly.

"Whatever happens, you're not gonna have to go through it alone." Ian whispered into Mickey's hair.

Mickey let out a stuttered sigh, relaxing fully into Ian's embrace.

It felt so good. So natural. Like he fucking belonged there, wrapped up in Ian. He leaned his head back, locking eyes with Ian. His eyes were wet with emotion, and so were Ian's. It had been a long, emotionally charged day, and it all of it was culminating in this moment, on this couch, in this embrace.

Ian's eyes darted down to Mickey's lips, a strong swirl of energy whirling in his stomach.

He didn't think, he just did it.

He surged forward and kissed Mickey, pulling him closer, pressing his lips against Mickey's. It was a little sloppy, due to the booze coursing through his system, but it felt perfect. Anything with Mickey always felt perfect.

Mickey growled low in his throat, getting carried away already. He pressed his body forward, falling deeper into Ian's arms.

Ian's arms tightened around Mickey, pulling him up into his lap.

Mickey sighed, moving with Ian. He smiled softly, snaking his tongue into Ian's waiting mouth. With a knee on either side of Ian's hips, Mickey deepened the kiss. Tipping his head to the side to get a better angle, Mickey surged forward, dipping his tongue deeper into Ian's mouth.

Ian tightened his arms around Mickey's waist, pulling him down harder onto his lap, grinding their bodies together, his hard cock pressing up against Mickey's ass.

Mickey gasped, breaking the kiss to throw his head back. "Fuck, Ian." he moaned.
Ian took the loss of Mickey's lips in stride, taking the opportunity to latch onto his neck. He sucked and lapped at the exposed skin, biting softly before going back for more. Ian was losing control. It all felt so good, so raw and hot. He was so fucking hard.

He was preoccupied with sucking a dark hickey onto Mickey's collar bone when Mickey shifted away. He pulled his head out of Mickey's neck to look into the man's eyes.

"How you doin'?" Mickey asked, still straddling Ian's lap. He can feel Ian's raging hard on resting heavy between his ass cheeks. He wants him so bad, his own dick painfully swollen in his pants. But none of that matters if Ian's about to have a panic attack.

Ian smiled softly, nodding his head slowly. "I'm good, Mick." he slid his hands up and down Mickey's back before settling both palms on his ass, pulling him back and forth on his lap. "So fucking good. Thank you for checking in with me, but I want this."

Mickey's eyes widened as he pulled back a little more to look straight in Ian's eyes.

"You mean...."

Ian nodded again, groping Mickey's ass harder, pulling his cheeks apart roughly. "You want to? You want me to fuck you?" his voice was low and rough with arousal.

Mickey groaned, pressing his forehead to Ian's. "Yeah, Ian. I do."

They just stared at each other for a moment, both panting hard. Mickey's eyes roamed over Ian's face, just soaking him in. He's wanted this for so long. He's missed Ian so much.

Ian smiled, a blush creeping up his neck. Why the fuck was he getting shy now? It's Mickey for fuck's sake.

"Okay, yeah." Ian nodded, smiling like a maniac. "Bedroom." he said, standing up, Mickey still in his arms.

"Put me down, jackass. I'm not some chick." Mickey laughed, wrapping his legs around Ian's waist, even as he complained.

"You love it." Ian laughed, moving through the room easily.

Mickey chuckled, burying his face in Ian's neck so he couldn't see him blushing.

Ian knelt on the bed, crawling to hover over Mickey. He leaned down and kissed him again, wasting no time slipping his tongue into his mouth.

Mickey kissed back eagerly. Their tongues pushing against each other, dragging and pulling. All lips and teeth. It was sloppy and uncoordinated. And fucking perfect. Mickey groaned again, pulling Ian down on top of him with both hands on his shoulder blades.

Ian ground down against him, pushing his hips down into Mickey's pelvis.

"Fucking hell." Mickey muttered, pushing Ian back a little. Ian looked down at him curiously.

"Clothes." Mickey muttered, sitting up. "Take your fucking clothes off."
Ian nodded again. He leaned back, reaching behind him with one hand to pull his shirt off. He tossed it off the edge of the bed. Mickey smiled, running a hand down Ian's newly exposed chest.

"Still so fucking perfect." he murmured.

Ian laughed lightly, gripping the hem of Mickey's t-shirt with both hands and pulling it up. Mickey raised his arms to help and soon his naked chest was exposed too.
Ian sighed, crowding Mickey again, peppering kisses up and down his chest. He paid special attention to Mickey's tattoo. Even though the cover up made him feel guilty and sad for how he treated Mickey in the past, the fact that he was here now, allowed to have this moment, made his own heart skip a beat.

"You're fucking gorgeous." Ian said, reluctantly sliding out of Mickey's grip so he could stand and take his pants off.
As he was undoing his belt and kicking his pants off, Mickey leaned back and undid his own jeans, pulling them down and kicking them off.
Ian eyed Mickey on the bed, laying there in his underwear, chest heaving as he kept his eyes locked on Ian as he loomed at the end of the bed.

"C'mon, man." Mickey whined, kicking at Ian with a bare foot.
Ian laughed, finally stripping off his boxers before climbing back onto the bed.
Mickey couldn't take his eyes off Ian's dick. It was swollen and red at the tip and hard as a fucking rock. Mickey's mouth actually watered at the sight. He's missed Ian's dick almost as much as he missed the man himself.

Mickey sat up straight as Ian kneeled on the bed again. Ian ran a hand through Mickey's hair as the other man got on his knees as well. Ian moved to embrace Mickey again, but Mickey only smirked, planting both hands on Ian's chest and pushing his over backwards.
Ian landed on the mattress with a surprised huff, arms splayed out above his head.

"What the fuck, Mick?" Ian laughed.
Mickey only smirked again, running his hands down Ian's chest to his stomach, landing on his hips. He squeezed lightly before taking Ian's throbbing erection in his hand.

"I've been fantasizing about sucking this dick for years, Ian." Mickey said, locking eyes with Ian as he got comfortable crouched over Ian's waist. "Missed this cock."
He punctuated his last sentence with a long, slow lick up the underside of Ian's dick.

"Fuck. Shit." Ian choked out. Mickey had hardly done anything, and he was already so keyed up.

"Like that?" Mickey asked, breathless.
Ian looked down and nodded, trying to keep his eyes on Mickey. He had to see this. Had to know it was real.
Mickey smiled, a dark, predatory grin, and sank down on Ian's dick without further preamble. He wrapped his lips around the head, sucking lightly before sinking his head down as far as he could go.
Ian arched off the bed as Mickey swallowed him down. He did his best not to surge up into the wet warmth, but it was hard.
Mickey bobbed his head, reveling in the weight on his tongue. Ian filled him up in all the best ways. Laying heavy is his mouth, it was fucking perfection.

Mickey slowly sucked Ian off, jerking what he couldn't fit in his mouth with a tight fist. He pulled back, swirling his tongue around the head before slipping back down as far as he could go. Ian punched out a harsh breath as his dick hit the back of Mickey's throat. He expected Mickey to back off, but he didn't. He pushed further, taking Ian all the way down his throat.

"Fucking hell, Mick." Ian groaned as Mickey swallowed around his length.

Mickey pulled off slightly, running his tongue along the underside of Ian's dick again. He watched through heavy eyelids as Ian writhed above him. He was so fucking hot when he was turned on like this. Getting Ian off got Mickey harder than anything else in the world.

Part of Mickey wanted to rush this, get to the good part, the part he's been craving for years: Ian inside of him. But another, more powerful part wanted to drag this out as long as possible, really feel every second of their reunion. He wanted to commit it all to memory, every pass of fingers, every swipe of tongue, every twitching muscle and moan. He wanted to keep this moment forever.

When did he become such a fucking sap?

He shook his head, pulling himself back into the moment as he sat up on his haunches, letting Ian fall out of his mouth. Ian growled and sat up, grabbing Mickey around his middle and tossing him onto his back on the mattress.

Mickey laughed brightly, his whole face glowing. It made Ian's heart stop, seeing him so happy. Ian smiled down at him, sitting back a little as he ran his hands down Mickey's sides and curled his fingers around the waistband of Mickey's boxers. He kept his eyes on Mickey's face as he started tugging them down. Mickey lifted his hips to help and Ian slid the material down his legs and tossed them off the side of the bed.

"Fucking gorgeous." Ian sighed.


"What? You are. So fucking hot." Ian said it so seriously, so sure. It made Mickey's heart swell.

"Not so bad yourself." Mickey said, blushing harder.

Ian smiled fondly, leaning in for a kiss. Mickey accepted him readily. They made out passionately, kissing and biting their way into each other's mouths.

"Lube?" Ian asked breathlessly, pulling back just far enough to lean his forehead against Mickey's, his hand rubbing up and down his thigh.

"Drawer. Same drawer as always." Mickey tilted his head backwards to look at his nightstand. Ian followed his eyes to the single drawer.

"It's so cute that you still keep your lube in the same drawer." Ian chuckled. "Hope it's not the same bottle, that shit will be expired for sure."

"Shut the fuck up." Mickey laughed. "Let's do this, while we're fucking young please."

"So pushy." Ian chided, pushing up on his elbow so he could reach a hand out and open the drawer. He poked around blindly for a minute before his hand clasped around his target. He raised it up high
over his head. "Victory!" he exclaimed.

"Fucking dork." Mickey laughed, taking the bottle from Ian's hand and pulling his head back down for another kiss.

Ian let it happen for a moment before pulling away again. "You tell me to get on with it, but you keep distracting me with your amazing mouth. Let me prep you, Mick, or else I'm gonna come before I even get in you. And then I'd die. I can't not fuck you." Ian practically whined.

Mickey laughed lightly, amazed how easy and natural this felt, even after all this time. Nothing was awkward or stilted. It was like no time had passed at all. It was amazing.

And it was about to get a hell of a lot better.

"Then get to it, firecrotch." Mickey said, licking his lips. He gave Ian a heated glance that put an end to any and all joking.

Ian smirked devilishly, leaning up on his elbow again while he popped the top of the lube with one hand. Mickey took the bottle from him and squirted a generous amount onto Ian's fingers before dropping the bottle on the bed beside his head.

Ian dropped his head into the crook of Mickey's neck while his lubed up hand made it's way between Mickey's spread legs.

Mickey's whole body was trembling in anticipation. He'd been with a lot of guys since the last time he'd slept with Ian, and he'd never felt this level of anticipation before or since him.

Ian was the only person who ever did this to him.

Ian buried his face in Mickey's neck, sucking on the tendon there, while his lubed up fingers traced his hole. Mickey tilted his head back, sighing. He sucked in a deep breath just as Ian pushed the first finger past his rim.

"Holy hell." Mickey groaned as Ian slowly fingered him. "Jesus Ian."

Ian smiled against Mickey's neck as he continued to prep him slowly. He pushed one finger in and out, all the while lapping and sucking Mickey's neck. When he felt the muscle give a little, he added a second.

Ian was falling apart. Every moan and sigh that fell from Mickey's lips went straight to his dick. He was painfully hard, pulsating against Mickey's thigh. He humped Mickey's thigh shamelessly while pumping his fingers in and out of his body. He added a third finger, twisting his wrist a little.

"Shit, fuck. Right there, Ian. God, god." Mickey cried out, his whole body spasming as Ian pegged his prostate.

Ian chuckled, twisting his wrist again, repeating the action. Mickey screamed loud, clamping a hand over his mouth a moment to late.

Ian beamed, pride swelling in his chest. He loved making Mickey fall apart like this. It gave him a rush he'd never experienced in any other relationship. Being with Mickey was next level hot. Ian felt like he was on the cusp of coming since their first kiss on the couch.

"Okay, okay." Mickey breathed. "I'm good. Get in me."

Ian nodded. He got up and crawled between Mickey's spread legs, but paused right before gripping his dick. He was so ready, so fucking hard, but he had to ask....
"Mick." Ian sighed, getting Mickey's attention. Mickey opened his eyes, looking up at Ian looming over him, hand still firmly wrapped around his raging erection.

"Huh? What?"

"I have a condom in my wallet." Ian said, watching Mickey's reaction closely.

Mickey narrowed his eyes, but said nothing.

"I'm clean." Ian stammered. "Got tested at the hospital after that night with Brian. I just wanted to be sure..." Ian wanted to look away, wanted to take it back, but he didn't. He maintained eye contact and waited.

"I'm clean too, Ian." Mickey said, nodding. He knew why Ian was asking, and he tried not to let the question affect the mood. "I got tested after Jack O.D.'d. I'm good, I promise. There, uh, hasn't been anyone since."

Ian smiled, relieved. He was ready to fucking drop this shit, and get back to the task at hand.

"Good." he muttered. He grabbed his lubed up dick and stroked it a few times, just watching Mickey.

He had his head tipped back slightly, biting his lip hard as he stared at Ian, his eyes clouded with lust, pupils blown wide. There is a thin sheen of sweat covering his whole body. His chest was heaving and all the veins in his neck were standing out. Ian could see his pulse throbbing there.

So fucking hot.

A growl rumbled out of Ian's throat. He grabbed Mickey under his thigh and hitched it up over his hip. Ian sighed, arching his back and wrapping his other leg around Ian's lower back. Ian leaned forward, capturing Mickey's lips in a heated kiss, just as he breached his rim. He pushed forward slowly, trying to commit the feeling to memory. Mickey's body giving way, inch by inch, welcoming Ian in again, after all this time.

He pulled back slightly before pushing in more, a little harder this time. Push, pull, push, pull. Until he pulled out half way, and finally sank completely into Mickey's body. Once his balls were resting against Mickey's ass, he just paused. He tugged his head into Mickey's neck, feeling him clenching around him. Desperate to keep his damn cool, Ian took a deep breath.

"Oh my god." Mickey breathed, sounding equally wrecked. "Fucking move, for the love of god."

Ian grinned, picking his head up and kissing Mickey hard, as he started to move his hips rhythmically. Their tongues tangled outside their mouths in some crazy porno kiss, while Ian pulsed inside Mickey.

Mickey's whole body was on fire. Fucking Ian was always an out of body experience, but this was a whole new world. He scratched his hands down Ian's back, surely leaving marks as he bucked his hips up, desperate to get Ian deeper.

Ian was a man possessed, pounding Mickey's ass like it was the last fuck they'd ever have. What started out as soft and playful had turned a corner into hard and desperate.

Ian grabbed Mickey's thigh, hitching it up even higher on his hip, getting a better angle to go even deeper. He wanted Mickey to feel it all. Everything Ian felt but couldn't articulate. He needed Mickey to KNOW.
On a particularly hard thrust, Mickey keened, pulling away from Ian to throw his head back against the pillows. "Jesus fucking christ." he moaned.

Ian could feel his orgasm building with every powerful thrust into that tight heat. He wasn't going to last much longer. He had to make Mickey come. Like now.

"Fuck, Mick. So good. So fucking tight for me." Ian moaned, reaching down between their writhing bodies to get a grip on Mickey's neglected cock. It was hot and slippery with precome. He wrapped a sure hand around it and started stroking it, trying to keep in time with his thrusts, that were growing more and more erratic.

"God fucking damn it." Mickey cried out, his body bowing off the bed. He went completely rigid as he spilled all over Ian's hand and his chest.

"So hot, Mick. Christ." Ian moaned, milking Mickey until there was nothing left. Mickey shuddered with oversensitivity, but didn't let Ian pull out. Instead he pulled him closer with a hand around the back of his neck, and another on the small of his back. He held Ian against his body, grinding on him. He rested their heads together, his mouth right by Ian's ear, so he could whisper to him, while peppering his face and neck with feather-light kisses.

"C'mon Ian, come in me. Fill me up. Fucking want it."

That was it for Ian. He pumped his hips twice more before stilling deep inside Mickey. He came hard, his vision blacking out while he gripped behind Mickey's shoulder, shaking through his own orgasm.

The room was silent for a long time after that, save for Ian's panting and Mickey's harsh breathing.

After a while, Ian pulled out, causing Mickey to wince. He laid down on the bed next to Mickey, resting his head on a bent arm. He didn't look over at the other man yet, wanting to give him a moment to himself after such an intense encounter.

Mickey lay on the bed, staring at the ceiling. There it was. It was done. He'd fucked Ian.

Everything had changed.

He inhaled deeply, trying to stave off the anxiety that was creeping it's way into his chest.

Ian must be freaking out too... That's much more important.

Mickey sat up, resting his body weight on a bent arm as he looked down at Ian, who was still laying on his back, staring at the ceiling.

"So. That happened." Mickey said stupidly.

Ian huffed out a laugh, still not looking at Mickey.

"Yeah, Mick, it did."

"How are you feeling?" Mickey wondered, worried that they'd pushed too far, and Ian would regret it.

But Ian wasn't feeling that way at all.

He finally locked eyes with Mickey, smiling fondly. "I'm feeling pretty incredible, Mick." he laughed.
Mickey smiled down at him, settling down on the bed and cuddling close to Ian. He reached over and shut off the lamp, plunging them into darkness. After a moment, Ian couldn’t contain himself anymore.

"Does this mean we're, like, together now?" Ian asked. He didn't want to ruin the night, but he had to know.

"Of course it does." Mickey replied without hesitation. Of course he was scared to take yet another chance on Ian. But he really didn't have a choice. He couldn't stay away. He didn't want to. Ian hummed, reaching out with both hands to pull Mickey flush against his chest.

Mickey barked out a laugh, but came easily, resting his head on Ian's torso.

"This is it, Mick." Ian murmured, running a hand through his dark hair. "You and me. No one else. Forever."

Mickey smiled, burrowing his face into Ian's chest, just reveling in the words he's been waiting to hear for years.

"Okay, Gallagher. Whatever you say." he muttered.

Ian laughed lightly, placing a kiss on the top of Mickey's head.

They settled into each other, totally depleted after such a long and arduous day.

"Happy Halloween, Mick." Ian said into the darkness.

"Shut the fuck up and go to sleep." Mickey said gruffly. But he soothed the words with a tender kiss.

Ian smiled, pushing his tongue against Mickey's for a moment before pulling back and resting his head on the pillow.

He fell asleep peacefully that night, wrapped up in Mickey. For the first time in a long time, neither of them were haunted by ghosts of the past.

Chapter End Notes

some spanish, courtesy of google translate:

Dónde has estado? - where have you been?

Alrededor. He estado muy ocupado - Around. I have been really busy

Están juntos ahora? Tú y el diablo rojo - Are you together now? You and the red devil?
Mickey was not in the mood for this shit this morning. He had one more day to go before his long weekend, and he wasn't going to let his lazy asshole brother fuck it up for him.

"Iggy! Get the fuck up! Mark will be here in twenty minutes, and I am not gonna cover for your ass again. I am LEAVING!!" Mickey screamed, kicking his brother's bed with all the force he could muster.

He was grateful Tessa hadn't been home last night. He always felt like a dick when he had to pull this shit when she was sleeping next to Iggy. But she had spent the night at her parents house to help her mom get ready for Thanksgiving the following day.

November had been quite a month for Mickey.

The most pressing issue for him had been Yevgeny's upcoming adoption. The hearing was scheduled for the first week of December, having been pushed back a couple weeks for reasons Mickey's unaware of. He's grateful for the reprieve, however short. He's still trying to get used to the idea.

Mickey had had a meeting with Svetlana and David earlier in the month. Well, with them and their lawyer. Mickey had been surprised when Svetlana called to ask him to meet them. He remembered when David promised to work out some kind of visitation for Mickey, but he hadn't really put too much weight on that shit. He didn't want to get all excited over something that would most likely not happen.

But David had shocked him by following through.

And that's how Mickey had found himself in a stuffy office building, sitting in a conference room in a dress shirt and tie he'd borrowed from Ian, signing his 'shared custody agreement' in front of David's lawyer.

It was a sweet deal, as far as Mickey was concerned, more than he'd expected, which was nothing.

Yevgeny would live with Svetlana and David full time. Mickey would get visitation. A week around Christmas, but not on the actual holiday. He'd get him for a week around his birthday, but not on the actual day. (Svetlana said he was still welcome to come down to Springfield for his birthday party, which Mickey appreciated.) Then he got two whole weeks in the summer, which was more than he'd thought Svetlana would ever give him.

There were contingencies, though. Mickey had to stay out of trouble, and not go back to jail. If he ever found himself incarcerated again, he'd rescind all his rights to Yevgeny, and all visitations would cease. If Mickey kept up his end of the bargain, and could continue to provide Yevgeny with a stable home when he visited, Svetlana and David were open to giving Mickey even more time.

The meeting went a lot better than Mickey had dared to hope.
Now all he had to do was survive the actual adoption hearing, and he would be okay.

Iggy groaned, pulling his blankets over his head.

"Nuh-uh, no no no." Mickey said, angrily pulling Iggy's blankets off and throwing them on the floor.

"Asshole, Matt got you this job as a fucking favor. Get your ass up now or I'm setting you on fire."

Iggy groaned again, finally prying his eyes open to glare at his brother. "What the fuck, Mick. I got like 20 more minutes."

"No you don't, asshole. Mark will be here in twenty minutes. You need to be up and ready, sitting on the fucking porch in twenty minutes. Get. The. Fuck. Up." Mickey punctuated each word with a harsh poke to his brother's naked back.

"Fine." Iggy sat up so fast Mickey had to jump back so their heads didn't collide. "Dick." he grumbled, standing and shoving Mickey out of the way so he could get to the bathroom.

"Yeah, I'm the dick." Mickey sighed.

He left his brother's room and headed back to the kitchen, where he'd left his coffee while he went to rouse the dead.

He was tired. It had been a long month work-wise too. For some reason, everyone wants to remodel their homes right before the holidays. Probably want to spruce their shit up before all those family gatherings.

Whatever.

So Matt had been working him like a damn dog. Getting to work before 7 every morning, not leaving until well after 5 in the evening. It was exhausting, but the money was killer. It was really going to help with Christmas shopping.

Mickey's never gone Christmas shopping before. He was actually looking forward to it.

But the best thing about this month by far was Ian. After the Halloween party, when they had finally, officially gotten back together, things just sort of fell into place for them.

It was actually a little surprising how easily they fell into the 'boyfriends' roll. They had done it before, sure, but this all felt so different. More real, more sure. More permanent.

They had fallen into a routine that Mickey secretly loved. They worked during the week, seeing each other when they could. Ian would come over to his house, sometimes they'd visit Ian's family, sometimes they'd not leave the bedroom.

Or sometimes Mickey would stay over at Ian and Mandy's place. It was nice to be there, just the two of them. Or the four of them if Mandy and her girl were there.

Mickey and Macy got along a lot better than Mickey had anticipated. Their eerily similar names aside, Macy was a cool chick.

She was short and tiny, probably pushing a hundred pounds soaking wet. She had dyed fire engine red hair, cut into a little bob that reminded Mickey of Lauren. She swore like a sailor and was covered in tattoos. Ian always said she looked like a 'suicide girl', which if Mickey remembers correctly, is some kind of internet porno thing. Macy was flattered, though, so maybe Mickey's confused.
Mickey enjoyed spending time with his sister and her girlfriend, but in all honesty, his favorite times were the times when it was just him and Ian, wrapped up in each other.

But it usually didn’t happen as much as Mickey would like, since Ian has made best friends out of all Mickey’s friends. Over the past three weeks, Ian has endeared himself to Lauren and Javier in a way Mickey had never anticipated. They talk all the time, on the phone and skype. Ian and Javier text like, constantly. It makes Mickey feel warm in ways he can’t explain, watching Ian acclimate to his life so easily.

But the biggest change by far has been Ian’s attitude toward Jack.

When Ian had first met Jack, things were strained for obvious reasons, but after their visit to him on Halloween, Ian has seemed to turn some kind of corner. He accompanies Mickey to about half of his visits to Victory House now. He makes easy conversation with Jack. Their interactions are no longer stilted and uncomfortable. They actually seem to like each other.

Mickey never saw that shit coming.

So all in all, things are not so bad.

But nothing good lasts forever, and the moment Mickey’s feeling like shit’s falling into place, the god damn holidays roll around, and Mickey just knows shit’s gonna go sideways. Thanksgiving is not a good time for Ian. He’s haunted by the ghost of his dead mother. Monica is always on Ian's mind, Mickey's sure of that. But it's especially rough on Thanksgiving. Mickey knows the story. The suicide attempt. The depressive episode. He also knows it's hard on the rest of Ian's family, and they all scrutinize him extra hard around this time, which only makes Ian feel worse.

So it's going to be a trying time.
But Mickey's gonna see him through it.

Mickey sighs, chugging the rest of his coffee before putting the mug in the sink. Just then his brother saunters out of his room, looking like shit, but at least he’s awake. He rubs at his eyes with the heels of his hands, stumbling into the kitchen.

"See, asshole. Told you I'd have plenty of time." Iggy laughs groggily, moving toward the coffee maker.

But just as he's about to pour himself a cup, a loud horn sounds from outside.

"That'd be Mark, you dumbass." Mickey chuckled.

Iggy groaned, forgoing his coffee to trudge to the front door and put his boots on, grumbling the whole time.

"God damn honest work. Getting up at the ass-crack of dawn. Paying fucking taxes. Fucking stupid." he muttered to himself, all the while knotting up his boots.

Mickey had to laugh. His brother bitches like this every morning, but never misses a day of work. Mickey thinks he secretly likes it, but feels like he has to keep up his brash Milkovich 'fuck society' exterior. Like he's trying to protect his ghetto street cred by shitting all over his own progress. Ass backwards thinking, if you ask Mickey.

Mickey follows his brother outside, locking the door before saying goodbye to Iggy and getting into his work truck. He’s at a job on the south side today, so he could walk if he had to, but Matt had
been letting him take the truck more and more lately, so fuck walking.

Nine more hours, and he'd be on his three day holiday. Spending time with Ian and other people he cared about.
Nine more hours.
He could do that.
He smiled to himself as he pulled his sunglasses off the passenger seat where he'd left them the day before. Setting them on his face, he lit up a cigarette and started the truck, heading toward the job site.
Nine more hours....

-------------------------------------

Ian is sitting in the break room at work, playing cards with Bill, and older EMT that has been at the station since Ian was in high school. He's an okay dude, quiet, but nice enough. And he's a hell of a poker player. Ian doesn't know why he subjects himself to this torture. He loses every damn time.

He's just biding his time right now, anyway. He's at the tail end of a 12 hour shift. 7pm to 7am. It was a chaotic night, being so close to Thanksgiving, people are doing stupid shit left and right. He's had a handful of cooking related accidents. One guy burned himself trying to deep fry a fucking turkey. Seriously?
There have also been a handful of domestics, and sadly a few suicide attempts. The holidays are hard for some people. Ian knows this from personal experience.

He doesn't think about Monica all that much anymore. He's glad to not have to think about her, as cruel as that sounds. But Thanksgiving will always be tainted with Monica's specter. There's just no avoiding it.

But he's going to be so busy, hopefully he won't have time to think about Monica all that much.

He and Mickey both have a three day weekend. Ian's looking forward to it very much. The whole holiday is jam packed for the both of them. Ian is hopeful staying busy will help him keep his mind off the jarring memories of his past.

First, they have dinner at Fiona's. Ian was not really surprised when Fiona invited Mickey, nor was he shocked when Mickey accepted. They had been getting along better as time went on. Fiona seemingly finally giving up on her past judgments, and Mickey getting past the wary feeling that always came up around Ian's siblings. So Ian was actually really looking forward to dinner at the house.

Then, of course, they had to swing by the north side. Svetlana had asked them to come by and visit with Yev for a few minutes between meals. They were gonna hang out with the kid for a little while, maybe have some hot chocolate, before Svetlana and David took up to David's parents house for a late dinner.

Ian was happy Svetlana seemed to be keeping up her end of the bargain, letting Mickey keep constant contact with Yev. Although Ian's sure the agreement they have with the lawyer helps too. When Mickey had told Ian about the custody agreement, Ian had been floored. He never expected Svetlana to give Mickey so much time willingly.
But Ian thinks she did it all as a way to keep Mickey from contesting the adoption all together. Mickey could cause a real scene, fuck up their move and everything. So, practically speaking, giving Mickey visitation was probably the easiest way to get what she wanted in the end. The adoption and the move.

But Ian doesn't care why she's doing it, just as long as she is doing it. Having Yev in his life makes Mickey happy. And Mickey fucking deserves to be happy.

"I'm done." Ian says, tossing his cards down on the table and pushing his chair away so he can stand up.

"Oh, come on, Gallagher. Don't quit just cuz you're losing. Again." Bill laughed.

"No." Ian laughed, pointing at the clock. "I'm done-done. My shift is over. Gotta go. Happy Thanksgiving, man." Ian walked over to Bill and put his hand out for the man to shake.

"Happy Thanksgiving, man. My best to your family." Bill said, smiling as he shook Ian's hand.

"Yours too." Ian smiled, backing out of the break room.

He made his way to his locker, changing quickly. He pulled his jacket on and made his way toward the station's door, waving at Sue, who was on the phone, before walking out of the building and into the crisp Chicago morning.

And after they were done with Svetlana, Ian and Mickey had agreed to visit Jack and Rowan, who were having dinner at Jack's parents house. They were invited over for dessert and drinks, which Ian found odd, since Jack and Rowan were both in treatment at the moment. But whatever.

Ian's not really sure what's going on with Jack and Rowan. He knows that they are spending a lot of time together around the halfway house. Ian almost never sees one without the other. Jack swears high and low they are not 'dating' or anything like that, but they are obviously more than friends. Ian doesn't really care one way or the other, as long as Jack's happy, and staying clean.

That keeps a smile on Mickey's face, and that's what matters most to Ian.

So Ian was happy to accompany Mickey to Jack's for dessert and drinks. It would probably be fun.

Then, after all that shit was said and done, they were going to head back to Ian and Mandy's apartment, to close out the night with Mandy and Macy, probably getting totally shitfaced, and having a double dose of super gay sex on opposite ends of the apartment.

That thought makes Ian chuckle as he makes his way to the L, smoking and scrolling through his phone.

He needs to get some god damn sleep before this whole 'holiday' crap starts. He's dead on his feet as it is, and there's no way he's gonna make it if he doesn't at least get a nap before he has to start preparing. 24 hours is not long enough to get his shit together.

He climbs the stairs to the train and gets there just in time, slipping into between the doors just as they closed. He huffed a tired breath, dropping into the seat right next to the door.

The train was pretty close to abandoned, it being the day before Thanksgiving and all. Ian was glad to have the train almost to himself. After such a long shift at work, the last thing he wanted to do was deal with a train cramped full of people that were just as tired and irritated as he was.

He looked down at his phone, still clasped loosely in his hand, as it starts to vibrate.
Mickey.

Ian smiles brightly, can't help it.

mick: hey. still want me to swing by ltr?

Ian's smile widens. Mickey is always checking in with him. They communicate more now than in all the years they've known each other. Texting and calling almost constantly. Ian loves it.

me: yeah, of course. come by whenever. i may be sleeping, so just let urself in.

Ian sets the phone down on his leg and looks out the window. He watches the city fly by for a few minutes before his phone goes off again.

mick: k. i'll b by after i wrap up @ this job.

Ian can't help the warm flush that rolls down his spine. This all feels so domestic, it's like a damn dream. Ian always wanted this simple, quiet shit with Mickey. He never thought he'd get it, but he's always wanted it.

Sometime it doesn't feel real. Sometimes he thinks he doesn't deserve it. Sometimes he's afraid it won't last. But he tries not to dwell on that shit. He puts his phone back in his pocket and focuses on the changing scenery out the window. It's going to be a good holiday. For once, Ian believes that.

---------------------------------------------

Painting trim sucks. It sucks big time. Nobody likes to paint trim. It's tedious and it's messy and it takes for-fucking-ever. Especially if you are a perfectionist, like Mickey is.

He's up on the top step of the ladder, steadying himself with his free hand while the other holds a paint brush. Classic rock is playing from the work radio on the floor. It's the only sound in the house.

He's putting the finishing touches on some crown moulding in a remodeled apartment on the south side. The building belongs to a friend of Matt's. It's a nice building in a not too terrible part of the neighborhood. If Mickey remembers correctly, this is the area where Fiona's building is.
Mickey doesn't know much about Fiona's building, or how she acquired it. He recalls Ian saying something about an old lady and a laudromat, but Mickey doesn't remember the details. Either way, the building Mickey is working on today is supposedly nearby to Fiona's. He wonders what her building looks like, if it could use some work. Probably. He decides to ask her about it later. Maybe he and Matt could help her out.

Huh, look at that. Mickey wanting to help Fiona. Times certainly had changed.

Mickey chuckles.

He dips his brush into his little paint bucket, wiping the excess off before going back to his work. He's working with oil-based paint today. He didn't even know people still used that shit until Matt broke out the can. Apparently the dude that owns this building only uses oil-based paint for his trim. It's an old school trick. Matt says it creates a harder surface, less likely to chip or flake off.

Mickey thinks it's a pain in the ass, and he's going to have to bathe in paint thinner to get this shit off later.

Later.

Mickey's mind wanders to all the shit he's got to do later. He's never had plans like this on Thanksgiving. He'd never even had Thanksgiving dinner until he was in Mexico. Which is hilarious, because it's not even celebrated down there. It's a damn American holiday, and the first time Mickey ever celebrated it was with his two roommates, one Mexican, and the other Canadian. The irony of that is not lost on Mickey.

And now, her he is, less than 24 hours away from an endless list of houses to visit. He's not exactly sure how he got roped into dinner, not only with Ian's family, but with Svet and the kid, Jack and his damn parents, and then Mandy and her girlfriend.

Mickey's never considered himself a 'people person', but he seems to be quite popular these days.

Go figure.

He spends the rest of his time slowly making his way around the room, meticulously painting the crown moulding. He's alone at the house now, Matt and Benji had been their earlier, fixing up some issues with the plaster, but had finished up a while ago.

Matt had wanted them to all leave together, start the holiday early, but Mickey had insisted on finishing up the trim. Matt had to get back to Lexi to help start the preparations for the next day, and Benji had a four hour drive back to his parents house in Detroit. So Mickey had told them to get lost, he'd finish up and close up the house when he was done.

Matt had insisted he take one of the trucks for the long weekend. Mickey's still wary of Matt's generosity. Matt insists it's a company truck, and since Mickey's a company man, he shouldn't fight him on it so damn much.

So Mickey had relented. It was certainly going to make it easier to get around for the holiday, so Mickey is grateful, if a little nervous still.

No one's ever trusted him like this before. He's constantly afraid he's going to screw it up.

But he hasn't yet. So there's that.

Mickey finishes up, placing the cover back on the paint can and banging it into place with the back of a screwdriver.
He descends the ladder and puts the paint can down on the floor against the wall.

It's a little after 2 in the afternoon. Ian should probably still be sleeping. He'd worked a really long shift the night before. 12 hours or something nuts like that. Mickey smiles at the notion that he's got Ian's schedule memorized now. It's such a small, stupid thing, but it makes what's happening to them feel all the more real.

Mickey dumps the paint brush in a cup of paint thinner. He should probably clean it, but he doesn't feel like it, so he leaves it. He wipes his hands on a rag that's sitting on a window sill. He gets as much of the paint off as he can. Whatever's left will have to be removed with chemicals later. But his hands are clean enough for him to pull out his phone.

He and Ian had been texting back and forth a little earlier in the day. Mickey was planning on heading to Ian's right after work. He'd take a shower when he got there, and hopefully Ian would still be in bed. A little cuddling and a small nap sounded pretty fucking good at the moment. He didn't see any new messages from Ian, but he did have a voicemail from a number he didn't recognize.

Mickey is instantly wary. Unknown numbers are never a good sign. He's actually hoping it's a telemarketer, and that's saying a lot.

He sighs, walking toward the front room, where he tossed all his shit earlier in the day. He pulls his jacket off the floor, dusting it off before pulling it on and zipping it up. It's god damn cold outside now, which makes sense since they are at the end of November. They have had a bit of snow, but no real accumulation to speak of. But it's been fucking cold. Ice everywhere. Mickey almost busted his ass salting the walkway at home earlier that morning.

In moments like this, Mickey really misses Mexico.

He puts his phone in his pocket. He'll listen to the mystery message in a minute. He leaves out the front door, locking up before hiding the key in it's designated spot. He immediately pulls a cigarette out and lights it, walking the few steps down the driveway to the truck. He unlocks it and steps up to get in, settling into the seat and starting the engine. He lets it warm up for a minute, turning the heat on and waiting for it to get hot.

He takes his phone back out, smoking his cigarette, he hits the voicemail button and puts the phone to his ear.

Okay. Here we go.

"You have one new message. Recieved today at 1:30pm
"This message is for Mikhailio Milkovich. Mikhailio, this is Dennis Bateman, your parole officer calling. I know we don't have a scheduled meeting for another few weeks, but I wanted to touch base with you before the holidays to remind you that part of your parole agreement is group therapy for gay rape survivors. I know this is a touchy subject for you. I recall you being vehemently disagreeable to this portion of your release agreement. But it's not up for debate. I was in contact with the man who runs the group, and although he seems to know you in some capacity, he's told me you have yet to get to a meeting. You need to rectify this, or I will be forced to report this violation to the parole board. I'm sure you don't want to have your early release rescinded. You need to call Andrew McMaster down at Victory House and get the information on their group therapy down there, then get back to me with your signed slips from the group. I want at least one slip in the first week of January, or you're in a world of shit. Pardon my candor. There are other groups you can attend, but Andrew's is the one that's affiliated with the Parole office, so I think it will be the easiest route, especially since Andrew already knows of you and is expecting you. Get it done, Milkovich, or I will have to have you picked up on a violation. Happy Holidays." and the line went dead.
Mickey ended the call, throwing his phone down so hard it bounced and landed somewhere on the floorboard.

"God fucking damn it!" Mickey screamed, slamming his fists down on the steering wheel repeatedly. His hands came down over and over, the horn blaring intermittently.

He's just so fucking tired of this shit.


He wants it to be fucking over.

The idea of sharing these horrific, shameful memories with a bunch of strangers, and fucking ANDY makes his damn skin crawl. It goes against everything he's ever known. Talking about this shit. Putting it out there for people to poke and prod at.

He doesn't want to fucking do it.

But he certainly doesn't want to go back to prison, either.

He's fucking trapped.

God damn it.

All the anger drains out of him, like someone pulled his damn plug. He sags against the steering wheel, slowly calming his breathing.

He pinches his eyes closed, willing himself not to lose it again.

Once his rage was assuaged, he calmly leaned over and felt around on the floor for his phone. Once he found it, he placed it gently on the car seat. He put the truck in drive and left the job site in the rear view mirror.

He'd deal with that shit later. Right now he wanted a fucking nap.

Mickey pulled up outside Ian and Mandy's building about twenty minutes later. It was around 3 pm, and he wasn't sure if Ian would still be asleep or not. Working 12 hours overnight had to take a lot out of him.

So Mickey had stopped and grabbed some coffees and muffins (Ian preferred them to donuts, so Mickey always got them.) Even though it was afternoon for Mickey, when Ian woke up it would feel like morning.

Mickey is hopeful that Ian's fucked up work schedule won't leave him tired and disoriented during their Thanksgiving fiasco. Mickey has the feeling he's going to need Ian firing on all cylinders. They're going to have to lean on each other quite a bit to make it through the day unscathed.

Mickey made his way up the stairs, balancing the cardboard coffee carrier in one hand and the bag of muffins in the other. His hands were full, so instead of reaching for his keys, (Ian and Mandy had insisted he have his own key to their place, for emergencies) he banged on the door with his knee.

He hoped Mandy was home. He didn't want to wake Ian if he was sleeping.
He heard someone shuffling on the other side of the door. He shifted a little, trying to maintain the precarious grasp he had on the items in his hands. The door finally swung open and Mickey was greeted with a barely dressed Macy.

Great.

Macy is leaning against the door jamb, wearing a torn Misfits t-shirt and what looks like a pair of black lace boy shorts, although with all her tattoos, it almost looks like she's fully dressed. There is hardly an inch of un-inked skin. He can almost pretend he's not seeing her mostly naked.

Almost.

"Fucking hell, Macy, put some damn pants on. Contrary to your beliefs, not all of us wanna see your ass all the damn time." Mickey grumbled, pushing past her into the apartment. He cursed as he almost dropped the coffees, saving them at the last minute and placing them on the kitchen counter with a relieved sigh.

"Jesus, Mick. Come on in." Macy laughed, following him into the kitchen. "You are always such a pleasure." she said, going around him to get to the fridge. She pulled out two bottles of water and made her way back to the living room. Mickey watched her go, seeing her fall back onto the couch next to his sister, who was apparently passed out.

Mickey grabbed the coffees and walked out of the kitchen, leaving the muffins for later. He wandered into the living room, leaning up against the wall while he watched Macy and Mandy for a minute.

Mandy was indeed asleep. She was laying against the back of the couch, her messy hair covering half her face. She was wearing one of Mickey's old Iron Maiden t-shirts, (where the hell she got it from, he had no idea) and not much else.

"Do either of you ever wear pants?" Mickey asked, eyeing his sister's girlfriend disdainfully.

"Why would we do that? It's her damn house. You telling me you and Ginger are always fully clothed when you're alone?" Macy laughed, cuddling closer to Mandy and pushing some hair out of her face with a gentle hand.

"Whatever." Mickey said, pushing off the wall and making his way to Ian's bedroom.


Mickey likes Macy. He can find no faults with the girl. She's tough and real and she reminds him a lot of his sister, actually.

Mickey's not sure how much Macy knows about Mandy's past. Mickey's also not sure how Macy grew up, or if she would understand or be cool with some of the fucked up shit Mandy has done in her life.

Milkovichs are not really known for their level heads or good life choices. Mandy is no different.

Mickey thinks he's lucky to have Ian, someone who understands Mickey, even if he didn't exactly grow up the same way.

Mickey wonders idly as he makes his way into Ian's room if Macy will stick around once Mandy spills her guts about it all. It's a lot to take in. Sometimes it's too much for a person, and they walk away.
Mickey would be sad to see his sister hurt like that, yet again. But he supposes it's better to get rid of the weak ones early on, instead of letting yourself get too attached, then getting even more hurt in the end.

Mickey hopes his sister is honest with Macy, and soon. Because that old shit can't stay buried forever.

Mickey pushes open Ian's door with his shoulder, walking over to the bed and putting the coffees on the nightstand. He wants to just shed his clothes and fall into bed with his god damn boyfriend. (The word is still new, the novelty having not worn off yet. It's a big deal for both of them.) But he's covered in dirt and paint and other undesirable shit, so he reluctantly stays standing.

Ian is, in fact, passed the fuck out, just like Mickey had anticipated. Mickey finds a tiny bit of humor in the fact that he is standing here, lovingly watching Ian sleep, while Mandy's girlfriend is doing the same damn thing in the next room.

The parallels are a bit ridiculous.

Mickey doesn't want to sit on the bed in his nasty work clothes, so he just leans over a little, his face hovering close to Ian's.

Ian's gorgeous all the time, but there is something different about these quiet moments. Ian's face all soft and calm, no hint of worry or stress to be found. It's like this open, vulnerable, secret version of Ian that not everyone gets to see.

Mickey's not stupid enough to think that he's the only one who's ever had the privilege of watching Ian sleep, and he's not confident enough yet to be sure he'll be the last one to stand where he is right now. But he's smart enough to not take it for granted. He's just gonna ride this one out, soaking up every beautiful moment he can get his grubby hands on.

He sighs quietly, his eyes roaming over Ian's sleep-wrinkled face. He's got pillow lines along his cheek, his face all red and flushed.

Fucking beautiful.

Mickey runs a hand through Ian's fiery red hair, down his neck before settling a palm on his face. He just holds his hand there for a moment, feeling the warmth of Ian's skin under his hand. Ian makes a small noise in the back of his throat, unconsciously curling into the touch. Mickey has to focus really hard on not groaning out loud. He's so overwhelmed with emotion, it honestly takes him by surprise. He stays like that for a moment longer, just absorbing Ian, until he has to break the contact before he says 'fuck it' and jumps into the bed.

He needs a god damn shower.

He finally stands back up and backs out of the room.

Macy and Mandy are both asleep on the couch now. Curled up around each other while the TV blares a televised roller derby match into the quiet space.

Mickey turns the TV off as he walks through the living room on his way to the bathroom.

Silence is welcome as he strips down fast, turning on the water with his free hand while he pulls his boxers down with the other. He steps out of them and kicks them in the vicinity of the hamper. He usually ends up doing Ian and Mandy's laundry anyway, so who cares if some of his shit is mixed in?
He turns around to grab some paint thinner he left on the sink that morning, in anticipation for this afternoon's clean up. But in the spot where the mineral spirits were that morning, there was now a small bottle of dish detergent, and another, larger bottle of mineral oil, along with a handwritten note.

mick,
i didn't like the idea of you putting that caustic shit on your beautiful skin, so i asked around at work, and Sue and Eli both said that dish soap and mineral oil with work for removing oil based paint. it's better for your skin, and we don't have to worry about disposing of the chemicals. so mix this shit together and rub it on the paint, it should come right off. let me know how it works. i can keep it around the house in the future if you like it.
<3
ian

Mickey's face breaks into a huge smile. This is such an Ian thing to do. Such a sweet, unnecessary, caring thing to do. He knew Mickey was dreading cleaning up today. He always complains when he has to use oil based paint. So he went out of his way to ask around, find a fix, get the ingredients and leave explicit instructions for Mickey.

It's one part 'control freak' and two parts 'incredibly loving.' And 100% Ian.

Mickey follows the directions on the note, mixing a handful of dish soap with a handful of mineral oil in his hands, rubbing them together vigorously. Miraculously, the paint starts to glom together and peel off his skin in long, stringy strips.

"No fucking way." Mickey chuckled, astonished. He'd been using the chemicals for a while now, and it really did fuck up his skin. It got all dry and flaky for a long time after he used it. Leave it to Ian to find a solution to a problem Mickey didn't even know he really had.

Mickey quickly cleans the remainder of the paint off his skin, places the bottles back under the sink, and finally jumps in the shower. The water is warm, running over his tired body and relaxing his sore muscles.

Honest work is hard, but he wouldn't trade it for anything. The pride and self respect he gains from it alone is enough to make him want to stay legit.

The happiness he sees in Ian's eyes is another good reason.

He's also happy to be able to be someone his son can look up to. After all the shit that has gone down recently with the adoption and all the papers he's been signing, staying out of trouble has become a damn necessity.

So he revels in his sore body at the end of a long day. It means he's kept his promise. He's doing good. He's getting better.

He washes his hair and body quickly, eager to wrap this up and get to Ian. He just wants a little time to themselves before shit get crazy.
He rinsed the remainder of the soap off his body, turning and twister, making sure to get everything washed away. He tilted his head down, watching through squinted eyes as bubbles and dirty water flowed down the drain.

He turned the water off and grabbed a towel off the bar on the wall. He drew the shower curtain
back and stepped onto the cool tile floor. A shiver wracked his body as the chilly apartment air hit his wet skin. He shook slightly as he quickly dried his body, wrapping the towel around his naked torso as he stepped out of the bathroom and back into the hall.

He passed his sister and Macy, still out cold on the sofa, and made his way into Ian's bedroom, where he was laying just as Mickey had left him, snoring softly, tucked in on himself in his bed. Mickey had planned to get dressed, maybe make some calls, make some last minute preparations for tomorrow. But watching Ian sleeping, all Mickey wants to do is crawl in bed and cuddle with the guy.

So that's exactly what he does. He drops his damp towel onto the floor and crawls into the bed naked. He scooted next to Ian, wrapping his arm around Ian's bare chest.

Ian sighed, but stayed asleep as Mickey nuzzled his face into the back of Ian's neck, placing a single open-mouthed kiss to the skin right behind his ear.

Yeah, this is exactly what he needed.

-------------------------------------------------------

Ian is sure he'd not be able to get through this day if it weren't for Mickey. Thanksgiving had finally come, with all the bad memories and familial chaos that was certain to ensue, Ian needed all the support he could get.

After a nice long nap after his shift, waking up wrapped up in Mickey was the best way to start the holiday. It was the best way to wake up period, in Ian's opinion. He wished he could go to sleep and wake up with Mickey every day, but it was far too soon in this new thing they were trying to even suggest such a thing.

The thing was, it didn't FEEL new to Ian. Even though they had technically gotten back together just recently, he was so comfortable with Mickey, it felt like they had never been apart. But Ian was fairly certain Mickey didn't feel the same way. He could tell the other man had some reservations about them still, and with good reason. They had been through so much shit, put each other through hell. And even though Ian was ready to let the past lie, he knew Mickey couldn't forget so easily. His life experience had hardened him, forced him to construct giant, nearly impenetrable walls around his heart. Ian had managed to decimate those walls once before. And even this new, open, emotionally grown version of Mickey still had that protective shell around his heart.

Ian was pretty positive that asking Mickey to move in with him would have the opposite of the desired effect. It would set them ten steps back in their burgeoning relationship. He had to tread carefully, and take shit at Mickey's pace. Even if these moments of mundane domesticity filled Ian's heart to the brim with gratefulness and love, he knew better than to push for too much, too fast.

Ian had never been one to dream of a domestic life. Fancy brunch reservations and date nights were never really his thing. Growing up the way he did, different things got him going. He craved chaos growing up. Long nights dancing at the club, staying up for days high on meth or coke. He sought constant stimulation, never wanting to sit still for a single moment. Even before his diagnosis, Ian was always drawn to anarchy. Growing up the way he did, it was all he knew. But now, laying here with Mickey, he realized he's changed.

He wanted all that realtionshipy shit with Mickey. Grocery shopping together and weekend road
trips. Watching movies cuddled on the couch, taking Yev to a baseball game. Even little stupid shit like cooking together or folding laundry. He wanted it all.

But it was too fucking soon for that shit. Ian had to chill the fuck out. So he had to suck up every moment available, when the opportunity struck.

Which is why he is so irritated that he has to go on this never ending Thanksgiving excursion, when he'd much rather spend the long weekend neck deep in all things 'Mickey'.

Alas, it was not to be.

When he had woken up from his nap the previous day, he had proceeded to spend the remainder of the day doing what he wished he could always be doing: just hanging around the apartment with Micky, Mandy and Macy.

Or the three M's, as Ian had taken to calling them, much to his own amusement (and nobody else's, obviously.)

They had spent the afternoon and evening cuddled up on the couch, watching Netflix and ordering Thai from Mandy's favorite place. They drank well into the night, laughing at the ridiculous horror movie Macy had picked, and ended the evening as Ian had anticipated, engaging in hours of gay sex and debauchery on opposite sides of the apartment.

Memories of the previous night's activities flooded Ian's sleep addled brain, turning his routine morning wood into a rock hard problem that needed to be addressed immediately.

He was already completely wrapped up in Mickey, the smaller man curled around Ian's chest, arms securely wrapped around his abdomen, his head nestled into his shoulder. Ian smiled sleepily, turning slightly so he could lay facing his lover.

Mickey didn't move or make any noise, so Ian cuddled closer, hitching a leg over Mickey's hip and grinding his erection on Mickey's hip. When Mickey still didn't stir, Ian grew more bold, rolling his hips harder, burying his face in Mickey's neck, inhaling his intoxicating scent.

Mickey did start to stir then, a small, sleepy smile stretching across his face.
"You need something?" he murmured softly, opening his eyes slightly to gaze at Ian. Ian looked up, locking eyes with him.
"You." he stated simply, grinding down against Mickey's leg once more.
"You just gonna rut against my thigh til you come, or what?" Mickey laughed, his voice rough with sleep.
"Nah." Ian smiled. "Wanna make you feel good. We got a long day ahead of us, and I don't think we should go into it with any unnecessary stress." Ian stated matter-of-factly.
"Is that so?" Mickey chuckled, tipping his head up so his forehead was pressed directly against Ian's. "I think that's a solid plan, man."

Ian smiled back, finally moving in for a good morning kiss. It was slow and sweet, both of them too tired for their usual heated encounters. Sometimes this is what they craved. Slow, passionate, intimate shit that neither of them would have been okay with when they were kids.

"Okay then." Mickey said, rolling out of Ian's grasp to fumble with the bedside drawer. He let out a
frustrated sigh when he didn't find what he was looking for. "Dude, where's the lube?" he asked over his shoulder, still rummaging around inside the drawer.

Ian sat up then, leaning over his side of the bed. He stuck his head under the bed, flailing around for a minute until coming back with the bottle clasped in his hand and a cocky smile on his face.

Mickey rolled his eyes, grabbing the bottle from him and dropping it on the mattress. "Don't know how that shit always ends up on the floor." he groused.

"We get a little crazy in the throws of passion." Ian shrugged. He smiled as he grabbed Mickey by the back of his head and kissed him down onto the bed. Their tongues tangled as Ian crawled on top of Mickey. He nipped at his lips before slipping his tongue back in for more.

Kissing Mickey has been one of Ian's favorite things to do since he was a teenager. Back before he was allowed to do it, Ian would fantasize about plunging his tongue into Mickey's beautiful mouth. It had driven him crazy at the time that it was fine to stick his dick in the guy's ass, but somehow, pressing their lips together was too gay.

Ian hadn't understood at the time, that to Mickey, kissing was so much more intimate than fucking could ever be. He hadn't realized how much trust Mickey had to have to give that last part of himself over.

Once Ian had understood the gravity of that simple kiss, he'd relished it even more. It was that final piece of the puzzle that told Ian that he unequivocally owned Mickey's heart. He hadn't taken it seriously enough back then. He ended up doing the one thing he never thought he'd do. He broke Mickey's heart.

Kissing Mickey now was a gift that Ian would never take for granted ever again.

He plunged his tongue into his mouth again, rolling his hips against Mickey's pelvis. The groan he got in response set his skin on fire. He had to have him. Now.

"I'm sure I'm still good from last night, just c'mon." Mickey whined, thrusting up against Ian, knocking their hard cocks against each other, sending shock waves of pleasure of up his spine. Mickey groaned, thrusting up again.

Ian chuckled. Looks like he's not the only impatient one this morning. He grabbed the lube from where he had dropped it moments earlier. It was a difficult task to open the bottle when Mickey had his arms wrapped around his shoulders, his mouth attached to his neck. Ian would have quite the mark there when all was said and done.

"Mick. Mick, I can't do anything if you don't give me a little room." Ian chuckled. In response, Mickey wrapped his legs around Ian's calves, pulling him closer while he continued to work his neck. Ian leaned back a little, trying to look Mickey in the face, but the other man kept his face tucked into his neck, lapping and sucking the tender flesh.

"Mick, c'mon." Ian laughed. "Weren't you just telling me to hurry the fuck up?"

Mickey grumbled, but relented, unhooking his legs and dropping his head back to the pillows. He just stared at him, eyebrows raised, small smirk on his lips.

Ian stared right back, leaning up on one hand, trying to flip the cap on the lube with his thumb.

Mickey watched him struggle for a moment before he huffed out a breath and grabbed the bottle from Ian's hand. "It's okay to ask for help, Ian. Jesus, we got shit to do today." he smiled, opening the bottle and drizzling the slippery substance onto Ian's hard cock.
"I can't keep up with you this morning." Ian sighed, losing himself in the feeling of Mick's hand tight and slick on his dick. "You are all over the place."

"And you should be inside me already." Mickey retorted, giving Ian one more good tug before wiping his hand on the sheets.

Ian laughed lightly, hooking his left arm under Mickey's thigh, propping it up in the air. Mickey's other leg snaked around Ian's lower back as he positioned himself at Mickey's opening and pushed forward slowly.

He watched, completely enraptured by Mickey's face as he sank into his body. Mickey's eyes rolled back in his head, his hands instinctively wrapping tighter around Ian's shoulders, his foot hooking up higher on his back.

Once he was fully seated inside Mickey's body, Ian just stayed still for a moment, losing himself in the feeling. He rested his forehead against Mickey's and they just stared at each other for a moment. Ian leaned down, planting a soft kiss on Mickey's parted lips just as he pulled back and slid forward sharply.

Mickey grunted, his eyes rolling back in his head as Ian started slowly thrusting.

Mickey's body is soft and pliant in the morning. And so warm. Ian runs his free hand down his side, before gripping under his ass for better leverage.

"Oh god. Oh god. Ian, fuck." Mickey chants quietly, rocking with Ian in perfect synchronization.

Ian moans softly, tucking his head into the crook of Mickey's neck as he languidly pulses inside of his lover.

"Feel so good, Mick." Ian whispers into his ear as he rolls his hips a little harder. "Always feel so fucking good. Tight. Jesus."

Mickey's hands trail up and down Ian's back, scratching lightly before settling at the base of his skull and pulling the short red strands there. He tips his head so they are facing each other again, diving in for a passionate kiss as their pace increases.

Mickey's got a short fuse in the morning, always has. It doesn't take long for him to get where he's going. He wraps a hand around his own leaking cock stroking it haphazardly while Ian pummeled his ass.

"Ian, fuck. Right there." Mickey moans when Ian hits his prostate dead on. Ian smiles, then moans himself as Mickey clenches around his throbbing cock. He picks up his pace, slamming into Mickey's body with increasing ferocity. Mickey buries his face in Ian's shoulder and bites down hard as he comes all over their chests.

Seeing Mickey unraveling is enough to send Ian over the edge. He thrusts once more, stilling deep inside Mickey's body while his body quakes through his own orgasm. He continues to thrust, slower than before, riding his orgasm out to the very end.

Mickey rubs a hand up and down Ian's back absentmindedly, while Ian just lays on top of him for a moment. Mickey's leg is still hitched up around Ian's arm, and his toes are starting to tingle, but he can't be bothered to move. Being this close to Ian is all Mickey's wanted for what feels like forever. Circulation can fuck off for the moment.

Ian peppers Mickey's neck and chest with kisses, finally releasing his leg and setting it down on the
bed as he pulls out slowly, trying not to hurt him. Mickey still winces from the loss, feeling empty and wanting.

Ian moves to sit up, but Mickey grabs him again, pulling him back down on top of him, kissing him ardently.

Ian returns the kiss, swept up in the feeling of Mickey. He knew in that moment that he was really crazy, to ever think he didn't want this. Being bipolar had taken so much from Ian. His military dreams, what he wanted for his future. But the most important thing his disorder had ever taken from him was Mickey. He knew then, lying in Mickey's arms, that he had to have been mad, back then, to break up with Mickey, to push him away. He'd blamed it on his mother for a time, her words twisting Ian's brain into believing that no one could ever love him, not even Mickey. That he was too damaged to be lovable. He blamed Monica for poisoning his mind. But he knew now, that it was all him. His own fears, insecurities, and codependent need to be with someone, anyone, had caused him to turn his back on Mickey when the man had needed him the most.

He wouldn't do that shit anymore. He was different now. Better.

Ian sighed into Mickey's open mouth, running his tongue over his parted lips. He was about to go back in for more when a strident knock on the door had him backing up, looking over his shoulder as Mickey huffed out an aggravated breath.

"Put your fucking dicks away, horndogs. We got family obligations and day drinking to get to."
Mandy's amused voice floated through the bedroom door.

Ian fell onto his back, staring up at the ceiling, just listening to Mandy giggling on the other side of the door.

"Fuck you, bitch." Mickey yelled back, causing Ian to chuckle as he pulled his lover closer to him. He wrapped an arm protectively around Mickey's shoulders, pulling the smaller man to his chest and dropping a soft kiss to the crown of his head.

They just held each other for a moment, absorbing this last quiet moment together before the real world and the insanity of the holiday closed in on them.
Everybody's thankful for something.

Chapter Summary

The holidays are upon us. What happens when the boys wanna try and make time for everyone? Chaos, that's what.

Chapter Notes

i had all this written weeks ago, but my own real life holidays and day drinking got in the way. so now our boys are a few weeks behind the rest of us in their festivities. forgive me?

hope this chapter makes up for the wait.

Ian was grateful his sister had decided to have dinner earlier than usual this year. With everyone having plan outside of the immediate family this time around, it only made sense to make accommodations, change up the routine a bit this year.

In years previous, when they had all been younger, and had nowhere else to be, they would spend the whole day holed up in the Gallagher house, drinking, smoking, and gorging themselves on whatever food they had managed to pilfer or score. It was never a grand affair, but it was theirs, and it was always fun.

Except for that one year.

The year no one liked to talk about.

The year Monica slit her wrists all over the kitchen.

Ian had never seen so much blood.

For a few years after that, they didn't have Thanksgiving dinner. Opting instead to spend the day watching movies and getting wasted with Kev and V.

It's not lost on Ian either, that even though he and Mickey have known each other almost all their lives, have lived together on and off and loved each other for years, they have never spent a single holiday together. Circumstances beyond their control had kept them apart.

Mickey said he didn't give a fuck about the holidays. Ian's not sure he believes him. Whenever they spoke about it, Mickey brushed it off. Ian knew better that to push him. But he had a feeling Mickey had some very dark holiday memories of his own.

Ian was hopeful they could replace all their past trauma and disappointments with new, happier experiences together.

He was wistfully daydreaming about those future moments as Mickey drove them toward the Gallagher house. Ian was impressed when Mickey told him Matt had let him take one of the work
trucks for the holiday. He knew it made sense, logistically. Mickey's presence had been requested at quite a few places over the course of the day. But it was still a bit of a shock to Ian's system to see how implicitly Matt trusted Mickey. He cared about him, as more than an employee, or a friend to his troubled son. He treated Mickey like family.

And although it was nice to see someone take an interest in Mickey, give him the chance that he deserved all along, it was still a bit strange to witness it. No one had ever shown this type of kindness to Mickey, not like Matt was doing. Ian had to wonder how Mickey felt about it. He wondered if it made him feel lucky, or if it made him uncomfortable. If this was Mickey of ten years ago, Ian was sure the praise and trust would make him squirm. Ian is desperate to know what happened to Mickey in the past few years that changed him so much, on such a deep level. Ian feels like there's so much he doesn't know, and that bothers him.

But he smiles when he realizes he's got all the time in the world now. Mickey's not going anywhere. The thought brings Ian immense peace.

"What are you smiling about?" Mickey chuckles. He's got one hand on the wheel, and the other resting on the bench seat between them. Ian smiles at Mickey, grabbing his free hand and pulling it into his lap.

"Just glad we're spending the holiday together. We never have, you know. Not a single one."

Mickey drew his eyes back toward the road, shrugging his shoulders. "Spent a lot of holidays in the joint."

Ian's smile faltered. He remembered. He remembered Mandy telling him many times that she was taking the bus down to MCC to visit Mickey. Ian had never bothered to join her. Sometimes he was sure Mickey didn't want to see him. Other times he didn't want to see Mickey.

"But fuck that shit." Mickey smiles again. "We're starting a new tradition today."

Ian returns his smile. He looks out the window at the bare trees, when a thought occurs to him. "What about when you were in Mexico? You guys celebrate down there?"

Mickey nods. "Yeah. L and Javi were big on celebrations. Even though Thanksgiving is an American holiday, we did it big down there. And Christmas, well, fuck, they're all Catholic, so Christmas was a huge fucking deal."

"That's nice." Ian says, his mind going to Mickey spending Christmas drinking and exchanging gifts with Lauren and Javier. He's sad he wasn't there, but happy that Mickey had good people to care for him when Ian dropped the ball. He's even grateful for Jack, as hard as it is for him to admit that, even to himself. He thinks about Mickey locked up and alone during the holidays, with only Jack to keep him company. He's glad at least he had someone he cares about to pass the holidays with. Ian's not sure he'll ever forgive himself for leaving Mickey hanging for so many years. But he will always be thankful he wasn't alone.

"I'm glad you had them." Ian says quietly, still staring out the window as the south side flies by.

"Me too." Mickey replies. He doesn't say anything else, sensing Ian's discomfort. Ian's glad he dropped it.

They are quiet for a while, just the sounds of the radio playing Led Zeppelin, until they pull up in front of the Gallagher house.

Ian turns to Mickey, small smile playing on his lips. "You ready for this?" he asks.
Mickey shrugs again. "Don't think I'm ever ready for your family."

Ian chuckles as he opens the door and jumps out of the truck.

You can hear the Gallaghers partying all the way out on the sidewalk. Ian's grin spreads into a wide smile. He didn't know how much he missed this shit until this very moment. He's hardly seen his family in the past few months. Too wrapped up in his own bullshit. He's sure he'll hear all about that when he steps foot over the threshold and into the house.

Mickey's not nervous. He feels like he should be nervous, following Ian into the Gallagher house. He's seen the Gallaghers since he's been home, but he hasn't spent an extended period of time with them. He's got the distinct feeling that the family still holds some ill will toward him. They still see him as the asshole kid who broke their brother's heart. The kid who kicked Ian in the face instead of admitting the truth about himself. Mickey wonders, as he follows Ian up the stairs, if Ian's siblings will ever look past his previous misdeeds and see the man he is now.

He shakes the idea out of his head, deciding that all he can do is be himself and let the chips fall where they may. Ian knows him, Ian wants him around. Whether or not his family likes him is irrelevant. He wants them to like him, but it won't change anything if they don't.

That's what he keeps telling himself, anyway.

Ian opens the door and they walk into chaos. Fiona and Vee are dancing by the window, drinks in hand. AC/DC is blaring from the stereo. The walls are vibrating with the base of the song. Lip and some girl Mickey's never seen before are sitting on the couch, drinks in hand, talking in hushed voices. Mickey sees Carl and Kev in the kitchen, both of them wearing aprons, moving around the kitchen with practiced ease and calculated moves. It looks like they cook together a lot. Debbie and Liam are sitting at the kitchen table, Debbie's kid wriggling in her lap, struggling to get free of her mother. Debbie looks up, seeing Ian and Mickey standing by the door. She puts the kid down and walks over, drawing the attention of everyone in the house.

"Ian!" Debbie yells, closing the gap and wrapping her brother in a tight hug. "It's been forever, asshole. Missed you." she mutters into Ian's shoulder. Ian wraps his arms around her and squeezes her tight.

"Hey Debs." he says quietly. "Missed you too."

They are surrounded now. Everyone in the house pulling Ian into hugs and Mickey tries to stand off to the side, let them greet each other.

But Fiona looks up after a long hug from Ian and they locks eyes. Mickey couldn't read her expression. It wasn't the usual mild disdain she pinned him with most of the time.

"Hey Mickey, good to see you." she said, a half smile on her face.

"Thanks for having me." Mickey replied. And he meant it. It was nice of Ian's family to include him today. It gave him hope that maybe someday there would be no tension between them.

Ian walked over to the couch where his brother was sitting with the girl Mickey didn't know. Lip
stood up and pulled Ian into a hug.

"Good to see you." Lip said, pulling back looking at his brother. Ian smiled, stepping back. Lip
turned to Mickey and extended his hand. "Mickey." he said. "Good to see you, man."

Mickey shook his hand, a little perplexed by his behavior. The last time they had crossed paths, Lip
had been wary of Mickey. Mickey wonders what has changed between then and now.
Mickey nods, pulling his hand back and running through his hair. "Like I'd miss an oldschool
Gallagher rager."

Lip and Ian laugh at that, and Mickey relaxes the tiniest bit. Maybe this won't be so bad.

"Ian, Mickey, this is Beth. We work together."

The girl stood up and shook Ian's hand. Mickey could tell the girl wasn't from the south side. She
was wearing a diamond necklace that Mickey would have ripped off her neck when he was a
teenager. She had long blond hair and manicure fingernails.

"Nice to meet you." she said, with a forced smile. Her eyes went wide when she shook Mickey's
hand and noticed the tattoos on his knuckles. Mickey chuckled lightly. He still got a kick out of
intimidating rich bitches. Even if he was mostly harmless now, it still amused him.

Lip and Ian started talking about work and what they had been up to since last seeing each other. Lip
was animatedly telling a story about a project he and Beth work working on at the shop. Mickey was
only half listening. He was confused about how Lip got a job at a garage. Last he had heard, the kid
was in college building robots or some shit. Looks like the mighty douchebag had fallen pretty far.

"Dude, wanna beer?" Mickey asked, elbowing Ian with raised eyebrows. Ian turned to him with his
megawatt smile.

"Sure Mick. Thanks." he said, running his hand down Mickey's arm. Mickey nodded, ignoring the
chills that ran down his spine from the lingering feel of Ian's fingers on his arm.
He was so fucked up over this kid. You would think it would wear off after so many years, so much
time apart. But the time and distance had only served to ignite the passion between them even more.
Mickey tried to push the thoughts from his mind, this was a family gathering after all.

He pushed his way through the full room and into the kitchen. Vee and Fiona were sitting at the
kitchen table now, cutting vegetables. Kev and Carl were crowding the stove, stirring shit and adding
spices.

Mickey went over to the fridge and pulled out two bottles of beer. He was almost out of the room
and back to Ian, when Fiona called his name, stopping his forward motion immediately. He turned
on the spot and saw that she had stood from her chair and put her knife down. She wiped her hands
on her jeans and walked over to Mickey.

"Can we talk?" she asked, tilting her head to the side.

Mickey wanted to say no. He wanted to tell Fiona to go fuck herself. She had spent years shitting all
over Mickey, filling Ian's head with garbage and lies about him. She had done nothing but force a
wedge between him and Ian since they were just kids. That shit hurt.
Not that Mickey would ever tell anyone that.

"Sure, gimme a second." Mickey said over his shoulder, walking back into the living room to give
Ian his beer. Ian accepted the bottle, raising his eyebrows at Mickey when he didn't sit back down.

"Your sister wants to talk. Be right back." Mickey said, taking a sip of his beer.

"What?" Ian asked, standing up. "Why? What does she want?"

Mickey put a hand on Ian's chest and lightly pushed him back down into his seat. "Dunno. I'm gonna go find out. No reason to get all twisted up. Sit here with Lip and I'll be right back."

Ian looked up at him, confused. But he relented. He remained seated while Mickey walked through the kitchen and onto the back steps, where Fiona was sitting alone, smoking a cigarette.

Mickey was glad he wore his hoodie today, because it was cold as fuck and windy. He plopped down on the step next to Fiona and set his beer down on the step so he could reach into his pocket and pull out his cigarettes. He lit one and put it to his lips. Taking a long inhale to calm his nerves, he blew it out into the cold November air, watching it float away and dissipate.

"So, what's up?" he asked when Fiona failed to say anything. He hadn't really talked to Fiona all that much since that melee at the Alibi with that Brian motherfucker. Fiona and Lip had laid into him over his relationship with Ian. Saying the same old shit. They want to protect Ian. They failed to protect Ian. Mickey's no good for Ian. Ian needs to be home with his family. But he thought they had talked all this shit out the last time he was at the house, on Halloween.

 Didn't Fiona just apologize and wax all poetic about him and Ian? But the old shit never really died, not with the Gallaghers. They never forget, and they hardly ever forgive. It was like a broken record with them. He's been hearing this spiel since he was 17 years old. He could probably recite it by heart at this point.

"I can see you and Ian are getting close again. Two Gallagher holidays in two months? No one but Kev and Vee have ever made it to two in a row. I mean, I'm not trying to pry, what you and Ian do is between you. But you have to know, I'm not gonna stop caring. And I'm not gonna stop looking out for him. Ever. So I just wanted to talk to you about some shit. You guys together again? Like for real?"

Mickey lit up another cigarette, anticipating that this talk was going to be a long one. "We're not exclusive or anything, Fiona. But we're, I don't fucking know, working on it?" Mickey didn't want to talk to Fiona about this shit. Especially when he and Ian still hadn't talked about it yet. "Working on it? Okay then." Fiona sighed, looking over at Mickey for a split second before returning her gaze to the yard.

"Ian was a totally different person after you went to prison. It's like all the life had drained out of him. He started taking his meds, got his life back together, dated asshole after asshole. But my brother wasn't all there, it was like a shadow of who he really was. When he got with Brian, I thought that was it. I thought we lost him forever. I didn't see him or hear from him in months. That dick had him on lock, and no one could talk any sense into him. Then you show up out of the blue and blow it all to shit." she laughed lightly and Mickey joined it. It was pretty crazy.

"It was like you were the only thing that could snap him out of that shit. You came back at the perfect moment. I think we would have lost him forever if he'd stayed with that dick any longer."

"I'm just glad he got out. That shit was bad." Mickey mumbled, darting his eyes away. He hated thinking of Ian like that, scared and battered.

"That's an epic understatement." Fiona laughed. "But the point of all this shit is this: I'm glad you're back in his life. From what Ian tells me, you really got your shit together now. Not doing anything illegal, seeing your son and shit. Working a legit job. Not that I didn't believe this shit you told me last time, but I had to make sure. I, uh, asked around. The neighborhood, a PO friend of mine. I'm
not trying to invade your privacy, but after Brian, I can't risk not knowing. I had to be sure. You gotta understand that. Ian says you are good to him. You treat him with respect and give him what he needs emotionally."

Mickey blushed, heat creeping along his neck and face. He didn't like talking about this shit. What he did with or for Ian was between the two of them. He was uncomfortable discussing these things with Ian's sister. He's also more than a little pissed Fiona's been checking up on him. Asking around about him. Like he can't fucking be trusted. He hates how he can't ever seem to escape his past. He'll always be a criminal and a derelict to people in this neighborhood. He'll always be a Milkovich.

But she wasn't done yet.

"I just wanted you to know, that I want to put that shit from the past to bed. For real. After this, it's done. I want to apologize and I want to forgive you, for all the bad shit you did to Ian back then. You were a royal dick a lot of the time."

"Not going to argue that." Mickey said.

"But I wanna start fresh. I won't go behind your back, I'll try to trust you, like I'm trying to trust Ian. So, fuck it, fresh start? Can we do that?" she asked, locking eyes with Mickey again.

Mickey nodded.

"I don't want to lose Ian. I don't want him to pull away from us and disappear again. Promise me, if you guys get serious again, you won't do what Brian did. You won't keep him from us." she had a desperate, pleading tone to her voice that unsettled Mickey.

"Fiona, what the fuck?" Mickey asked. "When did I ever push Ian to do anything? He's a big boy, and he makes his own decisions. Sometimes he just needs time away from this chaotic shit show you guys call a family. But he always comes back. I know you guys never liked me, but I'm not stupid enough to try and come between you and Ian. He loves the fuck outta you guys, and it would hurt him a lot if I shit all over that relationship. I want to make Ian happy. That's all I ever wanted. And as long as hanging with you assholes makes him happy, I'm going to make that shit happen. But if he needs a time out from all this bullshit, I'm gonna back him on that too."

Fiona nodded again, her eyes a little glassy now. Mickey didn't want to see her cry.

"I'm glad he has you back." she said sincerely. Mickey didn't know what to do with that, so he just nodded again. He felt open and exposed after this conversation. He and Fiona had never talked like this.

A thought occured to him in that moment. It felt like the right time to bring it up, since they were being so nice to each other right now.

"Oh, I meant to ask you, how's it going at your apartment building?"

Fiona's eyes went wide for a moment, obviously taken aback by Mickey's inquiry.

"It's good." she smiled. "Not as easy as I thought it would be. A lot of work."

"I get that." Mickey laughed. "I was talking to my boss about it today, actually. He told me we could help you out, if you need it. You know, simple fixes. We do it all. Drywall, floors, a little bit of plumbing and electrical. Fucking yard work. If you ever need any help, give me a call. Matty said he'd cut you a good deal."
Fiona was openly balking at him now. He mouth was hanging open in shock, her beer forgotten halfway to her mouth.

"Seriously?" she asked.

Mickey smiled, nodding. "Yeah. He's a good guy, wants to help."

"I think you're a good guy too, Mickey." Fiona laughed. "Who saw that coming?"

"Fuck off." Mickey laughed, standing up. "Get my number from Ian and call me when you figure out what you wanna do first."

Fiona stood up too, following Mickey back into the house. "Thanks, Mickey, it's really nice of you to offer."

They walked back into the house, ready to eat and revel in some old fashion Gallagher calamity.

-----------------------------------------------

Ian watched Mickey and Fiona talking in the kitchen like old friends. It was time to eat, finally, and everyone was in the kitchen, plating up the food and getting ready to gorge themselves. Mickey was laughing at something Fiona was saying. He had his genuine smile on his face, none of that forced shit Ian had seen earlier in the day.

Ian was trapped in a conversation with Beth that he just couldn't seem to escape. Lip had left him with her to talk to Carl and Kev about some video game they were all obsessed with at the moment.

Beth was dull as dishwater, and she had the misconception that just because Ian was gay, it meant he knew the first thing about fashion. She was deep into a lecture about the difference between Calvin Klein and Dolche & Gabbana. Ian had tuned her out a while ago, just watching Mickey and Fiona interact like they haven't hated each other for a decade.

"So I said, 'girl, I wouldn't be caught dead in that.' She paid five grand for that monstrosity. Can you imagine?" she giggled.

"Uh, no." Ian said, sparing her a glance before returning his gaze to Mickey. "Um, I wanna go help with dinner. You ready to eat?" he asked, already walking away.

Beth didn't say anything, or if she did, Ian didn't hear it.

He loaded his plate up with food. The Gallaghers had never had such a spread for Thanksgiving before. He'd never seen so much food in their house.

Fiona had set up the big table in the living room. It was the first time she'd done that since the fiasco of the 'Monica Thanksgiving', as Ian had taken to calling it in his head.

Ian doesn't want to let his mind go there today. He's done enough thinking about Monica. He doesn't want her specter to hang over this day.

Today is supposed to be a fresh start. The beginning of his life with Mickey. The first step to truly healing his relationship with his family. He wasn't going to let the darkness of the past cast a shadow of this moment.

He sat down on the left side of the table with his plate. Lip sat to his left, Mickey plopped down on
Everyone settled into their seats, ready to tuck into their full plates, when Amy, one of Kev and Vee's twins, banged her tiny fist on the table. Everyone looked over to her, curious.

"We gotta say what we're thankful for first." she said, in a commanding tone that was cute coming from someone so small.

Lip laughed, taking a sip of a rum and coke he probably shouldn't be drinking. "Not thankful." he muttered glumly.

Gemma, the other twin looked over at Lip with her tiny eyebrows raised. "Everybody's thankful for something, Phillip." she said.

Ian chuckled at that. The little girl had no patience for Lip's blase attitude.

And that's how Ian ended up sitting at the table, plate full of delicious looking food just waiting for him, listening to everyone spout off about random shallow things they were 'thankful' for.

"I'm thankful for Netflix." from Carl.

"I'm thankful for AA." from a hippocritical Lip.

"I'm thankful for tenants who pay on time." Fiona chuckled, much to her own amusement.

"I'm thankful for my daughter." from Debbie, taking this shit seriously, apparently. She ran a hand down Franny's face, fixing the little plate she had on her high chair.

"I'm thankful for my super hot wife, and my beautiful girls." Kev said, leaning in to kiss Vee on the neck. She purred like a cat, looking out over the table.

"I'm thankful that we're all moving up in the world." she said, smiling at everyone. "We lived in the gutter long enough."

That got a laugh out of everyone.

It was Mickey's turn. Ian wasn't sure if he was going to play along, or scoff at the whole thing. Everyone was looking at him, waiting for an answer or an outburst.

Ian thought the odds were pretty even.

Mickey cleared his throat, looking out over the table, then turned and locked eyes with Ian.

"I'm thankful for my fresh start." he said, eyes never leaving Ian's. He looked so serious, Ian's breath caught in his throat.

Jesus.

"Ian." Mickey said, breaking Ian out of his little moment. "Your turn."

Ian shook his head a little, looking down at his plate, then out at everyone at the table, watching him. Waiting for his answer.

"I'm thankful for the second chance I've been given." he said, boldly reaching over to lay his hand over Mickey's on the table.

It was a calculated risk. They had only been back together a short time, and Mickey was never one
for public displays. Hell, he hasn't even told his family he and Mickey are official again. But Mickey had come here today with him, and that meant something.

The risk paid off, because instead of ripping his hand away, he turned it palm side up, allowing Ian to slot their fingers together. There, in front of everyone. This small, insignificant display of affection sent Ian's heart into overdrive.

"Good." Amy smiled from her booster seat. "Let's eat."

Everyone erupted into laughter at that, wasting no more time devouring their meals.

If Mickey could handle the Gallagher Thanksgiving, he could handle anything.

That's what he keeps telling himself as he drive him and Ian out of the south side and toward Svetlana and David's house on the north side.

This was nothing. It was no big deal. Just coffee and spending some time with the little man. Mickey's excited for that, at least. He hasn't seen his son in a while. Life and circumstances getting in the way. The custody agreement hasn't been signed yet, so Mickey was still at Svetlana's mercy when it came to seeing Yev. She had the kid on a very strict schedule, and time with Mickey was often left of the 'to do' list.

Mickey was looking forward to signing the custody agreement, so he could have it all laid out in black and white. He had David to thank for that, oddly enough. The man hardly knew Mickey, but he seemed to have a soft spot for him for whatever reason. He often took Mickey's side during disagreements with Svetlana, much to the woman's dismay. Mickey didn't know why David was so adamant that Mickey have a relationship with Yevgeney, but he was grateful to have him backing him up. Svetlana was a force of nature, and she was used to getting her way in all aspects of her life. But David tempered her, got her to soften her approach and be more agreeable. Mickey would take all the help he could get dealing with his ex-wife. She still terrified him most of the time.

Which is why is a little bit anxious as he pulls up in front of the huge house. It was on a tree lined street in Lincoln Park. The house had to be worth millions. Mickey knew a little bit about real estate now, working in construction and restoration with Matt. He parked in front of the house in an empty spot.

"Lauren and Javier say Happy Thanksgiving, call them later." Ian says, dropping Mickey's cell phone back onto the seat. Looking over it's obvious Mickey didn't hear a word he just said.

He turned off the car and just stared at the house. He'd never been here. He'd always met Svet and Yev outside of home. At a restaurant or one of Yev's games. It was a shock, seeing how Svet and Yev lived now. They'd traded up, for sure.

The house was made of what looked like travertine to Mickey's mostly untrained eye. The stone was an off yellow color. It was impressive. Mickey didn't even want to think of what the inside of the house was going to look like.

It was just coffee.
He was doing this for Yev.

He took a deep breath and looked over at Ian, both glad and regretful that he brought him with him. He knew he needed backup to deal with Svetlana, but he didn’t want Ian to bear witness to her taking pot shots at him the whole time, or have to watch him flail and falter trying to connect with his son.

But his need for Ian's comforting presence overruled any misgivings he had over the situation. So he swallowed his anxiety down, feeling it curling in his stomach as he opened the door and stepped onto the immaculate street.

Ian followed him, walking over the sidewalk and up the stairs to the front door. Mickey half expected a suited up butler to answer the door when he knocked.

But it was just Svetlana. She stood there in the doorway, arms crossed over her chest, defiantly staring the men down in the doorway.

"Mikhailio, Orphan Annie." she said coolly.

"Don't start with that shit, Svet." Mickey said, shifting closer to Ian instinctively. "We talked about this."

Svetlana shrugged, moving to the side to let them in. "Ian." she said, nodding to Ian as he passed her and walked into the house.

"Svetlana." Ian replied. He kept his face passive.

Mickey looked around the inside of the house. Off to the left was a huge living room. Giant bay windows let the afternoon sun in, spreading rays of light over the tan furniture. There was a giant stone fireplace against the far wall, a fire crackling and spitting inside the stone enclosure. Over to the right was a winding spiral staircase, and on the other side of the stairs was a den and dining room together, the kitchen taking up the entire back of the house. Exotic hardwood floors covered the entire bottom floor. Ipe, if Mickey remembered correctly. It was modern and expensive looking. If Mickey was uncomfortable before stepping into the house, he was crawling out of his skin now. He knew Svetlana had traded up, but this was beyond the pale. He had never felt like more of an outsider in his entire life.

Just as Mickey was spiraling down into a pit of self deprecation and inadequacy, Yevgeny came booming into the room like a hurricane, a harried David in tow.

"Daddy Mickey!!" the boy yelled, running full steam into his father. Mickey had just enough time to kneel down and open his arms. He enveloped his son in a hug, lifting him up off the ground and standing again. Yevgeny wrapped his legs around Mickey's waist, giggling.

"Daddy, I'm too big to be picked up." Yevgeny laughed. He didn't move to be put down, though.

"You are a big boy now." Mickey smiled. "Don't you think, Gallagher?" he looked over at Ian, who was standing by the wall, arms crossed over his chest, small smile ghosting his lips.

"Sure is." Ian said.

"Uncle Ian!!!" Yevgeny screamed, now kicking Mickey's ribs to get put down. Mickey chuckled, placing his son down on the floor so he could run to Ian.

Yevgeny clamored over to Ian, who had knelt down with his arms open for Yevgeny to fall into with
a high pitched squeal. Ian wrapped his arms around Yevgeny's tiny body, pulling him against his chest. Yevgeny pulled back so he could look into Ian's eyes. He tilted his head to the side, studying him. Ian mimicked the motion, cocking his head over to the left and raising his eyebrows.

"Where have you been?" Yevgeny asks, looking between Ian and his father. Svetlana and David are moving around the kitchen, making coffee and mixed drinks, placing them on a small tray. David picks up the tray and carries it to the living room and puts it down on the coffee table. Ian and Mickey take a seat on one of the couches, Yevgeney climbing up to sit between them, a tiny hand on either of their thighs. It's like he has to have contact with them, has to make sure they're really there.

"What do you mean, buddy? Where have we been?" Ian asks, confused.

Yevgeny huffs, his head swiveling to look at Ian and then his father. The exchange a look over his head, Mickey shrugs.

"I haven't seen you in forever." Yevgeny says, voice cracked. "It's been so long! And I wanted to show you how good I can play soccer. I play soccer now, and I get goals and everyone cheers, and you guys never came. Not one game. And you came to my baseball games. Do you not like soccer? Mamma said you don't. " he says, sad faced.

"You play soccer?" Mickey asked, thoroughly confused. He glances up at David as he passes him a coffee, nodding his thanks. He sips it, tasting the distinct bite of Baily's on his tongue.
Ian also takes a cup, though his eyes stay on Yevgeny the entire time. "That sounds like so much fun, Yevvy. Tell me all about it. " he says brightly, running a hand over Yevgeny's darkening blond hair. "Do you like it?"

Mickey can tell he's trying to distract Yevgeny from his sadness and anger of his father missing his games. It works well, the child's face brightening right back up as he starts talking animatedly.

Ian nods to Mickey, and Mickey takes that as his cue to get up and figure out what the fuck is going on. He gets to the kitchen just as Svetlana is finishes up Yevgeny's hot chocolate. She's stirring cup, eyes trained on the counter top.

"Why didn't you tell me the kid was playing soccer?" he asked, putting his hands on the granite counter top and tipping his head down to try and make eye contact with her.
Svetlana shrugs, moving to go around Mickey and back to the living room, but he steps in front of her, crossing his arms over his chest.

"No." he says, shaking his head. "Tell me what's going on."

Svetlana huffs, clearly irritated. She looks at Mickey, a cold glare that would probably scare a normal person. But it just pisses Mickey off even more.

"Fucking tell me."

"I want Yevgeny to have this, with David." she spits. She puts the hot chocolate down on the counter top and takes two step so she's right in Mickey's face. She's wearing those stupid hooker heels, so she towers over him. "I want my son to bond with his new father. I want him to love his new father. The man who is there for him. The man who will raise him. But all he can ever talk about is Daddy Mickey. It hurts David. I do not want that. You have baseball. David will have soccer." she nods to herself like they've agreed to something.

"You can't do that. Now he thinks I don't give a shit. Now he thinks I don't want to be there." Mickey says lowly. He's trying to keep his voice level, but he's so fucking mad, he can feel his face
heating up and his hands start to shake. This is the point where he would be breaking shit, if this were him a few years ago. But he takes a deep breath, never taking his eyes off Svetlana. He won't let her see him lose it.

He won't give her the satisfaction.

"Now you care." she says, obviously equally as angry. "You never care before. You didn't even come home when he was born."

"That's not fucking fair." Mickey growls. "Did you forget how he got here? Did that shit slip your mind?" he's seething now.

"Weak American pussy." Svetlana's voice is laced with bitterness. "You think you are the only one to ever be forced? You think you are the only one who ever suffers? I suffer. I have pain. But I do what must be done for Yevgeny. Always. You do not. You run. You hide. You hide in jail. You hide in Mexico. And when you come back you hide with drugs. Now you hide behind redhead fuck who also always leaves." she shrugs her shoulders. "I want my son to have a father in his life. Always in his life. Not in and out. Not here then not. You are unreliable. So is your boyfriend. This is not good for Yevgeny. So he now has David. David likes soccer. Yevgeny and David will have soccer together. You will not get in the way."

Mickey steps up as close as he possibly can. They are breathing the same air, nose to nose. Mickey raises his eyebrows. Svetlana mirrors his actions, one hand on her hip, the other balled into a fist at her side.

"You listen to me. I'm only going to say this shit once." Mickey bites his lip, looking over his shoulder to Yevgeny and Ian sitting on the couch together, talking about something Mickey can't hear. "I know shit was fucked up, for a long time. I was fucked up. I think I had a good reason. You don't. That shit don't matter. But I'm fucking here now. I want to be here. I want to be his father. I AM his father. And I want him to know that I care. I don't want him to think I don't wanna be involved in his life. I don't want you telling him or insinuating that I don't give a shit, or I don't wanna be around. That's not fair. You're already moving across the fucking state. You will have plenty of time to build up your perfect fucking family. He will know David. I'm sure he'll love David. And if David is good to him, then that's fine by me. But if he wants me there, Svet, you shouldn't stand in the way of that. Don't hide shit from me, let him believe I'm choosing to ignore him. Not only is that a fucked up thing to do to me, but how do you think that's going to affect Yev? How is it gonna fuck his head up thinking his Dad don't love him? Cuz I know what it did to me. How about you? How did it feel when you finally figured out your old man didn't give a fuck? Feel good? You ever get over it? Cuz I know I'll be fucked up for life over that shit. And no stand in step dad can take the place of the kid's real father. Not in his mind, and certainly not in his heart." Mickey took a deep breath, looking back again to see Ian looking at him, a concerned look on his face. "How do you think he's gonna feel in ten years if you keep this shit up? Cuz I know he'll resent the fuck outta you and David. And I don't think you want that."

Svetlana narrowed her eyes, but said nothing.

"I'm not contesting the adoption." Mickey said, sticking up his pointer finger. "I'm not contesting your move." middle finger. "I help pay his expenses." ring finger. "I pick up every time you call." pinky finger. "and I love him." thumb. "I didn't know if I ever could, but I fucking do." he sighed, running a hand through his hair. "Don't make this harder than it has to be. Let my son and I have a relationship. I'm not trying to take him from you. Please, don't take him from me."

Svetlana sighs, her whole body deflating. She doesn't say anything else to Mickey. She walks right past him into the living room, setting the hot cocoa down in front of Yevgeny, who grabs it up and
starts blowing on it immediately.

Mickey smiles fondly, watching Ian poking at Yevgeny's marshmallows with his finger. Yevgeny giggles, and it's one of the best sounds Mickey's ever heard.

He sits back down next to his son, just as his ex wife speaks. She sits next to David and they link hands immediately. They lock eyes, having what looks like a silent conversation before David nods minutely.

Svetlana turns to them. "Zhenya, tell Daddy Mickey and Uncle Ian when your next soccer game is."

Yevgeny beams at his father, immediately going off on a tangent about his next two soccer games.

Mickey listens intently, but his eyes stay on Svetlana for a moment. He's not sure what her endgame is, but he's grateful for a small reprieve in the war they seem to be fighting.
He knows one thing though. If she thinks he's just gonna give up, slink away, fade out of his son's life, she's sadly fucking mistaken.
He may have been a coward before. He may have been a runner. He may have been scared and ashamed and cruel.

But he's none of that shit anymore.

And part of the reason he did all this work to change, to be better, was for his son. So he could be the father the kid deserved.
And he'll fight her tooth and nail the whole way to make sure that he gets the opportunity to show Yevgeny that he matters, and he is loved.
They spend their short visit drinking spiked coffee and listening to Yev babble about soccer.
Mickey loves every minute of it, bitch ex wife aside....

"Mick, are you sure you want me to come? You can drop me off at the apartment and come back when you're done." Ian says for probably the fifth time. He's fidgeting in Mickey's boss's truck, on the short ride from Svetlana's house to Jack's parents house.

He can't remember why he agreed to come with Mickey in the first place.
He likes Jack well enough now. Some time has passed since that one awkward encounter. He's not jealous like he once was.
It's not that.
He just feels like a bit of an interloper.

Jack is Mickey's friend. Matt is Mickey's boss. Ian is Mickey's what? Not boyfriend. The haven't talked about that.

Mickey was invited to Jack's house. Then Mickey invited Ian. Ian doesn't even know if Jack wants him there. They are not really friends, not yet. He doesn't really know the kid.
He's anxious and nervous and feels a little off kilter. What the hell did Svetlana put in that coffee? He feels hot all over.
Mickey pulls up in front of a nice house. It's got cedar clapboard siding and a slate roof. Big windows and a stone inlaid walkway.

Ian knew Jack's family was loaded, but it's still a bit jarring to see it. He still feels strange around all this wealth.

Mickey parks the truck in the driveway and turns to Ian, smiling. Mickey had been upset when they left Svetlana's house. Ian hadn't heard it all, but he heard enough to get the gist of it. Svetlana is trying, yet again, to cut Mickey out of Yev's life. But Mickey held his own against the cold-hearted bitch.

Ian's proud of him.

And as soon as they left Svetlana's and started the short journey to Jack's, Mickey's mood improved dramatically. He was smiling, holding one of Ian's hands with his free one, singing along to Guns n Roses as it flowed from the radio.

Ian smiles to himself. Never in a million years did he think Mickey would be such a singer. 'Sweet Child of Mine' never sounded so good.

"You ready for this?" Mickey asks, turning to Ian. He doesn't move to open the door, just looks at Ian and waits for the go-ahead.

"Yeah." Ian says, smiling. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"I know you still have reservations or whatever about Jack." Mickey said, straight faced, no trace of teasing. "You know he's just a friend. He's even brought someone tonight. Someone he's seeing, or fucking, whatever. We're friends. Good friends. And I hope you and him can be friends too. That's why I asked you to come tonight." Mickey slides across the bench seat, placing a hand on Ian's face. "I want you guys to like each other." he kisses Ian sweetly on the lips. Just the barest press. Just a hint of tongue.

It sets Ian's whole body on fire.

Ian's breath hitches and his hand flies up to the back of Mickey's head, pulling him closer. Always closer. The kiss deepens, tongue and teeth and lips everywhere.

Too soon for Ian's liking, Mickey pulls back. He pats Ian's cheek, staring into his eyes with a bright, fond smile on his face. "I don't want you to be jealous of shit that don't matter. It's me and you, yeah?"

Ian nods, and nods again. Not trusting his voice in the moment.

"I want you to be in my life. All parts of my life. This here, Jack and Matt, they are part of my life. Understand?" Mickey tilts his head to the side, waiting.

Ian nods again. He's hit with that feeling again. That feeling that Mickey has changed so much. He's not afraid to say how he feels. Not afraid to ask for what he needs. And right now, he needs Ian to try to get to know someone he cares about. He needs Ian to look past his own fears and insecurities, and do something for Mickey.

Ian can do that. Because he's changed too. He's not that scared, insecure kid anymore. He can be civil with Mickey's ex fuck buddy. Hell, he actually kinda likes Jack already. He hasn't told Mickey that. It's still a little awkward to him.
But he's trying.

And what he's about to do right now will be the ultimate test. Can he be cool with Jack for more than a few passing moments?

He hopes so.

Mickey kisses him again. Slow and sweet and everything Ian ever wanted. His heart speeds up in his chest and he goes a little fuzzy around the edges.

"C'mon." Mickey says, pulling away and finally opening the car door. "Lexi makes this killer pumpkin pie, you gotta try it.

"Oh, Mickey's here!" Matt booms, once he opens the door to see Mickey and Ian standing on the porch. "Jackie, Mickey's here!" he yells again, smile stretching his face as he corrals Mickey and Ian into the house and out of the cold Chicago night. The sun had set a while ago, and the temperature had dropped dramatically.

Mickey shakes Matt's hand, but Matt pulls him into a hug. Mickey goes without much of a fight. Ian finds the whole scene overwhelming. Heartwarming.

Jack comes around the corner, holding a pie in one hand a beer in the other. Ian's not sure if he's supposed to be drinking or not, but it's not his place to say, so he stays quiet. He follows Mickey into the living room, listening to him and Matt talking about something work related. He sits down next to Mickey on a big couch, the long, low coffee table in front of them is covered in delicious looking deserts. Ian has been eating and drinking all damn day, but the spread in front of him make him think he's got a little room left.

"Mick!" Jack says, dropping the pie he's holding next to a plate of tarts. Mickey stands up from the couch and goes to him with open arms. The hug for a while, everyone else in the room just sitting there silently. Ian feels strange in that moment. That eerie feeling of not belonging seeping into his skin. Jack is whispering something in Mickey's ear. Mickey chuckles, pulling back and smacking the side of Jack's head playfully.

Jack finally lets Mickey go, and Ian can breathe again when Mickey sits back down next to him. Mickey takes his hand right away, giving him a smile.

Jack sits across from them in an overstuffed arm chair, his parents against the far wall on the love seat.

"Where's Rowan?" Mickey asks, looking around.

"Couldn't get a pass, had to stay at the house with the others." Jack shrugs.

Mickey's not sure how the passes work at the house, and he wonders to himself if Rowan had broken some rule, got himself grounded or something.

"Mom, this is Mickey. I told you about him." Jack smiles, giving Mickey a fond look. "And this is his friend Ian. The EMT that saved my life." Jack is staring at Ian now, a strange look on his face. Gratitude? Affection? Ian can't place it. "It's because of these two men that I'm even here right now.
It's because of them that I'm clean, and I can be here with you tonight." Jack's eyes are a little wet, and Ian feels something shift inside him.

All the anxiety and jealousy he was feeling in the car dissipates like a fog, as he is overcome with Jack's genuine gratitude.

"Oh, I'm so glad you could come tonight." Lexi says. She gets up from her seat and crosses the room, enveloping Mickey and a shocked Ian in a tight embrace. She's bent over at an odd angle, looming over them as they lean back into the couch cushions. "You have no idea what it means to me," she whispered between their heads "I thought I lost him forever. Thank you." she pulls away before Ian can even think to reply, and she's gone back into the kitchen to bring out some forks, calling out over her shoulder as she disappears from sight. "Now let's eat. And be grateful for all the blessings in our life."

Ian's not about to argue. He's pretty damn grateful right now.

This is going better than Mickey anticipated. When he had asked Ian to join him at Jack's parents' house, he thought Ian would say no. When Ian had surprisingly agreed, he had thought it was going to be stilted and awkward the whole time.

He was wrong. Very wrong.

All the strange tension that had existed between Ian and Jack has seemingly evaporated. Mickey honestly didn't think that would ever happen. Ian has always been a jealous little bitch. He would never say this to Ian, but Ian had a strange attitude concerning Mickey's sex life before and after Ian. Like, Ian had a shit ton of boyfriends, always screwing around. Hell, he cheated on Mickey quite a few times back when they were kids. (bipolar is a bitch, but that doesn't take the sting out of it.) But no matter how many dudes Ian had fucked, he got insanely jealous over the fact that Mickey had been with other dudes too. He hated the idea of it, and took every opportunity to let Mickey know. Ian was even jealous over the girls he used to fuck as a cover when he was a teenager, even though it was obvious he didn't give a fuck about any of them. Ian was super territorial, and beyond possessive. Mickey was positive Ian would hate Jack on principal.

Looks like he was wrong.

Mickey's glad. He didn't want his friendship to falter because of his burgeoning relationship.

It's just Mickey, Jack, and Ian now. Matt and Lexi went into the family room to watch football, Matt saying something to Lexi about 'giving the boys some time to catch up without the old folks around.' Mickey thinks maybe Jack asked his dad to leave them be, but he's not sure.

"So, I was just standing there, on the bridge, totally lost, you know?" Ian's talking, and Mickey can't believe he's being so candid. He's never even heard this story. Figured they'd get to it at some point. But now that he's hearing it, he wants to know it all.

"My sister was suffocating me, my brother was sick of me. He got me this job, as a janitor at his college. And I was grateful, you know, but I just felt like I had fallen so low. I had all these big dreams, and it all went to shit when I got diagnosed." he paused for a moment, looking up at Jack. "Mick told you I'm bipolar, I assume?" he asked, tipping his head in Mickey's direction.
Mickey’s eyes went wide for a moment, his head swiveling between Ian and Jack. Jack, for his part, looked as shocked as Mickey did. He didn’t say anything at first.

"I don't mind." Ian said. "It's not like I'm ashamed. Not anymore."

"Uh, yeah, he mentioned it." Jack said warily.

"I'm sure he did more than mention it." Ian chuckled.

He was right. Mickey had told Jack everything. About the diagnosis, about his fears and feelings of inadequacy when Ian first got sick. How all he wanted to do was take care of him, and how he had felt like a failure the entire time. He told him about Ian cheating, running, stealing Yevgeny. About the hospital and the aftermath, and finally about Ian taking off with Monica, scaring Mickey half to death, only to come home and shatter Mickey into pieces by breaking up with him. He had unloaded the whole tragic tale on Jack, back when they were cellies. Back when he was still so desperate for Ian to just visit him. Back when he was still raw and ripped open by the whole thing.

"We talked about it." Jack conceded, obviously not wanting to break Mickey's confidence. Mickey appreciated that.

"Yeah, I'm sure." Ian nodded, a little sadly. "Anyway, I was on this bridge, just thinking about my life. All this shit that had happened to me beyond my control, and all the shit I had done that was entirely my fault." Ian looked over at Mickey as he said that last part. "And I was just hating my life and myself so much in that moment. Enough to wanna jump..." Ian paused, pinching the bridge of his nose.

Mickey didn't think, he just reached up and grabbed Ian's hand, pulling it down and gripping it between his own. A small smile formed on Ian's face.

"So I was just standing there, looking out onto the water, debating with myself, and the next thing I know there's this loud crash right behind me. It was a car accident. It was so loud, like scraping metal and breaking glass. I'd never heard anything that loud." he squeezed Mickey's hand a bit before he continued. "The guy who caused the accident got out of his car and started running down the highway, so I was like ‘Hey!’ and I started running after him, but then the car he hit caught fire, and I stopped following him so I could help the woman in the other car. It was so hot, and I couldn't breathe. I ended up pulling her from the car, and we both passed out on the road." he chuckled a little at the memory. "But I saved her life. That was when I knew I wanted to be an EMT." Ian finished his story and sits up to reach for his drink on the coffee table.

"Really?" Mickey asks, because he can't help himself. "Cuz my sister says you became an EMT because the hot fireman who saved your dumb ass after that hero shit told you to take the test." Ian blushes, pulling his hand out of Mickey's grasp. "Yeah, it was his idea to take the test, but I was already thinking about it."

"Cuz Mandy told me you went down to the fire station, fangirling out on him, baked cookies and everything." Mickey goaded, not even sure himself if he's joking or not.

Looks like Ian's not the only jealous bitch.

"I was just trying to show my gratitude." Ian says, defiant as ever.

"Whatever you say, freckles." Mickey muttered into his beer bottle.

"I think it's sweet." Jack says. "And it doesn't matter how it happened, you're damn good at it, and
I'm glad you got there, no matter who's idea it was. Right, Mick?"

"Yeah, sure." Mickey says. He doesn't wanna hurt Ian's feelings over a dude that doesn't fucking matter. "You are good at it, Ian. Really damn good."

Ian smiles shyly. "Besides, I wasn't even with that fire fighter that long." he adds on, almost as an afterthought.

"Oh, so you did fuck the fire man?" Jack laughs. "Good on you, kid. Was he good in bed at least?"

Ian laughs at that. Mickey doesn't find it funny.

"Uh, well." Ian says, but Mickey interrupts him.

"You don't have to answer that, Ian. Jack's just a perv interested in everyone else's sex life cuz his is shit right now."

"Hey, fuck you." Jack laughs, reaching over the table to swat at Mickey. "I get mine."

"Yeah, okay." Mickey laughs, "Nobody wants to hear about your sexcapades, keep a lid on it."

"I could listen." Ian smiles.

Wonderful. Now they're teaming up on him.

"Actually, Ian, I've been meaning to ask you. I mean, not to be too personal, but I really don't have anyone else to ask...." Jack leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, hands propped in a little pyramid on top. His eyes were shifting, having a hard time focusing on either Ian or Mickey. "It's about Rowan..."

"Oh god, really, Jack? You want to ask about the logistics of sex with a trans dude? Now?" Mickey huffed, irritated. This is not the shit he wanted to dredge up tonight. Fuck. Things had been going strangely well all day. Leave it to his asshole friend to fuck it all up on the home stretch.

He wasn't jealous or insecure. That's what he kept telling himself, and he almost believed it at this point. But talking about Ian's previous sex partners always put him in a shitty mood. Talking about Ian's relationship with Trevor was by far the hardest thing for Mickey. And it's not just because Mickey doesn't understand the trans thing.

He doesn't understand, but that's not what bothers him.

What bothers him is that Trevor is obviously a 'catch'. He's got a good job, he's well adjusted, mentally and emotionally, as far as Mickey can tell. He comes from a good family, one that loves and accepts him. He's young and objectively hot. As far as he knows, he was good to Ian, and Ian clearly cared about him, if he wanted to go back to him more than he wanted to go with Mickey to Mexico.

So talking to Jack about how to fuck a trans guy would bring up all those things in Ian's mind. It would remind him of how good things were, and maybe Ian would change his mind and go back to the dude after all.

Then Mickey would be destroyed. Again.

He didn't know if he could handle that shit. He's been broken by Ian more than enough times.

Before Mickey can berate his friend any more, Ian speaks.
"You know what, Jack, we can talk about it, if you want, but how about not right now? We need to get going anyway. It's actually pretty late." Ian looks over at the clock, causing the other two men to look over too.

10:30

Shit, it is late.

"Why don't I give you my number? We can get together some time this week, and talk about it, just us? Does that sound good?" Ian takes out his phone, ready to take Jack's number down. He totally misses the look of shock on both Mickey and Jack's faces.

What fresh hell is this? Ian giving Jack his number? What, are they going to be gay best friends now? Get manicures and talk shit about the men in their lives? Go shopping and get brunch together? All that super gay shit that Jack and Ian both love to do that Mickey can't stand?

Fucking fantastic.

"Really?" Jack's whole face lights up, and Mickey knows he's fucked. "That would be so great! Thank you, Ian, really." Jack fumbles in his pocket for his phone, pulling it out and typing Ian's number in as he recites it.

"It's really nothing." Ian waves him off. "I'm happy to help. It can be hard to navigate, and you don't wanna hurt the kid's feelings or upset him. You like him?" Ian asks, putting his phone back in his pocket and looking up at Jack.

Jack smiles a little, a small blush creeping up his neck.

What the hell? Jack's fucking blushing?

"I do. He's really nice."

"But, aren't you not supposed to fuck people in your halfway house?" Mickey asks, because even though these two idiots are hopeless romantics, Mickey's a realist, and it doesn't sound like a good idea to be screwing around with dudes when you're supposed to be getting clean.

"What, are we all rule followers now?" Jack asks, bitter tone laced in his words.

"Just looking out for you, man." Mickey mutters, a little hurt.

Jack sighs, falling back against the couch. "I get that. Sorry."

Ian inches closer to Mickey on the couch, carefully placing a hand on his thigh. Mickey looks over at him, eyebrows raised. Ian smiles.

"Jack's a big boy, Mick. I'm sure he can take care of himself."

"Not really, though." Mickey says, his eyes traveling over to his friend.

Jack shrugs. "He's not wrong." he smiles. "But that's why I got you, Mick, to keep me in line. And you're right, I'm supposed to be focused on my recovery, but I'm just having a little bit of fun. What's wrong with fun?"

Ian squeezes Mickey's thigh, clearly remembering the same thing Mickey's recalling. That day, so fucking long ago, when Ian asked Mickey that exact question.
What's wrong with fun?

Mickey sighs, clamping his hand down on Ian's, still resting on his thigh.

"Fine. Whatever. But keep your fucking eye on the prize, man. And don't come crying to me when it inevitably falls to shit."

Jack gets up from his chair, walking over to Mickey. He runs a hand through Mickey's hair, staring down into his face. Mickey leans into the touch unconsciously, his head leaning back, their eyes locked.

"You liar. You totally want me to come crying to you when it falls to shit." he chuckles.

Mickey pushes him away, not bothering to tell him he's right.

Asshole.

"Whatever, prick, we're leaving." Mickey gets up from the couch and starts to put his coat on, Ian doing the same.

Jack walks them to the door. He pulls Mickey into a tight hug, holding him against his chest. "Thanks for coming, Mick. It was really nice to have you here today." he pulls back, staring into Mickey's eyes.

Mickey nods. It was nice. He never anticipated such a strong friendship with this kid when they got bunked together all those years ago in jail. But now he can't imagine his life without him.

Jack lets him go, walking over to Ian.

"Ian, man, thanks so much for coming. My parents love you." Jack chuckled. Ian put his hand out to shake, but Jack batted it away immediately, opting instead to wrap his arms around Ian's middle, and pull him bodily against him.

Ian huffed out a surprised breath, but went into the hug without a fight. He caught Mickey's eye over Jack's head. Ian had a fond smile on his face. Mickey could tell he was really starting to like Jack. That probably surprised Ian more than Mickey.

Jack pulled back, but didn't let go. "You know, we're real friends now." he said, squeezing Ian's middle with his arms. "All that shit I heard about you for all those years, I thought I'd hate you forever." he laughed, almost to himself. "But Mick's right, you're impossible to hate. And if he can forgive you," he paused again, looking from Ian to Mickey. "If you can forgive each other, then how can I stay mad? That would just be silly." his face broke out into a coy smile before he lunged forward and planted a kiss on Ian's stunned mouth. He finally let go, releasing a flabbergasted Ian to a chuckling Mickey.

"You're a keeper, Red. I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship." Jack pushed them both out onto the front step, leaning in the door way, arms crossed over his chest. "See ya soon, boys." he winked, turning around and shutting the door on their stunned faces.

"He's a fucking trip, Mick." Ian laughed.

"You have no idea." Mickey replied. "But I have a feeling you're going to find out." Mickey took Ian's hand, kissing the back of it, before tugging him toward the truck, eager to get back to Ian's apartment.
"Jesus fucking Christ. I thought this day was never gonna end." Mickey sighed, falling back on Ian and Mandy's couch, hands thrown out dramatically at his side as his head bounced off the back of the couch.

Ian chuckled, falling down next to him and propping his feet up on the coffee table. He scooted as close to Mickey as he could, practically crawling into his lap. Mickey took the cue, draping his arm around Ian's shoulder as he dropped his head to Mickey's chest.

"T'was a good day." Ian mumbled into Mickey's chest, his words muffled by Mickey's black button up shirt.

"Sure it was, freckles." Mickey laughed lightly, running a tattooed hand through Ian's hair. "Better with you around. Always is." he added on as an after thought. The booze he'd consumed throughout the day loosening his lips, truth spilling out easily.

Ian picked his head up to stare into Mickey's eyes. "Yeah?" he looked a little shocked by Mickey's admission, although how Ian couldn't know how Mickey felt by now was anyone's guess.

Mickey felt like it was obvious at this point.

Ian was it for him.

He just nodded, not really wanting to start waxing poetic about his undying love for the redhead. It was still hard for him to articulate his feelings on a good day. Now that he was feeling a little tipsy, he was sure his word vomit would open up the floodgates and put a damper on the mood Mickey was hoping to set.

"Me too, Mick. You know I feel that way too, right?" Ian was now staring directly into Mickey's blurry blue eyes. "You know you're all I want?" Ian had a desperation to his voice, like he needed to make sure Mickey knew how he felt.

Mickey nodded again, pulling Ian's face to his in a desperate kiss. He's wanted this all damn day. Watching Ian interacting with all these people all day, just being his amazing, gorgeous, happy self, had been doing things to Mickey. Ian had this fucking way about him. Mickey's not the kind of hippie asshole who would say he had an aura about him, but that was kind of exactly what it was. He had this effervescent energy around him that lit up the whole room. He could make anyone like him. He could bring Mickey's mood up with just one look.

And Mickey had wanted to climb him like a tree since their morning coffee.

Mickey moved his mouth against Ian's in a slow easy manner that didn't quite match the fire in his body right now. He licked at Ian's lips until the other man opened his mouth for Mickey's tongue to snake it's way in.

Ian sighed into the kiss, running his hand up Mickey's side, gripping the fabric of his shirt tightly. Mickey groaned, swinging his leg over and straddling Ian's waist. With a leg on either side of his lap, Mickey deepened the kiss, both hands in Ian's red hair, pulling the short strands as he ground his hips down on Ian's crotch.
"Fuck." Ian choked out, ripping his mouth away and throwing his head back, fire ripping up his spine. He grabbed onto Mickey's hips hard, pulling him down onto his lap with more force. Mickey chuckled, a little breathless at Ian's vehemence. It amazed Mickey a little bit, that there could still be so much passion between them after all these years. He'd heard that people got tired of their partners after a while, that the fire died down and sex was more like going through the motions to get off. But with Ian, every time was like the first time (without the anger and fear, of course)

"Want you." Ian said, hands gripping Mickey's ass tightly, pulling him down onto his hard cock. Mickey was painfully hard himself, straining against his jeans.

Mickey smiled, kissing Ian again instead of answering him. He was full on dry humping him now, his hips moving on their own accord. They made out sloppily, tongues tangling outside their mouths. Mickey gave up Ian's mouth to latch onto his neck instead. Ian's neck was always a sure fire way to get him going. Ian moaned, loud, as Mickey sucked and nipped at the column of his throat. He bit lightly on the tendon of his neck, eliciting a delicious cry from Ian.

"God, Mick. Please." Ian whimpered.

"Please what?" Mickey asked innocently, grinding his hips down on Ian's throbbing cock.

"Please, Mick. Need you." Ian groaned, his hands squeezing Mickey's ass so hard it was painful. Deliciously painful.

Mickey pulled back, fingers going to the buttons of Ian's green dress shirt. He only got the first two buttons undone before they heard the front door open.

"We're here, assholes, make yourselves decent." Mandy's sing-song voice filled the apartment.

"Motherfucker." Mickey hissed, climbing off Ian's lap and adjusting his junk as he dropped himself next to Ian on the couch.

"Your sister has impeccable timing." Ian chuckled, adjusting his own hard on.

"Cock blocking bitch." Mickey grumbled.

Ian laughed at that, punching Mickey lightly in the arm.

Mandy came into view, carrying a twelve pack of beer and a fifth of whiskey.

"Like her a little better now." Mickey said, getting up off the couch to grab the whiskey from his sister's hand as she put the rest of the booze on the island in the kitchen.

"Nice to see you too, asshole." Mandy grumbled, grabbing a beer for everyone and wandering into the living room. Macy followed behind her, four shot glasses in her hands.

They both looked completely worn out. Mandy's hair, which was probably flawlessly done at the beginning of the day, was mussed up and falling in small wisps around her face. She fell down on the love seat and leaned over to take off her heels, sighing in relief and rubbing her feet.

Macy plopped down onto the seat next to her, grabbing her feet up and putting them in her lap. Mandy turned her body slightly so she was laying sideways on the love seat, so Macy could have full access to her sore soles.

Macy started rubbing her feet immediately, grinding her knuckles into the arch of her foot.
"Jesus babe, that's good." Mandy groaned, laying her head on the armrest.

"I've got magic fingers." Macy laughed.

"Sure do." Mandy smiled slyly, waggling her eyebrows.

"Eh, enough of those weirdo lesbo innuendos." Mickey chided as he poured out four shots of whiskey and passed them around.

Mandy laughed, pulling her feet off Macy's lap so she can sit up and take the offered shot.

Everyone has a glass in hand, but before they can toss them back, Macy puts her hand up, and everyone freezes, shot glasses suspended mid air between the table and their mouths.

"I just wanted to make a toast." Macy says.

Mickey rolls his eyes, but Ian's warm hand on his thigh keeps him from uttering the snide comment he had sitting on his lips.

Macy sits up a little straighter, her shot glass held aloft in her hand.

"I just wanted to say how thankful I am to be here." Macy said, her hand wandering down to rest on Mandy's free hand. "I'm thankful for good friends and family, and office politics that got me moved to a new department so I could meet this beauty." she smiled fondly at Mandy. "Everything happens for a reason. And I think we all have a lot to be thankful for."

"Cheers!" Mandy laughed, and they all clinked their glasses together and downed their shots.

Mickey's not one for cheesy emotional toasts, or for hippie shit like fate or soulmates. But he has to agree with Mandy's girlfriend on this one point.

Everything happens for a reason.

If you had told him that shit when he was a kid, you would have earned yourself an ass beating. All the shit he had to endure in his life. The beatings and the abuse. The shit Mandy went through. His mother dying. Fucking Terry.

There's no way in hell any of that shit could have a purpose. It had to be shit luck, plain and simple.

Going to jail, over and over. Losing Ian. Being raped.

How could you ever say that shit happened for a reason??

But now, sitting here, with Ian and his sister, after the day they just shared, he had to admit it.

All those terrible things, the years of hating himself and pushing everyone away. The pain, the suffering. The loss.

If any of those things hadn't happened, if his life hadn't unfolded in this exact way, he wouldn't be here right now.

He wouldn't be the man he is.

He's not perfect, not by a fucking long shot. But he's a better man now than he had ever hoped to be. Things were good for him. He had his son in his life, he had his sister and brothers. Ian was holding his damn hand right now.
He still has his demons he has to fight. He probably always will. But he's strong enough to fight them now, and he doesn't have to fight them on his own anymore. So yeah, maybe all that shit did happen for a reason. To bring him to this exact place at this exact time.

Huh, maybe he is one of those assholes. Those "fate and soulmates" assholes that believes hippie shit like this.

It feels good to believe, for once.

They stay up late into the night, talking and laughing about their various holiday experiences. Ian tells them about Yevgeny, Mandy tells them about meeting Macy's parents. The conversation flows easy, and so does the booze.

They end the evening just as Mickey anticipated, engaging in depraved acts of gay debauchery on either end of the apartment.

And as Ian pulses inside him, their hands laced together above Mickey's head and Ian's tongue and teeth roaming all over his taught neck, Mickey for once in his life is grateful. For this life he has.

Looks like everyone is, indeed, thankful for something.....
Mickey wipes the sweat off his brow with the back of his dirty hand. He squints, unable to see what's going on through his fogged up safety glasses.

He's finishing up sanding an old oak plank floor in a duplex in Boystown. It's hard work, the sander is big and bulky, and it pretty much pulls him back and forth over the floor, instead of the other way around.

He can hear Matt laughing at him from across the room as he cleans up his tools, the prick.

"Not as easy as it looks, huh kid?" Matt chuckles.

"Fuck no." Mickey replies with a laugh of his own.

He's ready to go home. It's been a long fucking day (they all are, really.) and he just wants to get back to his house and take a fucking shower.

It's Friday, and that means game night.

Mickey didn't think he'd ever be a 'game night' kind of dude, but a lot of shit had changed since he came back from Mexico. And if little shit like game night made Ian and his sister happy, then he was gonna fucking do it.

"Turn that shit off, and we'll get the hell out of here. Lex and I are heading up to visit Jack, bring him and his friend to dinner." Matt wiped his hands on his overalls as he walked over to where Mickey was to start putting away the rest of the tools.

"Oh, you guys are gonna finally meet Rowan?" Mickey asks, finally turning off the damn sander, the silence in the room overwhelming after the incessant humming and grinding of the machine.

"Looks like it." Matt shrugged.

"What, you not want to?" Mickey asks, putting the last of his tools in his tool box before turning to face Matt.

"Course I want to." Matt says. "It's just that every time we make a plan to meet the kid, shit falls through. It's like he's avoiding meeting us. That makes me wary."

"I get that. Maybe the kid's just nervous." Mickey offers. He doesn't know the kid well, really, but it must be scary for him, meeting new people. Mickey wonders for a moment what it must be like to be like Rowan. He knows firsthand how hard it is to be gay, he can't imagine being gay and transgender.
As a gay man, Mickey felt like he was constantly coming out of the closet. Any time he met someone new, the topic of his sexuality would have to come up sooner or later. It was a never ending thing, always wondering and worrying how the other person would react. Would they accept him? Would they be like Terry? Homophobes were everywhere.

So he can't even fathom what it must be like for someone like Rowan. Or even Trevor for that matter. Trans people have come a long way in the past few years, but the world was far from a safe place for them. So he can understand why the kid would be a little nervous of meeting Jack’s parents. He's probably afraid they're going to take issue with him, forbid Jack from seeing him anymore.

But Matt and Lexi are not like that. They're more likely to not like the idea of Jack dating another addict, and so soon in his recovery. Mickey's positive Rowan's trans status will have no bearing on how they view the kid.

But it's easy for Mickey to say that shit, but in reality, he knows that fears like that don't go away in the face of facts.

"Yeah, you're probably right. I'm not going to tell Jack how to live his life, but I kind of wish he'd focus on himself for a bit, you know?"

Mickey nods, it's like Matt read his mind.

"But he's grown, so I can't tell him what to do. If he's gonna be seeing anyone, I wanna meet the kid. You met him, what do you think?"

Mickey shrugs. "Don't know him all that well, but he seems nice enough. Jack's taken to him, that's for sure. It's nice to see him happy."

It's Matt's turn to nod. They head out of the house and toward the truck, putting their things into the bed before climbing up front. Matt turns the key and they are off, weaving through the traffic in Boystown on their way back to Mickey's house.

"You know, I always thought you two were gonna get together." Matt says offhandedly while they are idling at a stop light.

"Huh?" Mickey asks, taking his eyes off the scenery he was staring at to look over at Matt.

"When you guys were locked up together, he talked about you all the time. Always going on and on about how great you were. All these years go by, you being gone and all, and he's never really stopped talking about you. Really cares about you. I just always kinda thought you guys would end up together. But Jackie always told me you were meant to be with Ian. Looks like he was right."

Matt chuckled.

Mickey smiled. He had to agree.

-------------------------------------

"Are we going to do this or what?" Mickey's irritated voice floats out from the living room. Why Ian thought that inviting Lip to game night was a good idea was anyone's guess.

He had actually thought Lip would be smart and say no. They had been hanging out at Fiona's
earlier that day, just sitting around drinking coffee and bullshitting when Ian had gotten up and told them that he had to head over to Mickey’s house on Trumball for game night.

Fiona and Lip had both almost pissed themselves laughing. The idea of family game night at the Milkovich house sending them into hysterics. When they had both calmed down enough to breathe properly again, Ian had told them, yes they do this every week, and yes, he supposes Lip could tag along if he felt so inclined.

Although he was sure Lip was going to be disappointed when he realized there would be no post-scrabble victory ex-sex for him when he met Macy. Ian had made a point not to tell him, too keen on watching realization dawn on his brother's face. Cruel? Maybe. But it was going to be hilarious.

"Nah, Mickey, we gotta wait for Mands." Ian reminded him. He grabbed some beers from the fridge and a bottle of vodka Mandy had requested and put them out on the end table, since the coffee table was covered with the the board and bits for a game of Clue.

Mickey huffed out a aggravated breath, taking the offered beer and chugging half of it in one go. He's kinda pissed Lip tagged along for game night, and a little irritated at Ian for bringing him along. It's not like he hated the guy, but he wasn't eager to chill with him too much either. He had the distinct feeling that Lip still thought Ian was lowering himself by dating Mickey. Like he still saw Mickey as that trashy punk who beat kids for fun and always had a gun and at least three controlled substances on his person at any given moment.

But Mickey hadn't been that dude for a really long time. He wondered if Lip or any of Ian's other siblings would ever see him for the man he is now, and not always see him as the asshole he used to be.

But he wasn't about to tell Lip to fuck off. Ian had invited him, so he was going to suck it up and play nice.

"Why the hell are we playing Clue?" Mickey asked, instead of questioning Lip's motives for joining them tonight.

"Mandy requested it, so why the fuck not?" Ian asked, finally coming into the room, a bowl of popcorn in his hand. He set the bowl down on the table next to the game, seating himself close enough to Mickey that their thighs touched all the way up to their hips.

"Didn't even know we had this shit." Mickey motioned to the game spread out on the table with his beer bottle.

"You didn't." Ian chuckled, taking a sip of his own beer. He laid his free hand on Mickey's thigh, rubbing it up and down his jean clad leg. "I brought it over from Fi's."

"Ah." Mickey replied, watching Ian watching him. Lip was scrolling through his phone, pointedly ignoring the other two men.

Mickey smiled slyly to himself. If Lip wanted to hang out with them, he was going to get the full fucking experience. He grabbed Ian's beer and placed it on the coffee table with his own.

"C'mere." he whispered, his hand going up to Ian's hair and pulling him in. Ian hissed lowly at the stretch on his scalp, but came easily. He wrapped an arm around Mickey's body and once they were flush against each other their mouths connected on instinct.

The kiss was chaste, by their standards. Mickey's lips moved surely against Ian's, pulling back slightly to tip his head and go in for more. Ian smiled into the kiss as Mickey licked his lips, silently
asking him to open up. Ian complied, dipping his tongue into Mickey's mouth. Ian groaned lowly, his arm tightening around Mickey's body as they made out like a couple of teenagers.

"Hey!" Lip whined. "Come the fuck on with that bullshit. Don't wanna see you guys dry humping. I'm sitting right here."

Mickey did not even pull away to tell him off, just raised one hand and gave Lip the finger.

Ian chuckled against Mickey's lips, not pulling away either. If anything, he put more passion into the kiss, his tongue moving rhythmically against Mickey's now as Lip grumbling unintelligibly in the background.

Mickey heard the door open, but still didn't back off. He threaded his free hand through that red hair he loved so much, tugging on it lightly with both hands as he nipped at Ian's lips.

"Fucking hell." he heard Mandy's voice by the front door. "You assholes have company." she chided.

"That's what I was trying to tell them. Pricks don't give a damn." Lip pouted.

Mickey finally backed off, letting go of Ian's hair and patting it down a bit where he'd fucked it up with his fingers. He smiled brightly at Ian before turning to his sister and scowling at her.

"You're late, bitch." he said by way of greeting.

Lip had stood up to close the door, since Mandy had left it open when she came in, but a manicured hand shot out at the last moment and stopped him.

"What the fuck, Mands? You didn't wait for me?" Macy's disembodied voice floated in from the porch. She pushed her way in, almost knocking Lip to the floor, much to Mickey's amusement. He stood there, staring at Macy for a moment.

"Sorry." Mandy called back from the kitchen. She had a bag in her hand she set on the table. "I wanted to get this ice into the freezer before it could melt anymore."

Macy was now standing in the living room, Lip still behind her glancing between her and Mandy with a perplexed look on his face.

Ian laughed under his breath, leaning over to whisper into Mickey's ear. "This is gonna be hilarious."

"What?" Mickey asked, "he don't know?"

Ian shook his head, an evil smirk playing at his lips.

Mickey chuckled darkly, pulling Ian to sit more closely to him. "Oh shit. This is gonna be great."

"Hey Ian." Mandy sang, coming in from the kitchen just as Ian stood up. They collided in a tight embrace in the middle of the living room.

"Do they always do this?" Macy laughed, aiming her question at Mickey.

"What?" Mickey laughed. "Hug like Ian just got back from war? Yeah. Yeah, they do."

Mandy pulled away from Ian to punch her brother in the arm. "Fuck you, asshole. I miss him."

Ian beamed at his friend.
"That's the dumbest shit I ever heard, you fucking live together." Mickey scoffed. He turned to see Macy still staring curiously at Lip.

"Nice to see you, Mace." he said, pulling her attention away from the stand off she was in with Ian's brother. Macy snapped her eyes up to Mickey, shaking herself out of her trance. "Hey Mickey, long time no see, where you been?" She asked.

"Work. Had a floor I had to finish, been pulling long hours."

Macy nodded, glancing over at Lip again, who was still standing by the door, his eyes locked on Mandy and Ian.

"Macy, this is Lip, Ian's brother." Mickey said, throwing a thumb in Lip's general direction while Mandy and Ian finally pulled apart.

Macy's eyes went wide for a moment, looking over at her girlfriend, who just seemed to have noticed Lip was there at all.

"What the fuck is he doing here?" Mandy asked Ian, pointing an accusatory finger at Lip's scowling face.

"I'm right here." Lip said, annoyed.

"Okay." Mandy said, letting go of Ian to walk over to Lip. "What are you doing here?" she asked, arms crossed over her chest.

"What?" Lip asked, confused. "I thought we were cool. We said we were cool."

"Yeah, sure, we're cool. But I didn't think you'd be coming to game night. We don't really hang out, Phillip."

"Well, Ian invited me, so...." Lip shrugged uncomfortably. He fell back down onto the couch, reaching over to the side table to grab his beer, desperate for something else to focus on besides Mandy's piercing gaze.

"It's not a big deal, Mands, let the kid live." Macy laughed, coming up behind her girlfriend and wrapping her arms around her thin waist. Mandy fell back into the embrace, her eyes fluttering closed for a moment. Lips eyes went wide, and he looked over at his brother and Mickey, who had twin shit eating grins on their faces.

"Hi, I'm Macy. Mandy's girlfriend. And you're Lip, the ex. I've heard so much about you." she smiled sickly sweet, kissing Mandy's neck while eyeing Lip the whole time.

"Uh, hi." Lip said stupidly.

Mickey barked out a laugh. "Well fuck it, let's get to this murder mystery shit before it gets any more awkward in here."

"Good idea." Lip muttered, downing his beer in one long sip and immediately getting up to get another.

"Hey, go easy." Ian yelled at his brother's retreating back. He looked over at Mickey, who just shrugged.

Mandy and Macy sat down on the floor across from Mickey and Ian on the couch. Lip came back
with a round of beers for everyone and flopped down in the chair.

"I wanna be Miss Scarlet." Mandy said.

"Of course you do." Macy laughed, running a hand through Mandy's hair affectionately.

Lip scoffed under his breath, just loud enough for everyone to hear. Ian gave him a warning look, and he put his hand up, placating.

"Where's Igg?" Mandy asked as everyone got their shit together to play.

"With Tess at some hipster bar." Mickey laughed. "She's got him so pussy whipped it's insane."

"Yeah Mick, who would do something they didn't want to to make their partner happy? Like, game night maybe?" Mandy giggled.


Ian just smiled, sipping his own beer to hide his wide smile.

Yeah, Ian could get used to game night.

------------------------------------------

"I declare it was Colonel Mustard, in the conservatory, with the lead pipe." Lip said, with the conviction of a man who was rarely wrong. He grabbed the evidence envelope and took out the cards, perusing them with an unreadable face. Mickey waited patiently, face passive, knowing full well Lip was wrong, since he had Colonel Mustard in his own cards. He tried to keep his smug smile to himself as Lip's face fell. "God damn it." Lip muttered, putting the cards back into the envelope and falling back into his chair. "Stupid fucking game."

"Oh, come on Lip." Ian laughed. "It's just a game."

"You can't just declare without all the facts, man." Mickey laughed into his beer. "You understand how to play this game?"

"I understand quite well, fuck you very much." Lip replied sullenly. He got up to retrieve another beer. As far as Mickey understood, Lip was supposed to be laying off the sauce a little bit. Ian had mentioned in passing that Lip was supposedly an alcoholic now, taking after Frank like Ian had taken after Monica. Fucking Gallaghers, couldn't catch a break either, apparently. But it was none of Mickey's business what Lip did, with his life or his liver, so he kept his mouth shut.

Lip came back and flopped down in the chair, intent on watching the game, even if he was out for this round.

The game progressed, with people making guesses, being proven wrong, and steadily chipping away at all the booze Mickey had in the house. Mandy was seated on the floor between Macy's spread legs, Macy's hand constantly running up and down her side, across her shoulder, through her hair. Mickey surreptitiously watched them, a foreign feeling prickling up his spine. It wasn't pride, maybe contentment? He felt relieved and happy that Mandy had found someone who really seemed to care
about her. It was such a relief, watching her with Macy after having to bear witness to her suffering at the hands of countless asshole men, her ex husband Jeff chief among those pricks. He was just so damn happy to see her smiling for once.

Lip on the other hand, looked borderline homicidal. Mickey wondered as he went through his cards, preparing to take his turn, if Lip could really still be bitter about shit that went down with Mandy years ago. It didn't even seem that serious between them, back then. Although, Mickey was admittedly a little distracted himself at the time.

He looked over at Ian, the source of his distraction since he had been seventeen years old. He was taking his turn, shuffling his cards, mulling over his choices like he was deciding on which limb to amputate instead of which plastic pawn to accuse of murder. Mickey chuckled to himself at the consternation on the dork's face.

He was damn adorable.

Ian huffed, pinning Mickey with a withering look, before picking up Lip's piece, Professor Plum, of course, the pretentious ass, and dropping it down in the billiard room.

"I'm guessing it was Professor Plum, in the billiard room, with the rope?" He grabbed the envelope and checked the cards, tossing them back on the table with a grunt. "Damn it." he said. "No luck, your turn, Mick."

Everyone scribbled the new information down on their cards, and Mickey rolled the dice. As he was moving Mr. Green around the board, he could hear Ian's brother grumbling under his breath into his beer bottle.

"Got something to say, Professor?" Mickey asked testily.

Sensing the tension suddenly bubbling up in the room, Mandy jumped up and grabbed her purse. "How about we smoke?" she asked, pulling a joint out of her cigarette pack and waving it around in the air.

"Hell yeah." Macy laughed, going to grab for it. She was too slow, as Mandy danced out of her reach, grabbing a lighter off the coffee table on her way. She sparked the joint and passed it to Mickey.

He took a long inhale, the acrid smoke filling his lungs. He held the hit until his head started to swim, blowing the smoke out into the room and passing the joint to Ian. He probably shouldn't be smoking, but weed was kinda decriminalized now. And he usually didn't even get tested. He didn't think Batemen would get his panties in a twist over a little THC.

Batemen, fuck. Mickey didn't want to think about that shit. He still hadn't told Ian he had to go to this stupid group. Although, knowing Ian, he'd be over the moon at the idea of Mickey spilling his guts in front of a bunch of strangers. Just the idea of it made Mickey's skin prickle. It went against everything in his nature. But, the idea of going back to jail was much worse. Especially now that he's got so much going for him. He's not in any rush to fuck that up.

The joint made its way around the circle a few times until it was barely smoking anymore. Mickey took one more hit and stubbed it out in the ashtray. This game was taking for-fucking-ever. Next time they're playing Risk for fuck's sake.

It was still Mickey's turn, and he was shuffling his cards, looking back and forth between the board. He was about to move Mrs. Peacock into the library when Lip's unintelligible grumbling floated into
his ear.

"Fucking bitch, all happy and cozy. Must be nice." he muttered into what had to be his eight beer.

"Excuse you, Philip, what the fuck did you just say?" Mickey asked, his voice low and deadly.

Lip took a long gulp of his beer, chugging the remainder before dropping the empty onto the floor with a loud clang and wiping his mouth on the sleeve of his sweater and glaring murderously at Mickey.

"I said it must be nice to be a get a second chance after fucking everyone over your whole life."

Mickey threw his cards down and and made a move to get up, but Ian's hand on his knee stopped him. He shot Ian an incredulous look, but Ian look bewildered as well. What the hell was Lip's malfunction?

"Hey Lip, man, I thought we said we were gonna go easy on the booze tonight." Ian said carefully.

"Don't you fucking tell me what to do. You are the king of fucked up decision." Lip spat.

Ian recoiled, clearly hurt, but Lip wasn't done yet.

"What the fuck is this bullshit, anyway?" he waved his hand around the room. "What are you assholes playing at? You think you can just crawl out of the filth, dust yourself off, and have a happy fucking life?" he laughed bitterly. He stood up and started pacing the room, beer still clutched in his hand.

"Do you even know these people?" Lip rounded on Macy. He was only inches away from her, his face all red, eyes wild. "Do you know what they've done?"

Macy blanched, clearly distressed. Mandy put a protective arm around her shoulder, pulling her to her chest.

"Lip, what the fuck are you doing?" Mandy hissed. "Get away from her."

Lip shook his head ruefully. Ian stood up and walked over to his brother, laying a hand on his shoulder. Lip shook him off violently, turning to him and pushing him away. "Don't fucking touch me." he growled.

Mickey was up in a flash, standing between Ian and Lip. He put a hand up, warding off any more of Lip's advances.

"Fucking watch it." Mickey said lowly.

"You don't fucking scare me." Lip laughed. "You Milkovichs never scared me."

He looked over to Macy and Mandy, who were holding each other, watching him warily.

"But you should have. And you:" he pointed to Macy, still cradled in Mandy's arms. "You should be fucking scared. Do you even know what they've done?"

"Lip, shut the fuck up." Ian said, trying again to go to his brother, but Lip dodged him.

"No really, do you have any idea what they have done?" Lip chuckled darkly, running a hand through his messy hair. He grabbed the unattended bottle of vodka off the coffee table and took a swig, swaying on his feet. "She ran over my girlfriend with a car. The girl's fucking brain damaged
now. She beat a kid with a nightstick, broke his leg and three ribs. She forged my damn college applications, almost ruined my chances of going to school." he glanced over at Macy, who was staring at her girlfriend aghast. Lip smiled smugly.

"Lip, shut the fuck up." Ian yelled. He can't believe his brother is doing this shit right now. Why the fuck would he bring all this shit up now?

Mickey got up and pushed Lip hard, making him stumble. He caught himself on the wall, righting himself clumsily. "Shut your god damn mouth."

Lip just smiled, a dark, sinister thing curling his lips. "Oh, I know all about you too, Mickey." He turned back to Macy, as it seemed to Mickey that this little tirade was aimed at her for some reason. "This one has done so much shit I don't even have time to tell you. He tried to kill our sister, broke out of prison, was a fugitive on the run for years. You know how he broke out? He fucked some CO so good she left the damn door open for him! That's rich, right Ian?" he rounded on his brother and shoved him hard. "What the fuck are you doing back with him? He's a fucking dirt bag, they all are." Lip was far too drunk to register the crestfallen look on Ian's face at the mention of Mickey's escape.

Mickey bit his lip hard. He hadn't told Ian about Cassie yet. Looks like that's going to have to happen now.

"How the fuck would you know that, Lip?" Ian asked, all the anger drained out of his voice and replaced by confusion.

Lip laughed again, nodding to no one in particular. "AA buddy works at the jail. I heard all about it. Rumor has it Mickey even stabbed a guy." Lip's eyes are wild and filled with perverse glee as he watched the light fade out of his brother's eyes. Ian looks over at Mickey, who shakes his head furiously.

What the fuck? Mickey never stabbed anyone. God damn COs running their mouths without the damn facts. Gossiping like a bunch of little girls. Great, yet another fire Mickey's going to have to put out tonight.

Mickey and Ian got up and went to grab for Lip, but he danced out of their grasp again, his movements surprisingly fluid for someone so wasted. He spun on the spot and got right in Mandy's face. Mickey grabbed him by the shoulder and pulled him back hard. Lip went sprawling to the floor on his back. He laid there, staring at the ceiling for a moment before he spoke again.

"You don't deserve it." he sighed. "You don't deserve to be happy. Look at you two. All in love, acting like fucking teenagers. You haven't done a god damn thing in your life to deserve that shit."

Oh. So that was what this was about.

Lip had just burned shit to the ground because he's jealous. His life didn't turn out the way he expected it to, so he's lashing out at them for their good fortune. If Lip wasn't happy, why the fuck should they be?

Prick.

God forbid Mickey and his sister have one good thing in their lives. Milkoivch kids don't deserve a happily ever after. Lip knew that. Mickey knew that too. He was just hoping to fool himself a little longer. Leave it to Lip to destroy the fantasy.

Lip sat up and buried his face in his hands, muttering to himself. "You don't deserve it. You don't deserve to be happy," he glared up at Mickey. "You don't deserve my brother. All you ever did was
hurt him. " his voice was getting smaller and smaller. "You beat him, you left him, you cheated on him. You're no good, Mickey. Ian deserves better."

Mickey looked down at the broken man sitting on the floor. Mickey gets it, that desire to lash out when you feel low. He put his hand out, waiting. Lip eyed it warily, looking between Mickey and his brother. He sighed before he finally took his hand and let Mickey help him up. Mickey pulled Lip to stand, and the second he was on his feet, he ripped his hand away and punched Lip right in the face. His fist connected with Lip's cheek, a sickening crack echoed throughout the room and the girls gasped.

Mickey may understand, but he's not going to let it slide. Fuck that.

Lip went sprawling backwards again, hitting the wall with a dull thud.

Ian looked down at his brother, pity seeping into his bubbling anger.

"Lip, you need to back the fuck off Mickey and Mandy. Why don't you take a look in the mirror and own your own shit before you go giving opinions on other people's lives. My shit with Mick is none of your god damn concern. And where do you get off saying that shit about Mandy? Who the fuck are you?" he crossed his arms over his chest and glared at his brother.

"You should probably go." Mickey said lowly.

Lip's eyes traveled over the room, taking in the looks of pity and disgust. He's used to that shit now. Somewhere in the recesses of his booze addled brain, he knows he's fucked up good, but he can't bring himself to care at the moment.

Lip shakes his head, feeling really fucking stupid. His eyes start to prickle, and he is hit with the horrific realization that he's about to fucking cry.

Fuck.

Ian sees his brother starting to lose it, and his anger dissipates like fog. He takes one step closer, ready to put a hand on his brother's shoulder. But Lip backs away.

"Lip..." Ian starts, but his brother just shakes his head.

"Mickey's right. I'm gonna go." Lip mutters, moving away from Ian and avoiding eye contact with everyone. He grabs his coat from the rack by the door and slips it on. He leaves without another word, and the room falls into an awkward silence.

"Well fuck, I guess game night's a wrap." Mickey said, rubbing his nose with his knuckles and eyeing Ian surreptitiously. Ian looked confused, maybe a little angry. Defiantly sad.

This is not the way Mickey wanted to do this, tell Ian about Cassie. He didn't know how he wanted to do it, or when, but this wasn't the way.

Mandy and Macy were no better. Mandy had tears in her eyes and Macy looked like she wanted to bolt. Mickey was going to kill Lip. The man obviously didn't care about anyone but himself, and his own hurt feelings. Why he would want to destroy Mandy's relationship was beyond him. Could it really be because he was jealous of her happiness? Did Lip think Mandy didn't deserve to be happy if he wasn't happy? How does that make any sense? They broke up years ago. Mickey shook his head, utterly at sea. He got down on his knees and started picking up the game. He put the pieces back in the box and started gathering the cards. He opened the envelope out of curiosity. A humorless chuckle escaped his lips when he read them.
"Professor Plum, in the conservatory with the knife." he muttered.

"Yeah." Mandy grimaced from the couch. "Stabbing people in the back, no doubt."

A few minutes later, the two couples were seated on the couch, Mandy and Macy on one end, Mickey and Ian on the other. The game had been put away, and fresh beers were sitting on the coffee table. Mickey had also grabbed a bottle of whiskey from the kitchen, dropping it down on the table with some shot glasses. He poured some shots and handed them out.

There wasn't really anything to toast, so they all just tossed them back.

It was quiet for a while, nobody really knowing what to say or where to start.

Finally, after what felt like forever, Macy broke the tense silence. "Did you really do all that stuff, baby?" she asked Mandy as she leaned forward to grab her beer.

Mandy grimaced, a pained look spreading across her face.

"Remember when I told you me and my brothers grew up different than most people?" she asked innocently, picking at imaginary lint on her jeans.

"Yeah." Macy answered uncertainly.

Mickey knew, somewhere deep down, that his sister hadn't told her girlfriend any of the fucked up shit that they had endured as children. He knew from experience that there was no good way to expose loved ones to this shit, and he had personally avoided it at all costs. Now he was caught up in a shit storm of personal demons and long dead ghosts, and he had Philip Gallagher to thank for it. And he would thank him for it, in kind. With a lot of sucker punches and teeth lost.

Macy's face was uncertain and dark as she vacillated from staring at her shamefaced girlfriend and the guilty looking men in the room.

"It's not what it sounds like." Mandy started, reaching out for her girlfriend, only to be cruelly rebuffed as Macy pulled her hands back and scooted backwards on the sofa. When she couldn't get any further, she stuffed her body into the back of the couch and cast her eyes down.

"You're afraid of me, now?" Mandy whispered harshly. She wiped furiously at her eyes, desperate not to cry. She was stronger than that.

"I don't know what I am." Macy answered honestly. "When you told me you had a rough upbringing I thought you meant poverty. I know it must be hard growing up in this neighborhood. I had no idea you were so violent." she stared at Mandy like she'd never seen her before. "Why would you do something like that? Why would you maim someone forever like that??" Macy asked, her face a picture of shock and horror.

"Because she hurt someone I loved." Mandy replied honestly. She watched Macy's face carefully as she spoke. "The girl was fucking with Lip. She was stringing him alone and treating him like shit. Then one day she called me up and told me she would do whatever she wanted, cuz Lip was her bitch. She made it sound like he wasn't a person, just a tool to use as she pleased. I couldn't let it go."

Macy shook her head, uncomprehending. Mandy shrugged, she knew Macy wouldn't understand.
"The way we grew up was fucked. You defended what you love to the death, but you also picked it apart, piece by piece til nothing's left." Mandy said lowly, not sure if she was making any sense at all. "I had to protect him, I had to make her know she couldn't fuck with him like that. I couldn't let it go." Mandy repeated. She lurched forward and grabbed the vodka off the table, taking a big gulp and wiping her mouth with her sleeve. "I, uh, understand if this is it." she said to Macy, not looking at her. She didn't want to see the disgust in her eyes.

Ian and Mickey sat silently, just watching the drama unfold. Mickey was grateful for his own reprieve, not eager to start spilling his own secrets any time soon.

That was, until Macy finally spoke. "Why don't we go back to your place and talk about it, Mandy," she said, shocking everyone in the room. Mandy looked up, eyes wide.

"What?" she stammered.

"You heard me. But I want to hear it all. All the shit you've been keeping from me. Anything that a normal person may consider a deal breaker." she crossed her arms over her chest.

Mickey winced at Macy's choice of words. What the fuck was 'normal' anyway? And that seemed like an insane standard to hold someone to.

"Excuse me, but what do you mean by 'normal', Mace?" Ian asked, clearly also irritated.

"Shit." Macy cursed, uncrossing her arms. Her hands came up in a placating motion. "That's not what I meant at all, I'm sorry." she took a deep breath and looked over at Mandy, seemingly making a decision. She put her hand out and grabbed Mandy's wrist, pulling the woman to her and wrapping her in her arms. "That came out wrong. I'm just a little shocked is all. I feel like there's this whole other side of you that you've kept from me. It's a bit jarring to find out the girl you love creamed someone with a car, y'know?" she pulled back and stared into Mandy's tear-filled eyes. "It's not a deal breaker, but you gotta talk to me. It seems like things are a bit darker than you lead on, girl."

Mandy suppressed a chuckle, it really wasn't the time. But 'a bit darker' had to be the understatement of the century.

"I know." Mandy conceded. "It's just, once people find out how bad it really was, not a lot of them wanna stick around. I didn't want to lose you so fast."

Macy smiled sadly as she put a stray piece of hair behind Mandy's ear. "You're not gonna lose me. Just be honest with me, and we'll go from there. I mean, you haven't killed anyone, right?" she half laughed.

Mandy shook her head, finally giving into her inappropriate laughter. "Not really." she said.

"Not really??" Macy echoed. She caught Mandy's eyes with her own wide ones, but Mandy just shrugged.

"We gotta get you into therapy, my love." Macy said, pulling Mandy to her chest and rocking her right there on the couch. Mandy swayed with her, totally unaware of the other two people in the room.

Mickey, for his part, was a bit shocked to see his sister so open and vulnerable. Lip had really twisted the knife, pulling out all the stops to ruin whatever Mandy was working on with her girlfriend. But what Lip had not anticipated, nor had Mickey seen coming, was the fact that Macy really cared about Mandy, and wasn't about to ditch her so quickly. The thought warmed Mickey's heart. Mandy had been abandoned over and over in her life, she deserved so much more. And Mickey could only hope that the petite, tatted up girl currently consoling his sister or the sofa would be the one to give it to
She hadn't run yet, so Mickey could hazard some hope.

"Therapy's for assholes." Mandy muttered into her girlfriend's shoulder. "No offense, Ian." she added on as an afterthought.

"None taken." Ian chuckled. "But I think Macy's right, I think you may benefit from talking through some of your shit, Mands. Not just the old shit, either. You have all that bullshit Jeff put you through."

"Jeff?" Macy asked, pulling Mandy's head away from her shoulder to look her in the eye.

"Oh, fuck. Yes, Jeff. That's the cheater ex-husband I mentioned." Mandy grimaced, Macy nodding sympathetically. At least she'd told her about the ex, Mickey thought to himself. "We're gonna be up all damn night talking at this point." Macy said. She disentangled herself from Macy and stood up. "We're going to go." she said.

Macy stood up too and the women went about getting ready to leave. Once their coats and shoes were on, the exchanged hugs with the two men. Mandy hugged Ian, him pulling her tight against his chest and picking her up off her feet. "Just be honest, Mands." he whispered into her hair. "I don't think she'll bolt."

Mandy sighed. "I hope not." she whispered. Ian put her down, and Mickey took his turn hugging his sister.

"It's all good, Mands, give her a shot." he said. Mandy just nodded, unsure if Ian and her brother were right. She had a hard time believing anyone would accept her the way she really was. "I know it's hard to let someone in, but if we don't try, we'll only have each other in the end. And that would be horrific." he laughed. Mandy snorted, pushing her brother away. "Asshole." she laughed.

"You are what you eat." Mickey replied without missing a beat, all smirks and eyebrows. He was desperate to bring so levity back to the situation. Watching the disgusted smile bloom on his sister's face, he figured he'd hit the mark.

"Oh god, you're disgusting." Mandy made a face, pushing her brother again as Macy opened the door.

"I'd like to say it was fun, but it kinda went off the rail there at the end." Mandy said. Macy smiled at the two men, taking Mandy's hand in her gloved one and smiling at her.

"Next time, we'll play monopoly, and my prick brother can stay the fuck home." Ian offered, smiling.

"It's a date. Thanks guys. See you soon." Mandy said, looking from her girlfriend to the men one last time. Ian nodded, trying to reassure her, even though his own head was spinning at the moment.

Mandy nodded back, and the women were gone. Mickey locked the door real quick, turning slowly after to face Ian.

"I, uh, guess we have to talk." Mickey said warily.

"Yeah, Mick, I guess we do." Ian replied, taking his seat on the couch again.

Ian fidgets in his seat, twisting his hands in his lap and bouncing his knee. "Wanna beer?" He asked, running his hands up and down his thighs. He's got the strangest feeling of deja vu. Why does it
always have to be this way? Why is there always some secret to be revealed, or some hurdle to overcome? Why can't it just be Ian and Mickey, gay dudes in love? Ian shakes his head at his own absurdity, getting up for the beers when Mickey doesn't answer him.

Ian can only hope that this shit doesn't make Mickey pull away again. He will chase him, he'll always chase him. But he wishes, just for once, that he didn't have to.

Mickey is sitting in the living room, listening to Ian puttering around in the kitchen. He runs a hand through his hair, trying to put his thoughts in order.

He had been planning on telling Ian about Cassie for a while now. Since him and Ian started hanging out again, if he's being honest with himself. But every time he had the notion to bring it up, it wasn't the right time. There had been so much going on at first, and then once things had calmed down, Mickey wasn't too keen on rocking the boat. But now that his hand had been forced, he was berating himself for putting it off. What if this was it? What if this was the thing that finally made Ian walk away for good.

Mickey shook his head, grabbing the bottle of whiskey off the table, twisting the cap off and pulling straight from the bottle. The liquor burned, but Mickey hardly felt it. He did, however, feel the warmth spread through his limbs, relaxing him a tiny bit.

Okay. He could do this.

Ian came back from the kitchen and handed Mickey a beer. He sat down on the sofa facing Mickey, sipping his own beer, waiting for Mickey to speak.

Mickey sighed, falling back against the couch cushions, looking at Ian. "Okay, so I know how this is going to sound, but you gotta hear me out." he starts.

"This CO, is her name Cassie?" Ian asks, totally catching Mickey off guard.

"Huh?" he asked stupidly. "How the fuck?"

"Jack may have said something on Halloween." Ian replied, sipping his beer. "Not much, just that it wasn't your fault and you'd try to minimize whatever it was." Ian picked at the label on his bottle, looking up at Mickey through his eyelashes.

"Fucking Jack should keep his damn mouth shut." Mickey muttered, making a mental note to kick Jack's ass at a later date.

Ian said nothing, just sipped his beer and waited Mickey out. Ian knew the man well enough to know pushing him rarely ended well for anyone. Ian wasn't in the mood for a fist fight or the silent treatment, so he just bided his time patiently. These days, Mickey usually got there on his own, with just the slightest amount of prodding.

After a few minutes of silent drinking, Mickey sighed, dropping his head down on the back of the couch and staring up at the ceiling. He noticed, oddly, that the ceiling wasn't stained anymore, and wondered who had painted it. Whoever it was did a shitty job. He groaned internally. Working construction had turned him into a weird guy. Everywhere he goes, he's sees project that could be done again, or done better.
Ian stared at Mickey's profile, wondering when the man was going to speak. It felt like forever before Mickey sighed again, clearing his throat to speak.

"Shit with Cass was fucked up, but it wasn't really her fault." Mickey started.

Ian was immediately taken aback by the familiarity Mickey had with this person. Cass? What the fuck? This was the CO that raped Mickey in prison?

"What do you mean?" Ian asked quietly. "Who's Cass?"

"That's Cassie, Ian. She's the CO that helped me escape." Mickey said, finally turning his head to look at Ian. "But that shit stays between us. She got out, but that shit can still come back to bite her. I owe her big, Ian. I don't want her catching flack for helping me." Mickey said seriously.

A cold chill went down Ian's spine, but he felt himself nodding anyway. He kept his mouth shut, waiting for Mickey to continue. This whole thing seemed off already. The way Mickey's voice softened when he said her name, the look on his face. Something was off, and it had Ian spooked.

"At first I fucking hated her, if I'm being honest. She was rude and condescending and she was pushy as fuck. Always talking to me like we were fucking friends or something." Mickey shook his head disbelievingly at the memory, a strange smile on his face. "I worked in the laundry, that was my job in the joint, and she was the CO that was assigned to watch us work. At first it was just that, you know, talking or whatever. She's from the south side too, so we knew some of the same people."

Ian nodded again, drinking his beer slowly. He didn't want to get too tipsy. He wanted to absorb all this information.

"It started I guess, the second year I was there. About a year before I escaped. I was working in the laundry, and she comes up to me and tells me to take a break with her. That shit is fucking unheard of, COs and inmates don't take breaks together. Inmates don't get breaks period. But she was insistent, said if I refused, she'd write me up on some bunk charges. So I followed her to the staff bathroom. She starts talking about the neighborhood, says she knows Iggy through he gang banger boyfriend. Her man, Luis, and my brother wanted me to help her push drugs inside, pills mostly. That's whatever, I did that shit all the time back then. The part of the plan I wasn't on board with was the sex...." Mickey trailed off, avoiding Ian's eyes.

"The sex? Mick, what the fuck? You fucked a CO? A FEMALE CO? BY CHOICE??" Ian's voice was climbing higher and higher, but he had no control over it, his mind was spinning. He ran a hand through his hair, pulling the strands as he stared at Mickey, disbelieving. He knew, had known that Mickey had fucked the woman. But hearing him say it so nonchalantly made Ian's skin crawl.

"What makes you think I had a choice, Gallagher? You always think there's a choice. Well there fucking isn't, not inside. You do what the CO's say, or you're fucked." Mickey was getting irritated. He knew Ian would take the high road, he always did. Which was easy to do, when you never had to do time. When you never had to make a hard choice to survive inside. Mickey took a deep breath. Getting mad at Ian wouldn't fucking help anything. "You don't understand." he muttered.

"Then make me understand." Ian implored. He pushed closer to Mickey on the couch, reaching out for his hand, only to be let down when Mickey pulled away. Ian tried to school his face, not wanting to let the hurt show through. It wasn't the time to make this about them.

Mickey cleared his throat, seemingly trying to get his thoughts in order. At length he shook his head a few times and met Ian's eyes, only to look away again when he spoke.
"I had to do it. It was shitty, but I didn't have a choice. She was a CO, and on top of that, her man was mixed up in the drug game with my brother. I couldn't let anything happen to Iggy. Luis was no joke. He was hardcore. Not like me, or Iggy, or even fucking Terry. He was the real deal, Latin Kings. All it would take was one word from Cassie, and my brother would have been dead. Do you understand?" Mickey didn't look up when he'd finished talking, he just waited.

"Yeah, Mick." Ian mumbled. "I understand."

Mickey sighed in relief, taking a long sip off his beer before continuing.

"Her man was a total asshole. After the whole thing had been going on for about six months, it started to change." Mickey paused, searching for the correct words. "She changed." he settled on. "We started talking, instead of just fucking and doing the deals. She was telling me more shit about her life. And I actually started telling her some of my own shit."

Ian's eyes widened at that, but he wisely kept his mouth shut. He still had a hard time believing that Mickey, his Mickey, had opened up to all these different people. In Ian's mind, he was the only one who could peel back all Mickey's layers to see the real man underneath. But that obviously wasn't the case anymore. If Mickey had opened up to the CO that was habitually raping him, the man had changed indeed.

Mickey continued talking, unaware of Ian's inner conflict. "The more I learned about her life, the more I felt bad for her, I guess. She was stuck in a shit situation with a dude that treated her like one of his hoes. She loved the asshole, and she put up with all his abuse. It was hard to watch."

Ian couldn't keep quiet anymore. Jack's words ringing in his head: 'He's going to try to justify her shit and make excuses for her.'

"Mick, what does that have to do with her raping you?" Ian asked, eyes pleading. There was no way Mickey didn't see this for what it was, right?

Mickey cringed. He knew, had always known, that technically what Cassie had done to him was rape. He had sat in his cell for months, brooding over the fact that he was in a situation he didn't want, and had no control over. But he was used to that kind of shit. It wasn't even the first time he'd been forced to fuck a woman against his will. His son was a testament to that fact. But his view of it had changed the more he got to know Cassie, the more he understood her reasoning. She was in an impossible spot, and she used Mickey to alleviate some of that pressure.

"Fuck, Ian. Yes I know that." Mickey spat, a little angrier than he intended. He cringed again when Ian's face fell. "Hey, no, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be a dick. It's just complicated." he said.

"Complicated how?" Ian asked, totally at a loss. How the hell was Mickey defending this woman?

"Complicated because I understood her. I get why she did what she did. I was like that, you know. I acted out my emotions on people, instead of dealing with them. But instead of sex, I used violence. I was that person. And I also understood her fucked up relationship with Luis. The dude fucked her over time and again, but she fucking loved him, so she took it all." Mickey said, rubbing his upper lip with his thumb.

"Are you talking about me?" Ian gasped. "You think I'm like that guy?"

"No." Mickey said quickly, finally closing the gap between them and taking Ian's hands in his own. "You are nothing like that prick. I'm just saying, I understood what it was like to love someone so much, you would overlook some of the bad shit."
"Bad shit?" Ian asked hollowly.

"Yeah, Ian. Bad shit. He cheated on her all the time. Beat her. It was bad."

"And you related to her because of that?" Ian said, twisting his fingers with Mickey's. "You know I didn't mean to cheat." he whispered.

"Ian, I know that." Mickey said, squeezing Ian's fingers. "But it doesn't mean it didn't fucking hurt."

Ian nodded sadly.

"The point I'm making is, we got to a place where we understood each other. We had a good working relationship." Mickey said, a small smile ghosting his lips.

"A working relationship?" Ian echoed hollowly.

"Yeah. We actually became kind of friends," Mickey replied, ignoring Ian's somber tone. "I did my part, pushing the drugs for the gang and fucking Cassie's frustrations out. I could have done without that part, but like I said, I didn't really have a choice, so as usual, I sacked the fuck up and did what I had to do."

Ian nodded, but chose to stay silent. How Mickey could ever think that shit was okay was beyond him.

"Anyway, it all came to a head a few months before my escape. Cass was out of work for almost a week, which if you knew her, you'd know it was fucking unheard of. When she finally got back, she was covered in fucking bruises and shit, which wasn't abnormal. I had heard from Damon that Luis had lost his shit and beat her real bad, but seeing it was so much worse. When we finally came face to face, she told me he had raped her, for hours. Going on and on about how he owned her and he could do whatever he wanted. Kill her if the mood struck him."

Ian blanched, a cold sweat running up his spine. Ian didn't know how he felt about any of this. He could tell Mickey had a soft spot for this girl. He identified with her, and he probably cared more than he's letting on.

"So, we had to do something. I had to help her get out." Mickey got a far away look in his eye, like he was reliving the memory. "But I didn't know where to start. How could I help her? I was locked up, and he was a protected, high ranking Latin King." Mickey shook his head, jumping off the couch and taking their empty beers with him. He spoke over his shoulder, walking through the kitchen to drop off the empties and grab two more beers. "But the douche bag handed us his demise on a silver platter. I didn't even have time to start formulating a plan before Damon came to me. Luis had gotten busted with a shit ton of heroin, ratted out the gang to get a deal. His death warrant was signed before the ink dried on his plea." Mickey chuckled darkly, sipping his beer as he dropped back down on the couch next to Ian. That far away look was back in his eyes, and Ian could tell Mickey was way more invested in this shit with the CO than he's letting on. "So this was how the wheels started turning on my eventual escape." Mickey said, trying to read Ian's face. He knew it was a lot to take in at once, but if he was going to explain his fucked up relationship with Cassie, he needed to put all his cards on the table. The story had to be told in it's entirety or not at all.

"The gang wanted Luis dead. The state was stupid enough to send him to our prison while he was awaiting trial. The deal was a good one. I wanted to kill the fucker myself, but the gang was adamant that it was gang business. I was in on the plan mostly because I was Damon's roommate and Cassie's inside guy. I got lucky. Once Luis was taken care of, and Cass was safe, the gang would break me and Damon out. Simple shit, you know the rest." Mickey said.
"You cared about her." Ian said, unsure how to feel about the revelation. This woman used Mickey, put him in an impossible position, and got him mixed up in a murder. How could he feel anything but contempt for her? She fucking raped him, repeatedly.

"Guess I did." Mickey conceded. "Like I said, it was complicated. I never wanted to give a shit about her. Just like Jack was just supposed to be a fuck buddy. But I guess I'm just a giant pussy now. Let myself care about one asshole, and all of the sudden I give a fuck about everyone." Mickey laughed lightly, giving Ian a loaded look. Ian, however, was not amused. Mickey sighed. "Listen, looking back on it now, I get where you're coming from. I did not want to fuck her. I had no choice, so yeah, I guess you could call it rape, if you're being super technical about it. But I don't see it that way, and isn't that what matters? Besides, after Luis did that shit to her, put her in the hospital and all, she apologized. She got it, after that. What it feels like to be forced." Mickey let the last part of the sentence taper off, until his voice was just above a whisper.

"So she stopped?" Ian asked. He wanted to grab Mickey, pull him to his chest and tell him he never had to worry about anything ever again. That Ian would take care of him, keep him from getting hurt. Even though Ian had been the cause of a lot of that pain, he didn't want Mickey to ever hurt again.

"Yeah, after that shit, the fucking was off the table. Which I was fucking grateful for, let me tell you. Too bad it took her getting brutalized to understand where I was coming from, but..." Mickey trailed off, seeing the stricken look in Ian's eyes. "Anyways, that's the deal with Cassie. That's all there is to the story. She used me, fucked me up pretty good, but she was more than that. She looked out for me on the inside, she was as close to a friend as a CO can be, all that other shit aside, we were a good team, and I'm glad I helped her get out. Last I heard, she was out on the west coast, living with her sister." Mickey looked over at Ian, who had unshed tears in his eyes. Mickey sighed, gripping Ian's hand with his free one and squeezing. "I know it sounds grim, but it's not. Not really."

Ian nodded, unsure of what to say. Jack had warned him that Mickey's view on the woman and what she had done to him were skewed, but now that he had heard the whole story, he had to admit, it was a lot more complicated than Ian had originally thought. Like most relationships in Mickey's life, it was complex and layered. Ian wanted to hate the woman for abusing Mickey like that. What she had done was so wrong, and nobody deserved to be manipulated like that. But all Ian could do was trust Mickey, and believe what he said and be there for him in any way he could. He couldn't go back and change history, he couldn't keep Mickey from getting hurt. All he could worry about was now.

"So yeah." Mickey said, taking a long pull off his beer. Now that it was all out there, he felt a little bit lighter. It's not something he ever talks about, but he knew he'd have to tell Ian at some point. He's glad it's over with.

Shit. That reminds him.

"Oh, there's something else." he said, pulling his hand away from Ian and running it through his hair. "It's not really related to Cassie, but the story reminded me. I, uh, have to go to this group for rape survivors, or some stupid shit." he muttered, his eyes falling to his lap.

"W-what?" Ian stammered. There's no way he heard that shit right.

"I know, right?" Mickey laughed humorlessly. "It's stupid, I know. It's another long story, but the gist of it is I had some counseling in prison." Mickey said, watching Ian's face morph into a shocked expression he'd never seen before. "Not my choice, man, trust me." he said, shaking his head. "Anyway, it was either counseling or the fucking hole, and I know you've never been in solitary, but trust me, I'd cut off a finger to stay outta that place. Fucking awful." he shivered involuntarily at the memory. "So I told the bitch some shit, you know, about my life. Childhood, Terry, my fucking
mom. It wasn't easy, and I fought it tooth and nail the entire time, but I can admit it now, years removed, but that shit helped. We talked about you." a ghost of a smile appeared on Mickey's face, but it was gone before Ian even registered it. "A lot."

Ian hung his head in shame. He'd abandoned Mickey when he needed him the most. The thought of him pouring his heart out to some prison shrink about Ian and how he let him down broke his fucking heart.

"So, I thought I was covered by that shit, you know, when they can't say fuck all about what you talk about?"

"Doctor-patient privilege?" Ian asks, still trying to process this huge information dump Mickey is subjecting him to.

"Yeah, that." Mickey nods, taking a drink. He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand before continuing. "But I guess fucking not, cuz Bateman, my PO, left a message on my phone saying this survivor's group shit is part of my parole, and if I don't go, they violate me. Knew I shouldn't have told that bitch about how Yev came to be. Shoulda just lied. Told her I got sloppy trying to play straight." he tried to laugh, but it came out forced. "Dunno why I did that." he mumbled.

"Sometimes." Ian started, carefully reaching over and pulling Mickey's twitching hand away from his face, where it had been furiously rubbing his lower lip. He gripped the hand between his own, looking into Mickey's eyes before speaking again. "Sometimes it helps to talk to someone. Someone who doesn't have a personal stake in any of it. A neutral party."

Mickey nodded, tightening his grip on Ian's hand. "Does it help you?" he asked. Ian is the only person in his life he's ever known that's gone to therapy that wasn't court ordered.

"Yeah, Mick, it does." Ian smiled. "So, where's the group?"

"That's the funny thing." Mickey said, although he didn't find it particularly funny. "It's at Victory House."

Ian's eyes widened. What the fuck?

"Your PO wants you to go to Trevor's survivor's group? Seriously?"

Mickey raised his eyebrows, a disgusted scowl on his face. "Bateman said it was Andy's group."

"Andy's house, Trevor's group." Ian said.

Mickey sighed, dipping his head back to stare at the ceiling. "Fuck."

"Hey." Ian said, trying to get Mickey's attention. When the other man continued to stare silently at the ceiling, Ian reached over with two fingers and carefully turned Mickey's face to they were eye to eye again. "Don't worry about fucking Trevor, okay? You need to do this for your parole. You're going to do it. Fuck it, I'll go with you."

Now it was Mickey's turn to look shocked. "What?"

Ian smiled, gently cupping Mickey cheek with his palm. "Yeah. Caroline has been saying I should go to a group. You know, cuz of that shit with Brian. I was fighting her on it. It still feels really raw, and very personal. But if you can do it, so can I. Besides, it would be nice to not have to do it alone."

"You don't have to do shit for me, Ian. If you're not ready to talk about it, you don't have to. This shit
"Not really, though. I gotta get it out, or it will fuck me up more." Ian shrugged. "Besides, I want to. Unless you don't want me there. I know it can be really hard to talk about that shit if someone you're close to is right there." Ian said, recalling all the times he'd gone to therapy with Fiona. He felt ripped open, his therapist and his sister examining his sick, twisted insides.

"Nah, I already told you all the bad shit, and you were there, you know, with Svet...." Mickey trailed off, not really wanting to talk about that day. "Besides." he changed topics, slapping Ian's knee with an open palm. "If you're there, I'm less likely to punch that smug fucker you call your ex."

Ian laughed, but it died off as he thought about what Mickey had said. He didn't know how he felt about opening up in front of Trevor like that.

But fuck it. If Mickey had to go, Ian was gonna be there. This is what they had agreed to. The good and the bad. He couldn't bail on Mickey just because it was going to be uncomfortable for him.

"We don't want that, now do we?" Ian said, a slow grin returning to his lips. He cupped Mickey's face with both hands, pulling him into a kiss. Mickey accepted him easily. Kissing Ian would never get old.

He held onto his face as his lips moved against Mickey. It was chaste, by their standards, and over as soon as it began, Ian pulling away just enough to rest his forehead against Mickey's. They stared at each other for a minute in silence, before a small smile broke out on Mickey's face.

"We're super fucked up." he chuckled.

"That we are." Ian agreed, smiling himself. He closes the distance between them again, peppering sweet kisses all over his face. Mickey laughs, trying to pull away, but Ian's got an iron grip on his jaw with both hands, so Mickey begrudgingly accepts the sappy affectionate gesture.

Ian kisses his nose, his eyelids, his lips and his forehead before releasing his face and sitting back a little.

"Since we're being honest tonight, there's something I should tell you too. I don't know if it's a big deal or not, I'm so far removed from it now."

Well, that got Mickey's attention.

"What?" he asked, his heart beating a little harder.

"You know how I told you Monica died while we were in Texas?" Ian asked, standing up and heading back to the kitchen with their empties. He brought another beer back for Mickey, but decided he himself had had enough. Booze didn't fuck with his meds like it did with his last regimen, but he did get pretty fucking sloppy, and this conversation was too important to fuck up.

"Yeah." Mickey replied, taking the offered bottle. Ian sat back down, turning his body to face Mickey properly.

"Well, she was a mess, you know that. Never had a pot to piss in. But when she died, she had this key in her personal effects. We had no idea what it went to. I don't even remember how we figured it out, but it went to a storage place down by the river. You know where I'm talking about?" When Mickey nodded, Ian continued. He'd never told anyone this story. Only he and his family knew about this shit. He never even told Trevor, for obvious reasons.
"Well, it was full of random shit. Nothing that really belonged to her, as far as I could tell, not like she would have a stash of family photos or anything..." Ian trailed off, clearing his throat. Shit, this was harder than he thought it was going to be. "So there was this pink suitcase in there, and it was full of meth." Ian said, looking over at Mickey.

Mickey's eyes bugged out of his head. He could literally feel them expanding in his eye sockets.

"Like, methamphetamine? Your mother had a suitcase full of meth?"

Ian nodded. "Eight pounds of it. One for each of us, if you ask Frank."

"Shit." Mickey said, quickly doing some mental math. "That's like eighty grand, maybe more, depending on the quality." he said, voice filled with shocked awe. "What the fuck was your mother doing with that much meth?"

Ian sighed, sitting back against the couch. "That the thing, it wasn't really hers. We didn't know it at the time, but it belonged to this asshole she was fucking. But before we knew all that shit, we took it, Carl sold it. We each got a pound, and could do whatever we wanted with the money. That was the deal we came up with together."

"Look at that, the Gallghers aren't as reformed as they would like the world to think." Mickey had meant it to come out teasing, but the hurt was evident in his voice. Ian's long ago words repeating in his head on a loop.

'This isn't me anymore.....' 

What wasn't him anymore? If he left Mickey at the border because he didn't want to deal with Mickey's criminal lifestyle, why did he go home and immediately start selling fucking meth?? How does that jive with the shit he was selling Mickey at the border?

It had never sounded more like a line than it did in that moment. Something Ian said so he could pull away easier, with less guilt.

Ian cringed, apparently knowing exactly what Mickey was referring to.

"It came back to bite us in the ass, anyway. Monica's guy came looking for his drugs, almost drowned Carl. We had to scramble to get him his money. We didn't have it all. He took what we had, and the fucking hot tub Carl bought, and luckily for us, he called it even after that. But it was fucking scary. We were never like that. Hardcore criminals. It was always survival crimes with us." Ian said.

"Wish I had been around then. I coulda moved your shit quicker, and gotten that prick off your back without you losing all that money." Mickey said, wishing just that. He never wanted Ian to be in a dangerous position if he could help it.

"I didn't lose it all." Ian said.

"Huh? Didn't you just say you had to give it all back?" Mickey asked, confused.

"We did." Ian nodded, a strange smile forming on his lips. "What he thought we had."

Mickey's brow furrowed in confusion.

"I may have kept some of it, not told anyone. I mean, she was my mother, I'm the only one who gave a fuck about her. I didn't want to give that last piece of her life over to some scumbag dealer. Nobody knows I kept it. I gave him about half of it, and he was just happy to have something. No one ever
asked me where the rest of it was. I haven't touched it. It's in a bank account no one knows I have." Ian said, playing with Mickey's fingers.

Mickey raised his eyebrows. "Look at you, Gallagher. Criminal mastermind over here." he laughed, reaching up to ruffle Ian's red hair. Ian chuckled, but leaned into the touch. "What are you gonna do with it?"

"It's only like six grand." Ian shrugged. "Just gonna sit on it, til I figure out what I want or need."

"Only six grand, he says." Mickey chuckled. "You're nouveau riche, Ian."

Ian laughed loud at that. "How do you even know what that means?"

"You're not the only one moving up in the world, Gallagher." Mickey smiled fondly. That sour feeling he had a few moments ago evaporating.

Ian pulled Mickey to his chest, wrapping his arms around him. He placed a kiss on the top of his head, squeezing slightly.

"We are so fucked up." Ian repeated his earlier words into Mickey's hair.

Mickey chuckled, burrowing deeper into Ian's chest. "Yeah, we are." he conceded easily. "But at least nowadays we own our shit."

Ian nodded, a small smile on his face.

"Let's go to bed." Mickey said after a beat of silence, face still buried in Ian's chest. "Brutal honesty makes me fucking sleepy."

Chapter End Notes

i apologize for the delay, my life has been utter chaos for the past few weeks.
We're fucking family

Chapter Summary

Ian and Mickey see each other through some trying times, because that's what you do for your family.

Chapter Notes

sorry i'm late.... i was waylaid writing a quick little thing for the EG cat challenge. let's get back to it then...

It's still dark in the room when Ian stirs awake. It's been a week since their most recent soul-searching conversation, and Ian's feeling pretty good about his relationship with Mickey at the moment. They are moving forward, progressing slowly, but surely. Sleep overs like these are becoming more and more common. Mickey has opened himself up to Ian in a way his younger self would have never dared to dream of.

Much like the feeling he was experiencing currently.

He felt the press of warm lips against his hip bone. His sleep-addled brain was not quite on board yet, but his body sure as fuck was. His legs spread on their own accord, and his morning wood strained against his stomach. He feels another feather light kiss on the inside of his thigh, followed by the slide of callused hands along his legs.

He sighed, eyes still closed. He tilted his head back, just letting it happen.

He felt the wet warmth of a tongue running along his lower stomach, right at the beginning of his happy trail. Another scattering of open mouth kisses followed. He groaned, fisting the pillows by his head.

There were worse ways to wake up.

Ian groaned low in his throat as Mickey continued his slow exploration of his abdomen and hips. He scraped his teeth along his right hip bone, laving the spot with his tongue before ghosting his way across to the other hip, totally bypassing Ian's swollen cock to suck and nip at his left hip. Ian's breath stuttered, his hips bucking up slightly on their own accord. He heard Mickey's breathless chuckle echo in the darkness of the room.

This was new. Mickey was never much for foreplay or teasing back when they were kids. But like fuck Ian was going to complain about it. It was hot as fuck. He was so turned on he felt like he could cry.

Mickey hands ran up the outside of Ian's thighs, settling on his hips as his mouth continued to nip
and suck everywhere, still consciously avoiding Ian's dick. Little broken whimpers were spilling from Ian's mouth unbidden, his hips rocking up over and over. He could feel precum dribbling out of his cock, pooling on his abdomen.

Mickey finally seemed to take pity on Ian's desperate state, taking his erection in his hand and pumping it tortuously slow. His hand was tight, and the skin was calloused. It felt fucking amazing.

Ian sighed, tipping his head back further. He did his best not to move, wanting to let Mickey lead this for as long as he wanted. He knew today was going to be a rough day for Mickey. They had only talked about it a handful of times, and every time Mickey brushed it off, but Ian knew better than to believe that shit. He knew Mickey, and he knew he was suffering.

Today was the day of Yevgeny's final adoption hearing. All the preliminary hearing were finished, and all that was left was today's hearing and the signing of the final paperwork.

It was going to be hard for everyone.

But it was going to be hell for Mickey.

That's why Ian stayed over last night. It was rare for Ian to sleep over on a week night, having to get all the way to the north side for work was a pain in the ass. But Mickey had been dropping unconscious hints the whole week, that he didn't want to be alone. Iggy and Tess were around, but nothing comforted Mickey like Ian's presence.

Ian's train of thought was splintered by the wet warmth of Mickey's mouth closing around the head of his cock. He moaned, hips bucking up. Mickey held him down, a hand on each hip, as he bobbed his head lazily.

Ian settled a hand on the back of Mickey's head, not pushing or guiding, just resting there. It was perfect. Mickey was perfect. His lips and tongue were magic on Ian's body. He dipped his head down, taking Ian almost all the way in. His cock hit the back of Mickey's throat and Ian moaned again. He could feel Mickey smiling around his dick as he pulled back, swirling his tongue around the head before licking long stripes from base to tip, over and over. He coated Ian's erection with as much spit as he could before letting it fall out of his mouth, landing back on his stomach with a wet plop.

Mickey wasted no time crawling up Ian's body. He was still fairly stretched from the previous night, but craving that slight burn anyway. He wanted to feel every inch of Ian, wanted to feel pulled apart in that wonderful way only this man could give him. He didn't want lube or a slow build up. He needed to get out of his head, and Ian had always been his favorite distraction.

He settled over Ian, straddling his waist. Ian had finally opened his eyes, staring up at Mickey in the early morning light. It was still dark in Mickey's room, but bright enough to make out those glorious green eyes peering up at him in wonder.

Mickey never understood how Ian could look at him like that. Like he was something amazing. But he learned a long time ago not to question it.

He just stared at Ian for a moment, still not uttering a word since waking him up moments before. Instead, he just cocked an eyebrow, a small smirk on his lips, as he reached behind himself to grip Ian's erection and guide it toward his waiting hole. Ian held his breath, waiting.

Mickey settled his weight on both knees and started to sink down. He threw his head back, resting both hands on Ian's bare chest as he lowered himself painstakingly slow. Ian's hands flew up to
Mickey's hips, helping to steady him as he finally bottomed out. He stayed still for a moment, his ass resting on Ian's legs. Ian ran his hands up and down Mickey's thighs, trying to be patient. Mickey had taken his dick with no lube and hardly any prep at all, so Ian was conscious of the fact that it had to burn like a motherfucker. But Mickey was a bad ass bottom, and he knew what he could take, so Ian just let him do his thing.

After a minute, Mickey started moving. Not up and down so much as back and forth. He ground down on Ian's dick, small breathy sighs falling from his lips.

"Fuck." Mickey whispered into the darkness, the first words he'd spoken all morning.

Ian groaned again, hips bucking up involuntarily.

Keeping Ian's cock buried inside him to the hilt, Mickey fell forward, an arm on either side of Ian's head as he started to move. Lifting his ass up and dropping it back down with more force each time. He buried his face in Ian's neck, licking and sucking at the sensitive flesh behind his ear.

Ian's arms wound around Mickey's middle, holding him against his chest as he continued to fuck himself on Ian's cock. Mickey moaned, his mouth right next to Ian's ear. The sound sent shock waves down Ian's spine, settling in his gut. He wasn't going to last much longer.

"Mick, fuck. Gonna come." Ian whined, straight up whined. Mickey chuckled breathlessly, sitting back up so he could bounce with more force.

"Me first, you greedy motherfucker." Mickey laughed as he redoubled his efforts. He used his strong thighs to lift himself up, slamming back down on Ian's dick with force. The angle he was at had Ian hitting his prostate, and Mickey moaned loud, leaning back on one hand so he could pull on his own throbbing erection.

Ian's eyes fluttered open again and he took in the sight in front of him. Mickey's pale torso in the early morning light, flushed and glistening with sweat. His muscles taut with exertion, his erection bobbing obscenely in the air, his hand hovering close, but still not going to grab it.

Ian batted Mickey's hand away, knowing what he wants. He gripped his cock in a tight fist as he started to jerk it in time with Mickey broken movements.

"So fucking hot like this." Ian murmured, running his free hand up Mickey's chest, while still working him with the other. "Just bouncing on my dick. Ride me so good, Mick, fuck." he ran his hand from one pec to the other, squeezing a nipple between his fingers and pinching hard.

That seemed to set a fire under Mickey. He lost all sense of rhythm, falling forward again so he could slam his ass down as hard as possible.

"Shit, that's it. Right there Ian, fuck." Mickey cried, which Ian thought was hilarious, since he was just laying there taking what Mickey had to give him. Mickey ground his hips down on Ian's dick almost violently, fucking down onto his cock, then up into his hand. His back bowed and his head fell back as he came all over Ian's hand and his chest.

"Fuck yeah." Ian growled. He let go of Mickey's spent cock so he could grip onto both his hips. Mickey fell forward again, his face buried in Ian's neck as Ian fucked up into him a few more times before he stilled, balls deep, filling Mickey with his release.

Ian sagged against the mattress, his body limp and pliant. Mickey was much the same, sprawled across Ian's body, come splattered between their chests, Ian's softening cock still resting inside him.
"It's gonna be a shit day." Mickey muttered into Ian's hair. "Wanted to start it off right, at least."

Ian sighed, wrapping his arms around Mickey's sweaty body. He didn't know what to say. He didn't want to patronize him, tell him it was gonna be okay or any of that stupid bullshit. They didn't fucking lie to each other anymore.

So instead, he told Mickey the truth.

"I'm here. I've got you."

That seemed to be enough for the moment. He could feel Mickey nodding against his head. He dropped a kiss onto Ian's hair as he started to release his grip on him.

"Better get up. Gotta shower now." he said, rolling off Ian and getting off the bed.

Ian stayed still for a moment, staring at the ceiling in the early morning light. He wasn't sure how all this was going to play out today. But he knew he had to be there for Mickey. He may say that he's okay, but Ian knows him better than that.

--------------------------------------------------

Mickey wanted to shower alone, which was odd in and of itself. He knew Ian could tell he was struggling. He wasn't as good at masking his emotions as he used to be. Too many years away from his father, surrounded by people that gave a shit had left him soft and gooey in the middle. Usually, it didn't bother him so much. But on a day like today, where it was imperative he put up a brave front, he wished for just a moment, that he could pull on his old armor and keep everyone at bay.

He knew it wasn't a healthy way to think, but this shit fucking hurt, and he didn't really know how to process this kind of pain. It was unlike anything he had ever felt before. It wasn't like the physical pain of a broken wrist, when Terry had twisted so hard he's broken it in two places. It wasn't like the cold empty pain of his mother dying after years of being nothing but a ghost. It wasn't like the all-consuming fire of losing Ian.

It was like amputating your own arm. Cutting off a part of yourself and giving it away to someone else, leaving you crippled and incomplete.

He knew it was best for Yevgeny. The adoption. Svetlana and David were happy. They were well off financially. David was stable and kind and loving to both Svetlana and his son. He would never beat Yevgeny, he would never break Yevgeny. He would give him opportunities Mickey could only dream of.

What was it they said? 'If you love someone, let them go.'? That was it, right? Mickey's sure he's heard Mandy say that shit more than once. He never really understood it growing up. It started to make more sense the more he fell for Ian. All those times he wanted to hold on with both hands, but knew he had to back off for Ian's sake.

Now it was taking on a whole new meaning.

He was going to give up his son today.

Usually, the parent giving up their rights didn't even attend the final adoption hearing, but both
Svetlana and David wanted Mickey to be there. They told him they wanted to make sure he knew that just because his legal right were ending, it didn't mean his familial connection was being severed.

Mickey didn't really want to go. It felt like the final nail in the coffin of his relationship with his son. He knew he'd see Yev again. Hell, the custody agreement they had worked out with the lawyer was a damn good one. But there was just something about the formal finality of it all that made Mickey sad in a way he couldn't quite articulate.

He had been in the shower a lot longer than intended. The hot water flowed over his shoulders, his washing routine long over, he just leaned his forehead against the wall letting the spray cascade down his back. He wasn't going to cry. It's not that big a deal. The kid was going to be his, no matter what it said on his birth certificate. He had Mickey's eyes, Mickey's blood.

The tightness in his throat caught him off guard. He tipped his head back, clearing his throat, water pelting his face. The image of his son's face flashed behind his closed eyes. Smiling brightly, face open and happy.

He thought about Halloween. Yevgeny and Ian walking hand and hand down the street, lost in their own little world as Mickey trailed behind them.

He thought of when Yev was first born, when Mickey could barely look at the kid without wanting to puke. Ian had sat up with him late into the night, holding him and watching him sleep. Caring for him in Mickey's absence.

He allows himself a rare moment to wonder what could have been. If Ian hadn't gotten sick, if Mickey'd never drugged that bitch and gone to jail.

Would they have made it back then? Could Mickey and Ian be raising Yevegeny right now, together?

He can see it, so easily. The images flash through his mind like real memories. Ian and Mickey teaching him how to throw a football, reading him fucking stories before bed, all three of them falling asleep on the couch watching Star Wars, cuz Ian's a total dork and can't get enough of that shit.

It's these lost moments that will never happen that finally break Mickey. He's standing there, under the quickly cooling water, when he finally allows himself a moment to cry. His breath hitches the smallest bit, and silent tears roll down his face. He doesn't bother to wipe them off, the shower washes them away so no one ever has to know. He mourns the life he's lost, the one he knew deep down he could never have, never even dared to hope for. But now that he's watching it die before his eyes, he can admit, he fucking wanted it.

-----------------------------

Ian can feel the heavy atmosphere throughout the Milkovich house. It's been a long time since it's felt so dark and desperate there. Usually there's a happy, goofy energy around the house now. Iggy and Tessa are always good for a mood boost, and Ian and Mickey have been acting like teenagers for the past few months. But the ominous energy is palpable this morning, even if no one is talking about it.

Iggy and Tess are seated at the kitchen table when Ian walks out in a pair of sweats and a wife beater. Ian goes directly to the coffee maker, pouring himself a cup. He grabs a piece of rye toast
from a plate stacked with slices as he slides into a seat across from Iggy. He grabs the fistful of pills out of his pants pocket and throws them back with a swig of coffee, wincing at the burn.

Iggy gives him a mute nod, which Ian returns. Tessa eyes them both over the latest edition of Cosmo, but wisely says nothing. She knows what today is, just like everyone else in the house, and even she's not dumb enough to try and bring it up.

A few minutes later, Mickey joins them, freshly showered and back in his black sweats, his bare chest would be enough to send Ian reeling any other day. That gorgeous tattoo, that pale, freckled skin. But Ian tampers down those urges this morning. He stops himself from getting up and wrapping Mickey in his arms. He knows Mickey will most likely be standoffish and cold all day, and he has to let him be. He has to put his own shit aside and let Mickey deal with this his way.

As long as he fucking deals with it, and doesn't try to avoid it. That's all Ian wants.

He watches Mickey pour himself a cup of coffee and grab a piece of toast before dropping into the empty seat next to Ian.

No one says a word for a long time. The only sounds filling the kitchen are the soft crunching and chewing and the sloshing of coffee in mugs.

Ian watches the clock tick closer and closer to eight am. He took the day off so he could go with Mickey to the hearing. Mickey had told him over and over that it wasn't necessary, but the stricken look in his eyes had told Ian all he needed to know.

"Better get ready, gotta get going soon." Mickey mumbled, pushing away from the table and leaving the kitchen without another word.

Iggy finally looked up from his toast, his eyes meeting Ian's over the table. "He gonna be okay, dude?" He asked lowly, his eyes darting between Ian and Mickey's closed bedroom door.

Ian sighed, running a hand through his hair. "Yeah, he will be. We just gotta be there for him til it hurts a little less."

Iggy nodded, reaching his hand out to twist it with Tessa's on the table. She gave him and Ian a shared sympathetic look before leaning in to kiss Iggy's lips. "It's gonna be okay," she said against Iggy's lips before turning her head to look at Ian. "He's got us, and he's got you. You take good care of him." she smiled kindly, and Ian felt a tiny bit better. He stood up from the table and followed Mickey's steps to the bedroom.

It was going to be a long day, but they'd get through it together.

"Mick, you need to try and relax." Ian sighed, leaning up against the facade of the courthouse, watching Mickey pace back and forth on the sidewalk. He was smoking his third cigarette since they had gotten to the courthouse. Mandy had dropped them off on her way to work. Mickey had told her over and over that they could take the L, but Mandy wanted to be there for them, promising to pick them up as soon as Ian called once they were finished. She had hugged Mickey tight, giving her silent reassurance that she was there for him.
He appreciated it, and even if he didn't say it, she knew it. She gave him a small smile before hugging Ian and leaving them on the street in front of the court house.

"M'fine, Gallagher." Mickey muttered around his cigarette, even though they both knew he wasn't.

Ian wanted to go to him, wrap him up in his arms and take away his pain. Do those little things that always calmed Mickey down. Run his fingers through his hair, trail his fingers down his back or along his arms, kiss his neck and shoulder. Those things were like thorazine to Mickey, but Ian was quite sure none of those gestures would be welcome at the moment.

"You wanna go in?" Ian asked instead.

Mickey nodded, tossing his cigarette into the gutter and rolling his head around on his neck. "Fuck it. Let's get this over with." he said, leading the way inside.

This wasn't anything like when Ian and his siblings had their custody hearing, when Frank called CPS on Fiona and they had gotten split up. There was no contesting party. This was all a formality. Ian's never been to something like this before. From what Mickey told him, it wasn't even common for Mickey to be there, usually just the adoptive parent and the child were present. But Svetlana never did anything the normal way, if you ask Ian. He wasn't sure if she invited Mickey to let him be a part of this occasion, or if she invited him as part of some spiteful plan to hurt him more.

From what Ian has heard form Mickey, the custody agreement they have reached is a good one, considering they didn't have to give Mickey anything. But Ian thinks it's more than just splitting time to Mickey. It's the idea that his son will no longer be his. No longer be a Milkovich. Gone will be the chance to turn the name into something positive, something worthwhile. Ian's sure Mickey will never have any more kids, not with the way Yev came to be. So with him goes Mickey's only chance to do it right. And no matter how many times Ian tells him it's not over, than Yev is still his kid, it doesn't register with Mickey. He seems bound and determined to expect the worse. Ian can understand that. Mickey hasn't known much else in his life.

The thought makes Ian want to cry.

They are lead into the judge's chambers by some secretary.

"We're not going into the court room?" Ian asks the petite brunette as she leads them toward the office.

"No. The adoptions are done in the judge's chambers, it's less scary for the little ones, more intimate." the woman replied, holding the door open so they could step inside.

Svetlana and David were already inside, with Yevgeny and their lawyer, a suited up old dude that reminds Ian of one of those personal injury attorneys from the daytime TV commercials. They looked pretty dressed up for an informal hearing. Svetlana wearing a navy blue knee length dress, while David and Yevgeny were both in white button up shirts and dark slacks. Ian couldn't help but think they looked like they were getting ready to take one of those cheesy family portraits at Sears or something.

Yevgeny looked up from his handheld video game when he heard the door open. He jumped out of his seat, the device falling to the carpeted floor as he ran toward Mickey, arms open. "Daddy-Mickey!" he yelled, his voice slightly muffled as he collided with Mickey's solid form. Mickey had dropped to his knees in the middle of the room, wrapping his arms around the little boy.

"Hey buddy." he whispered, just low enough that Ian almost missed it. "Missed you."
Yevgeny pulled away, placing his tiny palms on Mickey cheeks and squeezing. "I missed you too." he said, seriously. His face split into a giant smile. "So glad you and Uncle Ian came for my 'dopton. I'm gonna be a Popov now! That's Russian! Are you Russian, Daddy-Mickey?"

Mickey cleared his throat, the feeling off of Yevgeny's tiny hands pressed to his face making his eyes sting and his throat burn.

"Nah, buddy, I'm Ukrainian, but close." Mickey says, finally standing up.

"What about you, Uncle Ian? Are you uckranan like Daddy-Mickey?" Yevgeny asked, turning in Mickey's arms to look at Ian, who was standing a few feet off to the side.

" Nah, I'm Irish, Yevvy." Ian smiled.

"Like Lucky Charms?" Yevgeny asked excitedly, causing Ian and Mickey to both chuckle. Before Ian had a chance to answer, the judge walks into the room, having a seat at her desk. Everyone else in the room follows suit. Svetlana and David on one side, Yevgeny running over to sit on his mother's lap, Ian and Mickey on the other, sitting close, but not touching.

"Okay." the judge says, clearing her throat just as the court reporter sat down in front of a tiny dictation machine. "My name is Judge Maria Ramos, and today we are here to finalize the adoption of one Yevgeny Alexi Milkovich, soon to be Popov. For the record today, we have in attendance Yevgeny, age five, his mother, Svetlana Popov, her husband, the adoptive party, David Popov, as well as the biological father, Mr. Mikhailio Milkovich, and...excuse me, who are you sir, for the record?"

It takes Ian a moment to realize the judge is talking to him, his head snaps up, making eye contact with the woman. He's surprised he's even being addressed. Before he can speak, Mickey does.

"That's uh, Ian Gallagher, my partner." Mickey says, running a hand over his mouth. In any other situation, Ian would be beaming at the title, but now he's just more surprised. He was under the impression he was just her for moral support.

"Very well. And Ian Gallagher, the boilogical father's partner. And finally Mr. Yackov representing the Popov family." the judge says, looking over some paper on her desk. "So, this doesn't have to be a long drawn out process. We just have to get some formalities out of the way. We just have to get some formalities out of the way." she said, looking up from her papers and smiling at Yevgeny, who hit her with a stunner of his own.

"Okay, so if everyone could please stand, so we can swear you in?" she asked, as a court officer pushed off from the wall and grabbed a bible off the shelf. He swore everyone in in quick succession, and once everyone was seated, the judge continued.

"Alright, now I'd like to go around the room and ask the parties involved to verify this adoption should take place, and why they believe it to be the best course of action. We'll start with Mrs. Popov." Judge Ramos said, looking to Svetlana.

Svetlana looked at Yevgeny briefly before turning back to the judge. "Your honor, my life has not been easy. I will spare details, but it has been a very hard, dark road, Yevgeny being my only guiding light since his birth. When I met David, he was the kindest, most loving man I've ever met, to me and my son. We are married, David wants to be Yevgeny's father. He treats him well, loves him very much. We wish to be family, share life and name together. This is my wish."

The judge nodded, writing something on a legal pad before looking up again. "Good, thank you. Mr. Popov, would you like to comment now?"
David nodded, reaching out to grip Svetlana's hand before speaking. "When I met Svetlana, I fell in love with her immediately. When I met her son, it was very much the same. I would do anything for Yevgeny. I would die for Yevgeny. I am most pleased to officially make him my son. Thank you."

The judge jotted down some more notes before looking up again. "Alright. Thank you. Now, Yevgeny, how do you feel about all this? Excited to get a new daddy?" the judge asked, her voice softening as she addressed the child.

Yevgeny looked at his mother, who nodded her head before looking back to the judge. "I'm not getting a NEW daddy, I'm getting ANOTHER daddy. I'm super lucky cuz I'll have Daddy-David and Daddy-Mickey. I'm happy cuz everyone loves me so much, and I'm getting a puppy." Yevgeny smiled brighty, waving his tiny hands around excitedly.

Ian is a little touched by the words. -'another daddy'- He's not sure if someone explained this all to Yevgeny, or if he is just that smart, but it's nice to hear the kid say Mickey's not being replaced as his father.

The judge laughed lightly at that. "Okay then, since it looks like all parties are in agreement on that front, Mr. Milkovich, you do understand that by signing the papers you have given up all legal rights to your child. Your custody agreement is still valid, but as far as making decisions regarding Yevgeny's life and well being are concerned, your opinions will be void after this hearing?"

Mickey nodded. "Yes, your honor."

"And you have no objection to these proceedings?" the judge asked.

"No, your honor." Mickey replied, trying to maintain eye contact with the judge. Ian wanted to reach for his hand so bad, but Mickey had been in an off mood all day, and he didn't want to make him uncomfortable during the proceedings.

"Very well." Judge Ramos replied, pushing away her notes and pulling some documents toward here. "I hereby terminate the parental rights of one Mikhailio Alexander Milkovich for one Yevgeny Alexi Milkovich. I also hereby decree that from this day forward, one David Popov will be the legal guardian and adoptive father of the child who shall be know from this day forward as Yevgeny Popov." the judge smiled brightly, signing the final documents and stacking them on her desk.

"Anderson, can you come take the photo please?" she called out. Ian wasn't sure what she was talking about until the assistant came back in with a digital camera in his hands.

He watched, a little confused, as Svetlana, David and Yevgeny stood up and moved over in front of the window. The assistant came around in front of them and knelt down on one knee and waited patiently for the little family to arrange themselves for the photo. Svetlana and David stood close to each other, David's arm slung around Svetlana's shoulder. Yevgeny placed himself in front of them, either adult putting a hand on one of his shoulders. They smiled brightly while Anderson took a handful of pictures. Once he was confident he got a good shot, he stood again. "Okay guys, give me a minute, I'll print these out in my office and you can take them home today. Congratulations." the man smiled and left the room.

Ian watched as Svetlana and David chatted happily with their attorney, David ruffling Yevgeny's hair, speaking rapid-fire Russian with a wide smile on his face.

Ian turned to look at Mickey, but was surprised to find he was no longer in the room. He whipped his head around fast, searching the small office as if Mickey could be hiding somewhere. He wasn't. He was gone.
"Uh, Svet, did you see where Mickey went?" he asked dumbly.

Svetlana looked up at Ian, a confused look on her face, as if she had forgotten he was even there.

"No. He probably ran away. He's good for that." she said coolly.

Ian held his tongue. Getting into it with Svetlana right now was not a good idea, no matter how bad he wanted to defend Mickey. Instead, he walked over to Yevgeny and got down on one knee.

"Hey buddy, congratulations." he said, rubbing a hand down Yevgeny's bony little arm.

"Thanks Uncle Ian!" the boy said. "Where's Daddy-Mickey?" he asked, confusion coloring his voice.

"Zhenya, I told you, Mickey had to go. But we go out now to celebrate adoption. If you wish, you may call him later." Svetlana said, squeezing his shoulder.

A look of resigned sadness washed over the child's face, but it was gone before Ian was even sure he really saw it. "Okay Mamma." he said, smile back on his face. "You gonna come, Uncle Ian? Ice cream!"

Before Ian could reply, Svetlana squeezed Yevgeny's shoulder again, causing him to look up at her.

"Just our family, Zhenya." she said firmly.

Yevgeny nodded sadly. "Okay."

"Yeah, I better go." Ian said, feeling very unwanted all of the sudden. He pulled Yevgeny into a hard hug, suddenly very unsure when he'll get to see him next. "See you soon, buddy." he whispered into his hair.

"Okay, bye." he replied, pulling back. Ian ruffled his hair as he stood. He nodded to Svetlana and David and made his way out of the judge's chambers.

He expected to find Mickey leaning against the wall in the hallway.

When he didn't find him there, he expected to find him outside, smoking a cigarette.

When he didn't find him there, he was a little more concerned.

Maybe he'd already called Mandy and the car was around somewhere. He stood up on his tip toes, and craned his neck, searching for the sedan, and finding nothing.

Huh.

He pulled his phone out of his pocket and dialed Mandy's number. It rang three times before she picked up.

"You assholes ready for your chauffeur?" she chuckled through the line.

"Mandy? Did Mick call you already? Are you around the courthouse somewhere?" Ian's starting to get a little nervous.

"Huh?" Mandy asked, obviously perplexed. "No, I told you idiots to call me when you were done. And now you are calling me. So, are you done or what?"
"Well, yes, the hearing is over, but Mickey came out before me. He walked out while I was preoccupied and now I can't find him." Ian is not panicked, per say, but he's not sure what to do. Mickey had been off for the past few days leading up to the adoption. And although he had seemed fine while it was happening, Ian has to admit to himself that he was so wrapped up in the proceedings that he didn't really notice Mickey demeanor.

Now he feels like a fucking asshole, because Mickey is obviously more upset than Ian had noticed, and has seemingly run off.

Well, fuck.

He ran. Like a fucking punk. What else is new?

He hadn't even know he was running. Not as he slowly backed out of the room, not as he turned tail and booked it down the hallway. Not when he shoved the door to the courthouse open and hit the pavement, sprinting away from his pain and anger. Not until he was sitting on the L heading back into the city did he realize what he'd done.

He'd been running completely on autopilot. His brains supplying nothing but white noise and panic. His heart hammering in his chest, his body quivering with the desperate need to cry, or punch something. He hung his head in his hands, elbows up on his knees, taking deep breaths to ward of the attack of emotions bubbling under the surface.

Fuck.

He'd left Ian at the courthouse. He fucking bailed without a word, and the poor kid was probably standing on the fucking sidewalk with his dick in his hand right now.

Like Mickey didn't feel like enough of an asshole already.

He's not even sure why the hearing affected him that way. He'd known for months now that this was coming. That the adoption was being finalized and Yevgeny was moving away. He'd known.

So why does it feel like he just got stabbed in the chest?

Mickey leans back against in his seat, leaning his head against the window, eyes closed. He knows what his issue is....

It's fucking over.

Whatever relationship he'd foolishly hoped to have with his son was over. Sure, they had their custody agreement, and he's sure he'll see Yev from time to time. But not with any real regularity. And he won't be a part of the kid's day to day life. Not like he had much of that shit now. But he had some things. Soccer games, random play dates at the park, hell, he even took the kid to the movies a couple times in the past few months.

But now that the adoption was final, and the kid was moving three hours away, those visitations written out in the custody agreement would be all Mickey got. He's positive Svetlana will not give him more than the barest minimum. He wonders why she even bothered with the custody agreement
if she just wanted to cut Mickey out.

Either way, it doesn't matter. The kid will get older, and it will get harder and harder to convince him to visit at all. Yev's already super popular, has tons of friends. And what kid wants to visit his scumbag sperm donor, when he can be going paint balling or having video-game filled sleepovers with his rich friends?

Mickey's sure it will start out slow and small, like most things do. Yev will want to go to camp instead of visiting Mickey in the summer. He'll want to stay at home for some kid's pool party instead of visiting the next time. Then Svetlana and David will want to take him to Colorado to go skiing for Christmas, but it will fall on Mickey's week. Next thing you know, Mickey hasn't seen his son in a year. He's only going to know what he looks like from the school picture that comes in the mail each October, and even that may be giving Svetlana too much credit.

He could tell, back in the judge's chambers, that he wasn't wanted there. He can't even remember why he wanted to go in the first place. Probably some masochistic desire to bear witness to the actual loss of his only child.

Fuck.

He's such a fucking pussy these days.

Mickey gets off the L at that familiar stop and walks the short distance to the only place he can think of to go.

He pushes the door open to the Alibi and pointedly ignores everyone, taking a seat at the bar. Kev looks up from the newspaper he's reading and starts to smile, but it dies on his lips when he sees the devastated look on Mickey's face.

Kev opens his mouth to ask, but Mickey shakes his head violently. He pulls out his wallet and drops a fifty dollar bill on the bar.

"Whiskey." he says. "And fucking silence."

Kev nods, filling a glass quickly. Mickey grabs it before it fully settles on the bar and tosses it back. "Leave the bottle, and leave me alone."

--------------------------------------------------

"I should have seen it, Mands. I should have seen he wasn't doing well. He's be irritable and mopey for days." Ian moaned, banging his head against the window of Mandy's car.

"Ian, my brother is always irritable and mopey." Mandy said, keeping her eyes on the road.

It was early afternoon, and Ian and Mandy have been looking for Mickey for about an hour. They'd gone by the house, Ian and Mandy's apartment, even stopping at Victory House. Jack, however had not seen or heard from Mickey all day.

After promising to let Jack know when he found him, they had left him on the front porch dialing Mickey's cell as they drove away.
"He won't answer for me, but maybe he'll answer for Jack." Ian said, almost to himself. He didn't care if he answered for Jack and not him, he just needed to know he's okay.

"It's probably not even that big a deal, Ian. He's just processing the fact that Yev is not his anymore." Mandy said, placing a hand on Ian's thigh.

"Why do you guys always say that?" Ian asked, looking over at Mandy, bewildered anger in his eyes.

Mandy turned her head, a quizzical look on her face. "Say what?"

"That Yev's not Mickey's anymore. He says that shit all the time. You say it. Fucking Iggy says it, Svetlana says it. The only people that don't say that shit are me and Yev. Yevgeny will always be Mickey's son. No fucking piece of paper or three hour drive is going to change that shit. We're fucking family."

Mandy's face was the picture of surprise. She's rarely heard Ian speak with such vehemence on any topic.

"Yeah, Ian. Of course." she agreed. "I'm just saying, it's a lot to process, and it probably feels like he's losing him, you know? He's never been good at dealing with his emotions, especially not when he loses someone he loves." she glanced over at Ian before gluing her eyes to the road again. "He rarely lets anyone in, and when he does, he's all fucking in. If you get past all his defenses and walls, and get to his heart, that's it. If he has you, then loses you, it breaks him." Mandy has to know that her words have a double meaning to Ian. She has to know that these words are splitting him apart. Of course Ian would be thinking about his own sins against Mickey when the issue at the moment was his son.

Focus Ian, jesus.

"So, he feels like the world is ending right now. Like he's never gonna see the kid again, like Yev will never know him. We just gotta find him, talk him off the ledge, get a dick in him, and put him to bed. He'll be better in the morning." she said, a bright smile on her face belying the grim reality of the situation.

Just then Ian's phone vibrated in his lap. He grabbed the device, reading the screen.

Kev? What did he want?

Ian swiped his finger across the screen and put the phone to his ear.

"Hello?"

"Ian, man. Come get your boy."

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

Mandy makes it to the Alibi in record time, but it's still not fast enough for Ian. He's got this intense feeling of dread he just can't shake. If Mickey falls apart, or pulls away, will Ian be able to cope? Will he be strong enough to support Mickey the way Mickey supported Ian? Ian was always the needy one in their relationship. Always wanting more that Mickey was willing or able to give. Would he be strong enough to hold Mickey up? Would he be strong enough to step back if that's what Mickey needs?
Ian doesn't want to step back. He doesn't want to give Mickey space, he doesn't want to give Mickey
time. He wants to give Mickey love and support, a shoulder to cry on, someone to lean on.

But if Mickey didn't want that, Ian knew he had to do what was best for him. He'd have to step back,
stand off to the side, in Mickey's line of vision, but far enough away to let him grieve in his own
way.

It would be hard, but he owed it to Mickey to do this one thing his way.

Ian can't imagine what it must feel like, giving your son up for adoption. Mickey's never been a full
time father to Yevgeny, and some people might think that would make this transition easier, but Ian
knows Mickey better than anyone, and he knows that deep down, Mickey always wanted to be a
better father. Better than Terry, better than Frank. Better than Svetlana's father, who sold her as a sex
slave when she was just a child. Mickey wanted to be the one to break the cycle of abuse and neglect
that ran rampant in the south side. He never told a soul any of that, but Ian had always known.

Back when Yevgeny was first born, it was especially hard for him. The baby was a constant
reminder of that awful day. Mickey felt trapped. Trapped in the straight man's illusion of life. Scared
to death that his father would kill him if he even so much as voiced a protest. So Mickeys saw
Yevgeny as an albatross around his neck, holding him down in this nightmare of a life he'd never
wanted or asked for.

Ian can pinpoint the exact moment it changed for Mickey. When Mickey no longer saw the baby as a
punishment for being gay, and saw him as his son. It happened in a police station two states over,
after Ian's little fiasco of a road trip.

Ian barely remembers most of the car ride, but he does remember feeling like he failed Yevgeny.
Failed to protect him from the demons chasing them, failed to protect him from the dangers of the
world.
That evening, when his family came to pick him up, that was the first time he'd seen Mickey hold the
baby properly. Up until that point, Mickey had avoided Yevgeny at all costs. But standing there, in
the crowded police station, surrounded by Gallaghers and police officers, he grabbed that baby up
and cradled him to his chest, kissing his head sweetly and rubbing his tattooed hands up and down
the baby's back, soothing the child and himself in the process.

It hit Ian in that moment, how much Mickey loved that baby. And how conflicted he was about those
feelings.

Now, years later, Mickey is still just as conflicted, but for a new reason. He wants what's best for his
son, wants him to be happy. He's just wishing he could be part of it.

Ian's heart breaks all over again as he pushes his way into the bar, catching Kev's eyes the second he
makes it over the threshold. Kev motions toward the back of the bar with his head, and Ian's eyes
scan the back of the room.

There he is.

Mickey is sitting alone in a dark back corner of the bar, a half gone bottle of whiskey on the table, a
shot glass resting sideways on the table top. His head is down, resting on his bent arms. The sleeves
of his dress shirt are rolled up, and his knuckles look bloody.

What the fuck?

Ian makes it across the room in three long strides. He stops in front of Mickey's table, momentarily
unsure of what his next move should be. He can hear Mandy in the background, talking quietly with Kev at the bar. The rest of the room is empty, save for two men playing pool and drinking draft beer.

Ian sighs, a new wave of sadness crashing over him. "Mick." he says softly.

Mickey doesn't move or make a sound. His head stays down, his body motionless.

Ian sits down in the empty chair next to Mickey and tentatively rests his hand on his boyfriend's shoulder. "Mick." he repeats.

Mickey turns his head then. He doesn't lift it, he just swivels his head so it's resting on the table facing Ian instead of his face being buried in his arms.

Ian's chest squeezes uncomfortably as he takes in the sight of his love. Mickey's eyes are red rimmed and swollen. He's been crying, probably for a while. Mickey's hands clench into fists and his eyebrows knit together. "What are you doing here?" he asks quietly. He's drunk, Ian can tell automatically, but not black-out plastered like Ian had thought when he'd first walked in.

Ian shakes his head, reaching across the table to grasp one of Mickey's bloody hands. "You left the courthouse. Scared the fuck outta me." he said, running a long finger over Mickey's abused knuckles. The blood was fresh, still wet, the wounds looked angry, the skin ripped open, deep lacerations littering his knuckles and fingers.

Mickey squeezed his eyes closed, and few tears escaped in spite of his best efforts to keep them in. He took a deep breath, finally sitting up and facing Ian properly. "M'sorry." he mutters, reaching for his shot glass. Ian doesn't stop him, so he rights it on the table top and fills it to the brim with whiskey. He throws the shot back easily before locking eyes with Ian again.

"Just couldn't deal with it. Knew I was being stupid. Fucking pussy. Running away like that." he berates himself.

Ian scoots as close to Mickey as he can, the wooden chair scraping loudly against the floor as he slides up and wraps his arms around Mickey in an awkward seated hug. "You were giving up your child, Mickey. Being sad about that doesn't make you a pussy. It makes you a father. A fucking good one." Ian says, face buried in Mickey's dark hair.

"A good father would have fucking stuck around." he said sadly, his eyes staring sightlessly into the distance. "A good father wouldn't have gotten locked up, fled the fucking country. A good father would support and love his child, spend fucking time with him. Do all that happy horse shit kids love. Playing video games, making blanket forts, letting him eat ice cream for breakfast."

Ian's eyes widened at Mickey's outburst. Where the hell was this shit coming from?

"Mick." Ian said sadly.

"No." Mickey interrupted. "No. He's better off without me, and I need to remember that shit."

"But the custody agreement...." Ian started.

"Won't mean shit once they are gone. You know how hard it is going to be to stick to that shit? I don't even have a car. You think she's gonna go outta her way to trek the kid all the way back to Chicago to spend time with me? Did you see the way she was acting today?"

Yes, Ian did see. He knows exactly what Mickey is talking about. He thought maybe his mind way playing tricks on him, the way Svetlana was pulling Yevgeny away from him and Mickey. The way
she made sure to say that their post-adoption ice cream trip was for 'family only'. She's been working hard over the past few months to separate Yevgeny from Mickey. Now that Ian's aware of it, all the signs are there. Things were even a little strained on Thanksgiving, now that he's looking back on it through another lens.

Ian doesn't know what to say. So he just wraps his arm around Mickey's waist and leans his head on his shoulder. Mickey sighs deeply, as if all the pain and hurt he's feeling is whooshing out of his body in that one breath. His body collapses against Ian's.

They just sit there for a while, both staring at the wall, neither of them speaking. Every once in a while, Mickey fills his shot glass and tosses back another mouthful of liquid pain killer.

At length, Ian lifts his head and reaches up with one hand to grip Mickey's face. He pinches his chin between two fingers and holds his head so they are looking each other in the eye.

"Mick. I don't care what Svetlana thinks. I don't care that it's three hours away. I don't care that we don't have a car, or a shit ton of money. None of that shit fucking matters. Yev is your son. Yours. No document or marriage or relocation is going to change that. And he's not going to disappear from your life cuz we won't fucking let him. If she thinks we're going to be that easy to get rid of, she's fucking delusional. I won't let that happen. And you sure as hell won't." he takes a breath, staring into Mickey's eyes. They are full of disbelief and resignation. Ian fucking hates it. "Because you give a shit. You fucking love him, and you want what's best for him. I know you think it's in his best interest to not know you." Mickey starts to speak, but Ian claps a hand over his mouth.

Mickey's eyebrows say 'fuck you' for him, but Ian just smiles fondly and continues, hand still pressed to Mickey's lips. "I know you think you're no good. You don't have to say that shit, I just know you. And if I have to spend the rest of my life telling you how fucking amazing you are, that's what I'm going to do. And I'll have Yevgeny to help me, cuz he thinks the fucking world of you. You are already a better father than I've ever seen in my entire life, and you can only get better Mick."

"Ian, I just want him to be happy." Mickey says when Ian finally lowers his hand. "Maybe if I just back the fuck off, he can do that."

Ian wraps his arm back around Mickey's shoulder, pulling him into his side again, planting a tender kiss on the top of his head.

"When I was a kid, all I wanted was for my parents to act like they gave a shit." Ian says. Mickey is a little thrown off by the change in topic, but lets Ian speak. "For Frank or Monica to show a little interest, remember something small about school, or go to one of my games. I just wanted to feel important, loved. Did you ever want that, growing up?"

Mickey thinks back to his own childhood. The only thing he can remember wanting is to be invisible, so Terry would leave him the fuck alone. He wished to not get beat, to not have to skip dinner. To not have to clean up his mother's vomit after she passed out with a needle still stuck in his arm. Wishing for things like love and affection never crossed his mind, because it never even seemed possible. But he does remember doing shit hoping his father would look his way. A perfect shot into a tin can with a 9mm, or a stolen steak from the grocery store. Anything to get even the smallest amount of positive attention. Once, when he was nine or so, he stole a bottle of Perc 30s from an old lady on the bus and brought it home to his mom when she was dope sick. She told him she loved him that day.

So yeah, he kind of understands.

"See, this is what I'm trying to say: you keep saying Yev will be better off without you. But no kid
feels that way. Even if you were a piece of shit father, which you're not, he'd still want your love. He
.craves it, to feel like he belongs to you, and that you're proud of him. Svetlana can't do shit about that. And if she keeps trying to separate you, she's only going to drive a wedge between herself and
.Yev."

Ian ran a hand down the side of Mickey's face, cupping his cheek. "Yevgeny is our family. And we
don't ever give up. We're gonna show him what it's like to be loved unconditionally."

"Even if we have no idea what that feels like?" Mickey asks, voice horse.

"But we do," Ian says, still caressing Mickey's face gently. "We know all about it, me and you. No
matter time, place or circumstance, I've loved you, and I hope that you've love me." He added a little
wink at the end of his statement to bring some levity to the conversation.

Mickey blushes like a god damn teenager, knocking his forehead against Ian's.

"You're such a fucking dork, man." Mickey says.

Ian just beams at him, a happy smile on his face.

Mickey doesn't even know he's leaning in until his lips are on Ian's. He kisses him softly, lips
pressing against each other, pulling back and going back in. Ian's hand curls around the back of
Mickey's head, anchoring him in place as they kiss and kiss.

"Take me home, Gallagher." Mickey mumbles against Ian's lips.

Ian huffs against Mickey's mouth. "Okay, Mick. Let's go home."

--------------------------------------------------------------

Shit's still not right. Mickey says he's fine, but Ian knows he's fucking lying.

It's been a week since the adoption. In that week, Ian hasn't seen Mickey nearly as much as he
usually would. Mickey has not stopped by the station house for lunch with Ian's favorite take out,
there have been no mid-week visits to his apartment for Netflix and incredible sex. There has hardly
been any contact at all. Ian calls. He texts. He even stopped by Mickey's house twice. The first time
Iggy told him Mickey's been picking up a shit ton of over time, hardly ever home. The second time,
Tess gave Ian a big hug, telling him she was worried too.

None of that was very reassuring.

That's how he finds himself in a position he wouldn't have anticipated a few months ago, walking
across the yard and up onto the big wrap-around porch of Victory House. He's just finished a day
shift, and it's a little after 3pm when he knocks on the door.

He stands on the porch, shifting from foot to foot, playing with the straps on his backpack while he
waits.

The door swings open and Jack is standing there. His brown hair is longer than the last time Ian saw
him, all mussed up like he just crawled out of bed. He's wearing baby blue adidas sweats and a white
wife beater.
"Did I wake you?" Ian asks, walking past Jack without being invited in and going straight to the living room, where he immediately starts to pace. Jack raises his eyebrows at Ian's agitated behavior, but says nothing.

"No. I was just lounging around upstairs when you called. Reading that fucking NA book. Shit feels like a god damn cult, but what the fuck ever. My fucking sponsor gives me homework, you believe that shit?" Jack asks, walking past Ian and dropping down on the couch. "Sit down, man. What's going on? You sounded a little low when you called." Jack patted the seat next to him and raised his eyebrows expectantly.

Ian idly thinks Jack got that move from Mickey.

Ian has never called Jack like this. Jack certainly considers Ian a friend now, but Mickey is still their main link, so this visit was unexpected to say the least.

Ian sighs, crossing the living room and sitting next to Jack.

"Mick's not doing well. I don't know what to do. I've tried everything." Ian says, dropping his head on the back of the couch, staring at the wood panel ceiling instead of looking at Jack. He hates that he has to be here, asking Jack for help with Mickey. Ian should be able to do this on his own. He's Mickey's fucking boyfriend. But he's at a loss, and he's getting more worried with every passing day.

"This about the adoption?" Jack asks.

"Yeah, I think so." Ian breathes, still staring at the ceiling. "Ever since then he's been super withdrawn. Won't talk to me, we aren't hanging out. Not to be crass, but we're not fucking. That shit is not normal."

Jack huffs out a small laugh.

Ian finally looks over at him, a curious look on his face. "What?"

Jack smiles at Ian fondly. "You really care about him."

Ian narrows his eyes. "Obviously."

Jack leans forward, getting closer to Ian on the couch. He tucks his feet up under his ass and leans back with one arm over the back of the couch. His whole body is facing Ian now, and his eyes don't leave his face.

"It's good to know you care. For a long time Mickey didn't think you did."

Ian frowned.

"The way you say he's acting now, that's how he was for the first six months I knew him." Jack said, picking at some lint on his sweat pants. "Kid never said a damn word, always angry, starting fights. Always had this far away, sad look on his face. He was really fucked up. I don't know any magic trick to get Mickey out of a funk like that, usually they just run their course. I've never been around when he was upset over something like this, though. Usually, it was you. So I don't know if this will be different." Jack shrugged.

"So you're saying I should just let him be? Stew in his own pain and anger, and wait for him to come around? Sorry, but that sounds like a fucking awful idea." Ian says.

"Well, you do have the magic Mick touch, maybe you have a way to get him to open up. But for us
mere mortals, it's not so easy. Mick and I talk all the time, about all kinds of shit. But when he puts
up that fucking wall, no one's getting through. And the more I push, the more he pushes back, and I
don't feel like losing any teeth, so I'm certainly not gonna push him. You ever think of just being
available for him? Waiting for him to come to you? Cuz you know he will. Mickey couldn't stay
away from you if his life depended on it. You rule his damn soul. You know it, I know it, he knows
it. So maybe just let him process this in his own way. You know, deep down, he'll come to you
when he's ready." Jack smiled fondly at Ian, leaning forward to pat Ian's knee.

He's right. Ian knows he's right. He has to let go and let Mickey do this in his own way. Which is
hard for Ian, since he craves control and comfort and stability so much. This up-in-the-air limbo shit
is killing him. But he can't push. He has to be available and patient.

"Damn Jack." Ian laughed "You may think I have the magic Mick touch, but you just may be the
Milkovich whisperer."

Jack leaned forward on the couch, twisting at the last second and dropping backwards into Ian's lap,
his head resting on his thigh. He looked up into Ian's shocked face from his upside down perspective,
smiling devilishly.

"I have a way with the emotionally crippled and hopelessly in love." Jack winked, the asshole.

Ian laughed, ruffling Jack's hair before scrubbing his hand all over his face playfully. Jack sputtered,
flailing his arms dramatically.

"Yeah," Ian laughed. "You're something else."

-----------------------------------------------------------

Mickey is driving his work truck towards his house late in the afternoon. It's been a long day. They
all are. He had spent the day with his head under the cabinet of a house on the north end, replacing a
sink for an elderly widow. She's been using Matt's company to fix things around her house since her
husband died in the late 90's. She was a sweet old woman, very nice to Mickey, despite his harsh
demeanor and obscene tattoos.

Mickey looks over at his empty passenger seat, where he has a plate full of double chocolate chip
cookies the woman had baked for him while he was working.

"You're the best, Delores." he says to the empty cab of his truck, reaching over and grabbing a
cookie from a hole in the plastic wrap. (He may or may not have had a few already.)

He's debating grabbing another cookie when his phone rings in his lap. He wipes his hands on his
work pants and grabs the device. He sees Jack's contact photo on the screen and swipes to accept
with his thumb, keeping his eye on the road as he puts the phone to his ear.

"Hey Cauldwell, what's good?"

"Mick, hey." Jack's voice travels into Mickey's ear, and Mickey smiles. He hasn't spoken to Jack at
all this week. He hasn't really talked to anyone, if he's being honest with himself. "Have you talked
to Ian today?"

Mickey's brow furrows in confusion. Why would Jack want to know if he'd talked to Ian. "No,
"Why are you avoiding him?" Jack was never one to beat around the bush, preferring to get to the heart of the matter as soon as possible.

"I'm not avoiding him. What the fuck are you on about, Jack?"

"You are so avoiding him." Jack counters. "Or else his gorgeous ass would not have been sitting on my couch this afternoon bemoaning the fact that you have been denying him your presence, and your dick."

Mickey groaned, reaching over for another cookie. He stuffed it into his mouth whole, chomping loudly into the phone.

"God damn it, Mickey." Jack said. "Are you stuffing your fat face right now? I'm trying to have a serious conversation with you."

"Stress eating." Mickey replied, only half joking. "But seriously, did he really go all the way down there to tattle on me for not being available for his needy ass 24/7?"

"Mickey." Jack said, all joking gone from his tone. "He's fucking worried about you, and after what he told me, I am too. You told me you were okay. You promised me, and your man, that you wouldn't close yourself off. Imagine my surprise when the poor kid shows up here all 'sad puppy', going on and on about how you are avoiding him, and he feels fucking helpless, watching you suffer and unable to help."

Mickey dropped his half eaten cookie back into the tray and wiped his hand on his jeans before running a hand anxiously through his hair. "He said all that shit?" Mickey asked quietly.

"Pretty much, Mick. Practically begged me to talk to you cuz apparently he thinks I have this otherworldly way of getting through to you when no one else can. I told him he's fucking nuts, that I can't talk any sense into you, nobody can. Told him he had to wait you out. But the kid is crawling out of his skin we the need to comfort you abrasive ass. So do us all a favor and let him. Why the fuck are you with him, if you're going to avoid him when you need him the most??"

Jack didn't expect an answer. He knew Mickey better than that. So he just let his words sink in for a minute, listening to Mickey breathe on the other end of the line.

"Think about it, Mick. But not for too much longer. If Ian's still got that kicked puppy look on his face the next time I see him, you and I are going to have to throw down. And you know how much I hate messing up your pretty face."

Mickey laughed, despite himself. "That was once, and it was a lucky hit. I've kicked your ass a million times since then."

Jack giggled, "Nobody's disputing that. And it's not like I WANT to fight you, Mick. Don't give me a reason to go all spider monkey on you. The kid's a mess. Fix it, yeah?"

Mickey sighed, nodding to himself. He stopped a a stop sign and put his blinker on. He made a U-turn and started heading back the way he came. "You're right, you prick. I'm gonna go see him now."

"That's what I like to hear."

"And, you know, thanks. For giving a shit or whatever."
"Always, Mick. You know that."

Ian's trying his best not to think about it. He got home from Victory House about an hour ago. The house was empty, a note on the kitchen counter explaining that Mandy was spending the night at Macy's.

Despite all his own personal bullshit going on at the moment, he's happy to see Mandy and Macy moving forward from the game night debacle. Lip's outburst of honesty had been a catalyst in Mandy and Macy's relationship, just as it had been for Ian and Mickey.

Ian was glad all that shit was out in the open now. Secrets fester, and they can ruin a relationship easily. He's sure Mandy wishes she could have broached the topic of her past on her own terms, and in her own time, but since that hadn't been the case, Ian thinks she handled the situation as well as could be expected.

Macy, for her part, had been wonderful. Although shocked and a little bit horrified by what she found out from Lip's drunken tirade, she had listened when Mandy explained why she did what she did, and why she was the way she was.

Mandy had spared no detail, telling Macy everything from how he mother died when she was just a child, to how Terry abused her in the worst possible way for years. She told her about the baby and the abortion, the endless physical abuse of her and her brothers, the guns, the drugs, the constant loop of violence and poverty that had been the reality of the Milkovich children from the day they were born until the day Terry took his last breath. She told her about the hooking, Kenyatta and Jeff. She told her all about Lip and the things Mandy had done for and to him.

Macy had listened, quite for hours. Focused on Mandy intently, taking in every single syllable until Mandy couldn't talk anymore and all she could do was cry. Mandy cried for what felt like forever, until Macy had wrapped her in her tattooed arms, whispering soothing words and rocking her slightly.

Mandy had been surprised when Macy told her that all that baggage was not, in fact, the deal breaker Mandy had anticipated. Macy said she would work with Mandy to overcome the horrors of her past, as long as Mandy put the work in to get better.

When Mandy had told Ian all of this, as well as her plan to finally get her ass to therapy, Ian had been happy and relieved. Ian grew up in a house where therapy was a sign of weakness as well as insanity. It was not so much frowned upon as it was ridiculed and devalued.

'Gallaghers don't do therapy' was a motto the whole family lived by.

When Ian was first diagnosed with his bipolar disorder, he was vehemently against any kind of therapy. Now, years removed, he a staunch advocate for it. It's helped him understand himself and his disease in a way he never thought possible. He feels lighter and more in control of his emotions after a good session. It has helped him accept himself and his faults, as well as forgive people in his life that have let him down, as well as himself for all the terrible things he'd done.

He told Mandy all of this when she told him about Macy's ultimatum: therapy or a break up.
He's happy Mandy is going to be talking to a professional. He knows what it's like to carry around endless dark secrets and fucked up emotions. He hopes Mandy gives it a chance to help her, the way it helped him.

He silently muses to himself about all of this while moving around the kitchen. It's close to six pm now, and he needs to eat so he can take his night time meds before bed, or else he'll get sick. He's standing in front of the microwave, watching last night's lasagna spin on the glass disc when his cell rings on the kitchen counter.

He leaves his dinner to finish up it's reheat dance and grabs the phone off the counter top. He's mildly surprised to see Mickey's name on the display. Excited and wary at the same time. He doesn't like feeling nervous about talking to Mickey. It reminds him too much of how he felt when they were kids, always waiting for the other shoe to drop. Always waiting for Mickey to say 'enough' and walk away. He doesn't feel that way now, not really. He just can't shake that old feeling that Mickey is just out of reach, hurting in secret, unwilling to open up or accept help.

He hates that shit.

He pushes his worries down as best he can and answers the phone with an overly cheerful "Hey Mick, what's up?" It feels forced coming out of his mouth and it sounds worse. He winces.

"Hey," Mickey's quiet voice fills his ears, and all his anxiety bleeds out of his body and seeps into the floor. Just one word from this man stills all the chaos spinning in his brain. "I'm downstairs, can I come up?"

Ian did not expect that. He's hardly seen Mickey all week, the man has been avoiding him like the plague.

"Uh, yeah. Sure. Come on up, I'll unlock the door." Ian stammers, tripping over Mandy's bunny slippers on his mad dash to the front door.

Mickey doesn't say anything else, and the line goes dead. Ian unlocks the door and goes back to the kitchen. He grabs his lasagna and two beers and goes to the living room to feign nonchalance.

He hears the door open and close as he's taking his first bite of his dinner. It's delicious, even the second time around. Macy is a good cook. Better than Ian and Mandy combined.

He's just stuffing the last bite of saucy goodness in his mouth with a contented hum as Mickey drops down on the couch next to him. He grabs one of the unattended beers on the table and takes a sip. The sit in silence for a moment as Ian leans forward and puts his bowl on the coffee table and grabs his own beer, sipping off it as he turns his body to face Mickey better.

"Where you been?" he asks quietly.

Mickey sighs, taking another sip of his beer before placing it back on the table to lean back and pull his cigarettes out of his pocket. "We can still smoke in here, right?" he asks, remembering something about his sister talking about quitting recently.

Ian nods. "Yeah, Mandy put her grand plan to quit on hold while she gets acclimated to therapy." Ian says with a small smile.

"Oh shit, she's really doing that?" Mickey asks, surprised.

Ian nods again. "Yeah, guess she's really gonna try. Macy's happy, so that's good too."

"Good." Mickey says. "She needs to get all that toxic shit out before it eats her alive." Mickey's
words cut Ian to the core. What does Mickey have eating him alive?

Ian doesn't want to engage in small talk anymore. He reaches forward and grabs Mickey's free hand, pulling it into his lap to play with his fingers. He runs his thumb over each letter, tracing the words like he's done a million times before. "Mick, what's going on?" he asks quietly, as if sharing a secret.

Mickey looks sad. Really sad. And exhausted. He's got dark circles under his eyes and his skin is paler than usual. He looks like he hasn't slept in days. Ian's heart breaks just that much more.

Mickey sighs, bringing his cigarette up to his lips and inhaling deeply. He tips his head up toward the ceiling and blows out the smoke. He turns his head and gives Ian a brittle smile.

"I kinda lost it for a minute there." he admits, shaking his head. "Couldn't deal with the adoption. With Yev moving, with Svetlana slowly cutting me outta his life. Just had to be alone for a while, get my head around it."

"But Mick..." Ian starts, but Mickey shakes his head.

"I know what you're gonna say. We talked about it at the Alibi. I know how you feel about it and what you think is going to happen. What I'm telling you is that I don't believe that shit. I just have a feeling that I won't get to be the dad I wanna be, and it's got me feeling shitty."

Ian nods sadly, unsure of what to say. There's really no way he can make this better. Nothing he can do to assuage Mickey's pain. Maybe he's right. Maybe Svetlana will pull Yevgeny away more and more and maybe there's nothing either of them can do about it. The thought makes Ian's eyes prickle. Just the idea of not seeing Yevgeny grow up breaks his heart. He can't imagine how Mickey must feel.

"But, uh, it was fucked up of me to shut you out. It's an old habit, and it's a bad one. I'm just so used to suffering in silence, I don't really know another way."

"I know, Mick. I get it. I know how hard it is for you to even acknowledge your own emotions, never mind share them. But you're here now, and that's a good first step. I just don't want you to push me away. I thought we were done with all that."

"We are." Mickey nodded, finishing his cigarette and putting it out in the ashtray. He grabbed his beer in one hand, and wrapped the other around Ian's forearm. "We are done with all that shit. I'm trying to be better. It's just, I've never felt like this before. You know, about the kid. It was like, I spent all this time trying to not give a shit. When Svet first got pregnant, I was almost positive he wasn't mine. I mean, she was fucking tons of dudes, fucking Terry included." Mickey laughed bitterly. "And when he came, I avoided it all like the fucking plague. Remember that shit?" he asked, squeezing Ian's arm before letting go to grip his bottle in both hands.

Ian nodded. He did remember. Mickey staying with him, the two of them playing house, acting like none of it had ever happened. Getting caught, the rape, the complete destruction of everything they were trying to build. It wasn't an easy time for either of them, but Ian cherished the memories nonetheless.

"But it was a lost cause, not caring." Mickey said, a small smile on his face. "The kid grows on ya, right? He doesn't even have to try. But by the time I came to terms with it all, how he came to be, what he was to me, I was in jail and it was too late. I should have just let it be. When I came home, I should have kept my distance. Let the kid have his new life, with his family. But I had all these ideas. Stupid fucking ideas. Like, I could be a good father. I could break the cycle, you know? Make sure the kid had everything he wanted or needed. Teach him shit, watch him grow up. But who the fuck
am I kidding? What would I teach him? How to pick a lock? How to shoot a pistol? The best ways to knock off a convenience store? I'm a fucking dirt bag, got nothing to offer the kid. It was stupid to dream up all the fairy tale shit. That's not how life works for a Milkovich. The kid's lucky he's not one anymore." Mickey fell back against the couch, rubbing furiously at his eyes.

"Mick, that's bullshit." Ian said, sitting up. Mickey opened his mouth to reply, but Ian just talked over him. "Utter fucking bullshit. Don't you dare talk about yourself like that." Ian leaned forward, grabbing Mickey's face in his hands, running his thumbs along his jaw. "Your life was shit growing up, and yeah, you did a lot of bad stuff. So did I. It's just how things were for people like us. We had to do shit to survive. But you had it the worst of all. Even out of all the Milkovich kids, you had it the worst. I didn't know how bad it was back then. I had no idea what kind of hell you dealt with every single day. And just the fact that you are here now, doing so well, is a testament to what kind of man you are. You wanna know what you can teach Yev? Resilience, loyalty, compassion. That shit you have in spades. Yevgeny is lucky to have you as his father, and he knows it. He worships the ground you walk on. And even if shit goes south with Svet and the move, you don't fucking give up. Because one day, Yev will be old enough to make his own decision. And if you stay in his life, be available and open for him, he will be receptive. Kids just want to feel loved. You love him, and everything else will fall into place. Okay?" Ian asked, hands still caressing Mickey's face.

Mickey let out a harsh breath, hanging his head, finally letting the tears that had been threatening to fall all day slip out of his eyes. Ian wrapped his arms around Mickey, pulling him to his chest, rocking him a little while he ran a hand through his hair. Neither of them said a word about Mickey's silent crying. They just sat there on the couch, Ian holding Mickey and Mickey letting go of all the shit he'd been holding in since the adoption. He had really thought he was okay, when he and Ian had spoken at the Alibi. He thought he had his feeling figured out, he thought he had it under control. But as time passed, he could feel his tenuous grip on his feelings slipping away. By the time he realized he was actually really fucked up about it, he was angry with himself and embarrassed, so he did what he did best, put up his walls. He insulated himself from his feelings with manual labor and booze, ignoring anyone who tried to get in touch with him.

Looks like that plan was a spectacular failure.

He'd hurt Ian. Again. He didn't want to, and he didn't mean to, but he did it.

He's got to get better at this emotional shit. He'd thought he was doing okay. He's leaps and bounds beyond where he was when he broke out of prison. Jack, Lauren and Javier have a lot to do with that. And although it's easy now for Mickey to open up to his friends, there are still certain things no one knows about. Things he's never told another living soul.

But opening up to Ian has always been exponentially more difficult. Mickey doesn't know if it's the massive amount of shared history between them, or the underlying fear that it could still end at any time that keeps Mickey dancing around letting Ian in. He has no problem being there for Ian, taking care of him. Hell, he'd take another bullet for Ian in a heartbeat. But the idea of letting Ian do the same is still scary. He's still afraid to be hurt. Still scared to give Ian unfettered access to his ghosts and demons.

If Mickey's scared shitless of the dark, ugly shit in his head, what is Ian going to think when he sees it all? History tells Mickey that Ian will run. That's been his go-to answer when things got tough since the beginning.

But if that's how Mickey feels, what the fuck is he doing with Ian at all? This was supposed to be their second chance. To do things better, to love each other in the way they both had wanted to for so long, but had been unable or unsure how to. Mickey couldn't waste this opportunity giving into his
old coping mechanisms and played out emotional baggage. He has been working so hard to let that shit go.

He has to look at his progress with Jack, Lauren and Javier as minor league shit. Cutting himself open and splaying his guts out for Ian to poke and prod at was stepping up into the majors.

And it's now or never.

He lets out a shuddering breath, his chest aching as he gasps for air. He grips Ian as tight as he possibly can, wrapping his arms around him and burying his face in his shoulder. Ian reciprocates with vigor, crushing Mickey to his chest as the other man lets a pained whimper slip past his lips.

"Fuck." Mickey curses, his breath speeding up as his skin breaks out in goosebumps and a large, painful lump forms in his throat. "Fuck." he repeats, as Ian's arms squeeze him to the point of pain. "I don't wanna lose him."

Ian nods furiously, desperate to keep his fucking cool. He maintains his bone crushing grip on Mickey, swaying slightly as Mickey finally lets go and fucking cries.

He cries for what feels like forever, finally feeling all that shit he's been desperate to ignore for years. The fact that he's the father of a child he never wanted, but loves furiously with every fiber of his being. That he was raped, brutally, in front of the one person he ever loved while his abusive father held a loaded gun on them both. That he never really had a chance to have a normal healthy relationship with anyone in his life. His family, Ian, his son. Not until after he got locked up did he ever feel like he could actually have that, do that. And the fact that it happened inside made it all the worse. He cried for all the things he never had, all the things he had and lost, all the thing he wanted that he was desperate to deny.

He cried.

After what felt like years, once Mickey's eyes were painfully swollen, his cheeks red and puffy, snot running down his nose, he lifted his head up and looked at Ian.

They separated the smallest bit, both their arms falling into their laps, knees still touching.

Ian had also been crying, albeit much more quietly than Mickey. He had tear streaks running down his face, his eyes red-rimmed.

Ian gave him a small smile, running his thumb under Mickey left eye, wiping away the moisture there. "You're a mess." he whispered.

Mickey didn't know if he meant the state of his face, or his brain, but Mickey nodded in agreement regardless.

"It's okay to be scared." Ian said. "It's okay to be worried about the future, to afraid to lose all the shit you've been working on. But you gotta let me help you carry that burden, Mick. It's not fair that I dump all my shit on you constantly, and you keep all yours locked inside. You helped me so much, for so long. My diagnosis, my family, fucking Brian. Even when I knew I didn't deserve it, you were there for me. You gotta tell me when you're feeling like you're getting overwhelmed."

Mickey nodded, wiping his nose with the back of his hand. "Yeah, okay."

Ian nodded back, running a hand through Mickey's hair lovingly. "Seriously though, you're a mess,
and so am I. Let's go take a shower, then we can order some food. Sound good?"

"Yeah, man. Sounds perfect." Mickey gave Ian a watery smile, lifting his face in silent request.

Ian complied, dipping his head down to kiss Mickey softly. His lips tasted like salt, and the thought broke Ian's heart just that little bit more. He hated to see Mickey in pain. Especially when it was not in his power to fix it.

How was he supposed to make this better? It was out of his hands, just like it was out of Mickey's. Ian hated feeling powerless, more than anything. He'd felt that way so much in his life. As a child, the victim of uncaring parents and the circumstances of poverty. When he first fell in love with Mickey, unable to get what he wanted or needed from the other man, desperate for any scrap of affection he could steal from him. Dancing at the club, swaying to the whims and demands of faceless men. After his diagnosis, under the rule of an intangible entity that would control him for the rest of his days.

He's worked hard over the past few years to regain some semblance of control he'd craved all his life, but had never really possessed. And now here he was, finally feeling like he's where he's always wanted to be, working on building a life with Mickey, and this outside shit beyond his control comes along and sets a match to all their progress.

Fiona's voice rings clear in his mind, a long ago memory of those words flowing through his brain.

And he decides: Fuck that.

Nothing and no one is going to destroy this thing. Not this time. He will do whatever it takes to make this shit work.

And that starts with helping Mickey deal with that shit that he tries so hard to ignore.

Ian grabs Mickey's hands, cold and clammy in his palm. He understands. He gets it. And he's not giving up that easy.

He pulls an numb, lethargic Mickey toward the bathroom, pushing him up against the door after he closes it. Mickey just stands there, watching Ian start the shower. He grabs some towels and puts them on the counter then turns to Mickey. He gives him a small smile as he reaches down and grips the bottom of Mickey's t shirt. He pulls up and Mickey raises his arms to help. Once his shirt is gone, Ian goes for his belt, making quick work of undoing it and getting Mickey's pants down.

Any other time, Ian would love to give in to the little tingle running up his spine as he ran his hands down Mickey's ass as he removed his boxer briefs. He's so sexy, and Ian's more attracted to him than ever. But now is not the time for shit like that.

Mickey, for his part, looks exhausted. He needs a shower and some food, then sleep. Ian's going to take care of him, because that's what you do for family.

Mickey's his fucking family and he loves him. Ian may not be able to fix the situation, but he sure as hell can help Mickey get through it.

Once Mickey is standing naked in front of Ian, arms hanging loose by his sides, a far away unfocused look in his eye, Ian finally starts stripping. He pulls his shirt over his head and tosses it on the ground with Mickey's discarded clothes. He strips his pants and boxers and they join the pile on the floor.

The room is quickly filling with steam, the hot water making the air thick. Ian pulls the curtain back
with one hand, turning slightly to extend the other out to Mickey. Mickey doesn't come out of his trance right away, still staring at the wall. Ian wiggles his fingers a little bit, and that seems to break the spell. Mickey pushes off the wall and takes Ian's hand. Ian steps into the tub, pulling Mickey in with him. He closes the curtain and they stand together under the spray. It's not a huge shower, but it's bigger than either of them had growing up.

Ian maneuvers Mickey so he is standing facing Ian, with his back to the cascading water, Ian right in front of him. They are silent as Ian washes himself first, then Mickey. Mickey tips his head back with a sigh as Ian scrubs his fingers through his hair, suds everywhere. Ian realizes in that moment that he's never done this before. Sure, they have showered together countless times, but Ian has never washed Mickey's body. He's never washed his hair. He's never taken care of him like this.

He likes it. He decides in that moment that taking care of Mickey is his new favorite thing, that he should have been doing this since the beginning. Although Ian's not delusional enough to think Mickey would have been receptive to this kind of shit when they were kids.

Mickey's eyes are closed, but there is a faint hint of a smile on his face, and Ian's heart throbs.

He just wants to make him happy.

They finish in the shower and Ian wraps Mickey in the biggest towel he owns. Mickey doesn't grumble or make any snide comments, and that is worrying in and of itself.

Ian leads Mickey to his bedroom, where he dries his body thoroughly while Mickey stares off into the distance some more.

Ian gets him into a pair of boxers, then into a gray pair of sweats that Mickey is swimming in. Another time, Ian would make a joke about how Mickey's his tiny little peanut, but the words stick in his throat.

As the silence drags on and Ian leaves Mickey seated on the edge of the bed to grab his phone and some takeout menus, Ian wonders if this is what Mickey feels like when Ian's going through a low phase. When he can't speak to save his life, and he needs help doing the most basic things. He doesn't like the feeling.

Not at all.

Ian orders the food and they watch 'The Avengers' while they wait. They get Mickey's favorite pizza, extra cheese, extra bacon, because of course, and they eat in a relative silence that's not super uncomfortable.

Ian's a talker, always has been, but Mickey's not. Sometimes he just needs some quiet time to process his feelings. He needs Ian's presence more than his words of encouragement. He just needs to know he's not alone.

So that's how they spend their night, watching movies and picking at their pizza, until Mickey passes out on Ian's shoulder, completely wrung dry from his overwhelming emotions. Ian turns off the lamp a little after midnight and Mickey curls into Ian's chest instinctively. Ian lays there in the dark for a really long time. His eyes adjust and he just stares at Mickey's face in the moonlight filtering through the window.

He feels his whole body thrumming with love for this man. They'll be okay. They'll get through this. Together.
Mickey feels like a dick. It's not a new feeling for him. He's been feeling like a useless asshole for as long as he can remember. But it always feels worse when Ian's involved.

Mickey didn't expect Yevgeny's adoption to hit him as hard as it did. He knew, objectively, that it was happening, months in advance. He also knew that it didn't change anything, not really.

Yevgeny was his son, his blood. He would always been his child.

Svetlana deserved to be happy. She had had more than her fair share of suffering in life. Sold into sexual slavery before she was twelve years old, she spent early life fucking for money and getting beaten. Long before Terry forced her to fuck Mickey's gay away, she had lived a life that would break a lesser woman. So Mickey was happy she had found David. He seemed like a nice enough guy, if a bit boring. But maybe that's what Svetlana needs now. A dull, stable life. She's had enough excitement, if you ask Mickey.

So he doesn't really know why it fucked him up so bad. It's for the best. Even if he is pretty sure it is the beginning of the end of his relationship with his kid. He can't be selfish on this one. He needs to let Svetlana do what will make her happy. And if that's moving to some boring ass suburb and sitting on her ass all day while her man makes money, then Mickey’s gotta give her his blessing. Because a happy Svetlana will raise a happy Yevgeny. Mickey's sure of that. Svetlana's a lot of things, but a shitty mother isn't one of them.

Yevgeny is healthy. He's happy. Those are the things that matter to Mickey.

So Mickey had done his go-to shit. He shut everyone out. He didn't really care about anyone feelings when he got into a mood like that. Too wrapped up in his own self pity and low self worth to give a shit about how his attitude affected anyone.

But he did care about how it affected Ian. And he had been an asshole to the man he loved for no other reason than his own tired bullshit.

And that made him an asshole.

But it's getting easier, as the days go by. Coming to terms with all this shit is a lot harder than Mickey anticipated. The adoption, changing how he deals with his emotions, letting Ian in. It's fucking hard, but he's getting there.

Fucking slowly.

It's been about a two weeks since the adoption, and about a week since the end up his subsequent melt down. Things have gone back to normal for the most part. He goes to work, he goes home. He hangs out with Ian. There's not much more to Mickey's life these days, and he actually kind of likes it.

He's not some domesticated fucker, or anything like that. It's just nice to have a normal life. He doesn't have to look over his shoulder when he walks down the street. The threat of the police, or reprisal from someone he ripped off are a distant memory at this point. He's just a regular dude now. Well, as regular as a gay ex con escapee can be. And on the south side, that's about 50% normal.
Mickey chuckles at his own ridiculous thoughts as he makes his way down the street to his house. It's late afternoon on a Friday. It's about two weeks until Christmas, and the streets are full of ice and snow. Mickey stuffs his gloved hand into the pocket of his down jacket. He was elated to find that it had survived somehow in his closet all those years he was laying on the beach in Mexico.

Thoughts of warm sand and cold beer fill his mind as he maneuvers his way down the perilously icy sidewalk. He curses loudly when he almost slips, his hands flailing out as he flounders for a minute before finding his footing again. "God damn it." he grumbles.

He had dropped off the work truck at the garage up the street for an oil change. He had told Matt countless times that he could do that simple maintenance shit himself, but Matt insisted the warranty covered it, so why not get that shit free?

Mickey couldn't argue with that. Free is free, after all.

So he'd have to swing by and pick it up in the morning. He didn't mind running this errand if it meant he could have the work truck for the weekend.

Not like he had a lot going on this weekend. He and Ian were supposed to go Christmas shopping. That in and of itself was a head trip for Mickey. He'd never been Christmas shopping, had no idea what went into it, if he's being honest with himself. But he is certain of two things: first, Ian will be an expert, and second, Ian will make it easy. Ian makes everything easier.

Mickey smiles to himself, pulling a cigarette out of his pack and lighting it as he rounds the corner to his house. He sees lights on inside and wonders who's around. Iggy should be just finishing up at work, he'd had an early shift sanding and salting for the city, but decided to pull a double at the last minute. He should be home soon. And Tessa never works on Friday.

He walks up the stairs, almost face-planting again on the top step.

"Motherfucking fuck!" he screams, grabbing the railing at the last minute, saving himself from going over backwards down the stairs. He grabs some salt out of a bucket they keep by the door, tossing it out indiscriminately across the steps, grumbling the whole time. "Fucking lazy ass stupid brother, never does a god damn thing. Almost broke my fucking neck. Gonna die on these damn steps one day." he continues his solo diatribe while he salts the steps and the entire front walk. If he's gonna do it, he's gonna do it right.

He finally makes it inside after an extra ten minutes in the bitter cold.

He closes the door behind him, unwrapping his scarf and hanging it on the hook by the door. He stripped his mittens, stuffing them in his pocket before shucking off his coat and kicking off his boots.

"Hello?" he called into the house. The only light on was the one in the kitchen, and he could hear soft music coming from that direction.

"Mick?" Ian's voice carried from the kitchen.

Mickey made a face, confused. Why the hell was Ian here? Who let him in?

Ian came around the corner, wiping his hands on one of those frilly little towels Tess has hanging all over the kitchen.

"Hey." Ian said warmly as he came to stand in front of Mickey. He was so close he was towering over Mickey, causing the other man to crane his neck to maintain eye contact.
"Hey, what are you...." he was cut off when Ian dipped his head and captured his lips in a tender kiss. Mickey instinctively wrapped his arms around Ian's shoulders, inching up on his tip toes to get that much closer.

Ian hummed into the kiss, his arms snaking around Mickey's waist, pulling them flush against each other. Mickey sighed, the action giving Ian the opportunity to slip his tongue into Mickey's mouth. They kissed like that for a moment, gentle passes of tongue, wandering hands and small noises, until Mickey pulled away, delivering one more small kiss to Ian's smiling face before pulling away to step around the other man to get to the kitchen.

"What're you doing here, man? I thought we were gonna meet up later? Go shopping, right? Weren't you supposed to be hanging out with your family right now?"

Ian came up behind him, sliding between Mickey and the table to get back to the stove. He pulled open the oven, looking in at whatever it was that he was cooking. When he didn't answer right away, Mickey turned and grabbed two beers from the fridge, sliding one over to Ian before popping the top on his and taking a long sip.

Ian closed the oven and turned around, giving Mickey a small smile before opening his beer and taking a sip of his own.

"I made chicken." Ian said instead of answering Mickey's question. Mickey sat down at the kitchen table, motioning for Ian to join him. Ian did, pulling out a chair opposite Mickey and falling into it with a tired thud.

"I hope you don't mind, Tess is taking a nap, she let me in."

"Ian, you're avoiding my damn question." Mickey chided softly. "I'm glad you're here, and I'm fucking starving. Thanks for cooking for me and all, but why are you here and not making dinner with your own family, like you had planned?"

Ian huffed, taking another gulp of his beer. He gave Mickey a pained smiled, his lips curling around his teeth in more of a grimace than anything. "Let me just get dinner ready and I'll tell you all about it, okay?"

Mickey nodded, worry knotting in his stomach. He pulled off his beer more aggressively. These 'conversations' with Ian always unsettled him a little bit. He's still getting used to all this open dialogue with Ian, always wanting to fall back into their old pattern of 'fight & fuck', nostalgic for a time when they didn't share every single thought that crossed their minds.

But he knew that was an asinine way to think. What had that shit ever brought him? Mind blowing orgasms and bruised ribs, but that's it. The shit he shared with Ian was worth way more than that, so he swallowed his worry down with another mouthful of booze, wrapping his knuckles on the table top nervously while he watched Ian flitter around the kitchen.

He pulled the chicken out and plated it. It smelled delicious. It had that lemon pepper crust shit that Mickey fucking loved. Ian added some fresh green beans and white rice before depositing the plate in front of his ravenous boyfriend.

Mickey shoveled food into his mouth, only taking breaks to breath and drink more beer. Ian watched him with a fond look on his face, eating at a much slower pace. His hand reached out on it's own accord, the fingers on his free hand lacing with Mickey's as they ate in a comfortable silence.

Once they were done eating and Mickey had cleared the plates, they sat at the table and smoked, drinking slowly.
"So." Ian started, getting up and grabbing two more beers. He opened them and passed one to Mickey. "As you know, I was supposed to have dinner with my family tonight."

Mickey nodded. He knew, because Ian had asked him to go and he had said no. It's not that he hated Ian's family or anything, but he just wasn't into some standing Friday dinner date with the whole clan. Once in a while he could bring himself to go, and he'd already been once since Thanksgiving. There is only so much Gallagher family bonding Mickey can take, he's only a man, after all.

"Well, the thing is, I wanted you to come because I knew it was gonna be a shit show, and I was right. We had a huge fight and I walked out." Ian said, nervously picking at the label on his beer.

"Fight? What about? Lip giving you shit?" Mickey was immediately on the defense. Ian and Lip had come to some kind of armistice after Lip had lost his shit that night at Mickey's. Mickey is not so quick to forgive, since Lip had pretty much exposed all of Mickey's worst fears and deepest insecurities. Lip was a dick, and he knew what to say to cut a person to the bone. Mickey would be lying if he said that shit hadn't hit home and fucked him up.

Ian had been livid after that. Refusing Lip's calls for days. Finally it had all come to a head at the Gallagher house one day while Mickey was visiting Jack. It had come to blows, like most fights between Lip and Ian are wont to do when they don't get resolved right away.

When Ian had come over later, he had a swollen cheek and a split lip, but had sworn high and low that shit with his brother was squashed. Lip had promised to lay off the booze (again) and to keep his shitty thoughts about Ian and the company he keeps to his damn self. Though Mickey was sure Lip would keep neither of those promises, Ian wanted to believe him.

Mickey wonders if Lip is back to his same old bullshit already.

But Ian shook his head, avoiding Mickey's eyes again. "No, Mick. Not about you and Mandy, anyway."

"Come on, man." Mickey pleaded. "You're freaking me out."

Ian sighed, tipping his head back to stare at the ceiling. Mickey hated when he did that. He only did that when he didn't want Mickey to see his eyes while he talked. Never good.

"It's about my mom." Ian finally said, still not looking at him.

"Monica?" Mickey asked dumbly.

Ian chuckled. "Yeah, that one." like he had another or something.

"What about her? She's dead." Mickey asked, mentally berating himself for being so callous. He cringed when Ian sighed again.

"Yeah, Mick, she is. That's kinda the problem." Ian said. He finally lifted his head and looked at Mickey. "I wanna go visit her, you know, cuz it's Christmas or whatever, and I'm a fucking idiot because I mentioned at dinner that I was gonna go down to the cemetery and bring her some flowers or something gay like that. But my whole family jumped down my throat about it. Lip, fucking Fiona, even Debbie. It's the same old tired shit with them every time. Like I'm the asshole cuz I don't hate her. Like I'm betraying them because I miss her. It's stupid. Never mind." Ian shook his head violently, obviously reliving the argument in the moment. "Don't know why I even said anything. They all hated her. Nobody understands why I don't." he chuckled darkly. "Guess it must be a
'crazy' thing. That's what they said, in so many words."

Mickey sat there, listening to Ian berate himself for loving his mother, and it broke his heart. Mickey didn't understand, he fucking hated Monica too. She never did anything but hurt Ian, fuck up his head and try to turn him against Mickey. But she's dead now, and none of that matters anymore. The only thing that matters to Mickey is Ian, and helping him feel better.

He can see how the other Gallagher kids can't get past their own hate and bad memories, but he sure as fuck can if it means helping his guy.

"I'll go." Mickey says, eyes on his beer bottle, fingers nervously tapping on the table again.

Ian head shot up comically fast, eyes wide. "Huh?"

"I said I'll go. When do you wanna go? I got the truck all weekend. We could grab some flowers or a wreath or whatever you get dead moms for Christmas. If you wanna go, I'll bring ya."

Ian stood up so fast, his chair teetered for a moment before crashing to the floor. Before Mickey knew what was happening, he was up out of his seat and wrapped in Ian's arms again. Ian buries his face in Mickey's neck, squeezing him so tight it was hard to breathe. "You'd do that for me?" Ian asked, voice muffled by Mickey's shoulder.

"Nah, Gallagher, I'll do it with you. That's what this is, right? We do shit together? The fun stuff and the hard stuff. Right?"

Ian pulled his face out of Mickey's shoulder so they could look into each other's eyes.

"Yeah, Mick. That's what this is." he nodded, a watery smile on his face.

"Okay then, no need to get all emotional. I wanna watch the game. Blackhawks are on in ten. Bring the beers." Mickey patted Ian on the cheek and moved to walk around him so he could get to the living room and turn on the game. He didn't want to make it a bigger deal than it had to be. He wanted it to be normal for Ian to ask him for things.

It seems like such a simple thing, accompanying Ian to the cemetery so he could visit his mother. Although he never understood Ian's relationship with the woman, he knows what it feels like to love the ghost of an imperfect woman who gave you life and not much else.

They settle in to watch the game, Ian laying his head on Mickey's shoulder as they sip their beers and make snide comments about the apposing team.

In that moment, and not for the first time, Mickey thinks he'd be okay with doing just about anything, for Ian.

---------------------------------------

Mickey follows Ian's directions as the pickup winds through the icy Chicago streets. The closer they got to the destination, the more uncomfortable Mickey got.

No way. There's no fucking way.

"Um, Ian, what cemetery is Monica buried in? Like, what's the name of it?" Mickey asked, as he
reached over to turn down the base-heavy metal that was pounding out of the truck's speakers.

"Uh..." Ian looked out the window, watching the city whip by. "I think it's called Oak Woods or something like that. Monica's parents are super catholic, if you can believe that." Ian laughed lightly. "We don't really know them that well." he added on much more quietly.

Mickey's mind was reeling. Of all the cemeteries in this god forsaken city. What the fuck.

Ian was still staring out the window, a small potted poinsettia sitting on his lap. He's so lost in his own thoughts, he doesn't notice how tight Mickey is holding the steering wheel, how shallow his breathing has become. Ian is so fixated on his own thoughts, he can't see his boyfriend losing his mind two feet to the left.

Mickey can't believe his endless amount of shit luck. He's here for Ian. To help Ian. To fucking support Ian. But now he can feel all his own repressed shit bubbling to the surface, and it pisses him off. Now is not the fucking time to fall down his own personal rabbit hole.

"It's just over here." Ian says, rousing Mickey from his internal dialogue.

"Uh, sure." Mickey says, turning into one of the narrow alleys that housed one of the endless rows of headstones.

"Right here." Ian's clipped voice cut through the cab of the truck, and Mickey hit the brake so hard they both jerked forward violently. Ian grabbed onto his poinsettia with both hands and Mickey grimaced at his lack of fucking chill. He put the truck in park and Ian was out of the cab before Mickey even had his seat belt off.

Okay then.

Mickey got out of the truck slower, hitting the button to lock the truck and waiting for the corresponding 'beep' before he started making his way toward Ian.

Ian was already on his knees in front of an odd grave when Mickey finally found him. The gravestone was busted. Broken in half, if Mickey's seeing it right.

Yeah, he's seeing it right. It's a simple rectangular headstone, made of what looks like grey marble. The inscription is also simple. "Our angel." with a tiny angel carved into the left side. There may have been another on the right, but the whole right side of the stone is missing.

Monica Darrgan Gallagher
May 1, 1966- Dec 18, 2016

Well shit. This just gets more and more bizarre. Monica's birthday was only four days before his own mother, born on the fifth of May. They were close to the same age, too, since Mickey's mother had his oldest brother, Joey, when she was 14.

Strange coincidences seem to be the order of the day.

Mickey stood off to the side while Ian sat the potted flower on the ground by the gravestone. He sat there, on his knees, on the frozen grass, just staring at the headstone. He was silent for a long time, and Mickey didn't want to interrupt whatever it was he was thinking, so he just stood off to the side with his arms crossed over his chest. Every now and again he'd look over to his left, to the section of the cemetery that had pulled his attention since the first rolled through the gates. Ian didn't notice his distraction, too caught up in his own head.
After what felt like a long time, Ian looked up at Mickey, who's eyes were still on the far corner of the cemetery. "You know, we dug her up." Ian says, so casual. Mickey's head whips around, eyes wide and confused.

"You did what now?"

"We dug up my mother, about a week or so after the funeral." Ian shrugged, finally standing up and sliding his hands into his pockets. He came over to stand next to Mickey, watching his face for any sign of discomfort.

"Remember when I told you about the meth?" Ian asks, still looking into Mickey's eyes instead of at his mother's broken gravestone.

'Yeah, I remember, how the newly reformed Gallaghers decided to venture into the world of class A narcotics." Mickey says, a little snarkier than he intended. If Ian noticed, he didn't say anything.

"When we first found out about the meth, Fiona wanted to have nothing to do with it, she took her and Liam's share and stashed it in Monica's coffin. It got buried with her." Ian took a deep breath, avoiding Mickey's eyes as he continued his sordid tale. "When that dude came looking, threatening to kill us or whatever, we had to get those two pounds back. And there was only one way to do it, so...."

Mickey, for his part, remains stoic through the story. The only hint that he is even struck by any of it at all is the wild dance his eyebrows are doing through Ian's monologue. Ian's grateful that Mickey understands him so well, letting him get this shit off his chest with little interruption. "That's how the gravestone got broken, we fucked it up when we were digging her up. Carl hot-wired a damn excavator. It was a shit show."

Ian's smile fades as he recalls the casket falling open. That indescribable smell of his mother's corpse decaying.

"Jesus Christ, Ian. What the fuck?" Mickey finally speaks. He's utterly shocked by what Ian just shared with him. This is just more confirmation that shit he sold Mickey at the border about having his life together and not wanting to get mixed up in Mickey's illegal drama was pure and utter bullshit. His family is just as crazy and crooked as ever.

That realization stings a little bit.

"I know." Ian sighs. He steps back from Mickey and runs a hand through his hair. It's getting really cold, so he zips his coat up a little more and rubs his hands together. "It was fucking stupid, and I really regret it. Seeing her body like that, I'll never be able to forget it. Everyone else thought it was hilarious. Joking about the smell for weeks." Ian looks away, his eyes finding the cracked headstone again. "We're so fucked up." Ian shook his head.

"Everyone's fucked up, Ian." Mickey reminds him gently. "She was your mom, and even if she did crazy shit, you're allowed to miss her."

Ian shakes his head. "Not according to my family." he says, bitterness laced in his tone. "They never understood. That's why I'm here with you right now instead of them. Nobody gives a fuck but me, and I'm the asshole cuz I care."

Mickey closes the distance between them again, grabbing Ian by the shoulders and shaking him a little bit. "You don't owe anyone an explanation about your own feelings, Gallagher. They don't get it. They don't have to. It's between you and her." Mickey pointed to the grave.
"Yeah, you're right." Ian says, the anxiety in his eyes abating a little bit. "She's my mom, you know? I just can't forget her."

"I get it, man. Trust me." Mickey sighs, debating with himself for a moment before deciding 'fuck it.'

"You know my mom's buried here too?" he says it quietly, but Ian sure as fuck hears him. His eyes go wide and his mouth drops open in shock.

Ian can count on one hand how many times he's heard Mickey mention his mother, in all the years they've known each other. She's been dead since Mickey was really young, that's all Ian really knows about her, besides the fact that she met Terry when she was just a child, and she was a junkie for most of her life. It's not something Mickey likes to talk about, understandably. So to say this tidbit of information was a shock would be quite the understatement.

"What?" Ian asked dumbly.

Mickey nods, thumbing at his nose while his eyes dart back to the far left corner of the cemetery. "Yeah, man. This is one of the biggest Catholic cemeteries in Chicago, I'm guessing lots of lapsed Catholics are buried here.

Of all the graveyards in Chicago, what are the odds both Mickey and Ian's mothers would be buried here?

"You wanna go over there?" Ian asks, partly because he's super curious, and partly because he has a feeling Mickey brought it up for that exact reason.

Mickey seems to debate for a moment, before nodding his head minutely.

Okay, they're going to do this.

Ian walks back over to Monica's grave for a moment, running his hand along the marble with a contemplative look on his face. Mickey leaves him to say goodbye on his own, opting instead to start the truck up. He blasts the heat, since they've been standing in the cold for a half an hour.

Mickey's surprised by the story Ian just told him about Monica and the meth. It's not the fact that Ian's mother was mixed up in that shit, or the fact that Ian's family did what they did, that shit's a given if you ask Mickey. He is a little shocked, however, that Ian would let himself get pulled into such a chaotic, dangerous situation. From the way he was talking before the border, to the way he was acting since Mickey got back, it seemed as if Ian had left all that ghetto madness in his distant past. Looks like all it takes is a little family encouragement to get him back in the mix.

It is not lost on Mickey that throughout his relationship with Ian, all the Gallaghers were fixated on the idea that Mickey would bring Ian down, hold him back. When in actuality, it's the Gallaghers themselves that keep dragging Ian back into the shit, his dead mother included.

But that was neither here nor there. He couldn't change the past, or the way the Gallaghers saw him, however hypocritical it was.

Ian finally left his mother, climbing back into the truck and looking over at Mickey expectantly.

Mickey nodded, putting the truck in gear and turning toward the back left corner of the cemetery. They make the short drive in silence, Ian still a bit pensive from his visitation to Monica, and Mickey lost in his own thoughts about his mother. He rarely lets himself ever think of her. It's not hard, really, she's been dead since he was ten. His memories of her are fuzzy at best, and mostly unhappy. Her whole life was one tragedy after another, culminating in her death. He does know that she loved
him, though, in her own fucked up way. And that's something, at least.

Mickey parks the truck next to a long line of intricate looking grave markers. Ian looks over and notices a lot of them are in another language. Maybe Russian? He's not sure. It looks like this whole area of the cemetery is dedicated to foreigners maybe. Ian's confusion gets to him and he turns to Mickey, who is still staring straight ahead, hands on the wheel, even though the truck has been off for a few minutes now.

"What's with the weird language?" Ian asks, motioning over to the window.

"It's Ukrainian, some Russian." Mickey shrugs, finally going for the door handle. He climbs out of the truck and starts making his way over to the right hand corner of the small parcel of land. Ian scrambles to follow him, weaving in and out of the headstones, doing his best to be respectful, and not step directly onto any of these graves. Mickey makes his way to one grave in particular, and by the time Ian catches up with him, he knows they've found what they are looking for.

Mickey's got his arms crossed over his chest. Defensive, shut off. Ian eyes him warily for a moment before he lets his eyes fall to the grave they've stopped in front of.

Katya Ulia Leski Milkovich
ти тепер в руках бога
May 5, 1969 - February 15, 2004

Jesus. This is really Mickey's mother's grave. Ian never thought he'd be here. He's thought about Mickey's mother a lot. Wondering what she was like, if Mickey was anything like her, if Mickey missed her the way he misses Monica. He can't imagine what it would be like to lose his mother when he was ten years old. Monica was a flake, always in and out of his life. But he had always known she was out there somewhere, and just that thought had comforted him as a child. Mickey never had that. All he had was Terry, and that thought in an of itself is fucking terrifying. He never asked about Mickey's mother, because asking him about his family was like pouring salt on an infected wound that refused to heal.

But here they are. And it's fucking surreal.

"What language is that?" Ian asks, pointing to the headstone.

"It's Ukranian." Mickey replies simply. He hasn't taken his eyes off the headstone since they stepped up to it. Arms still crossed over his chest, a tight, pained expression on his face.

"What does it say?" Ian ventures. He's not sure what he's going to get for his curiosity, but he asks anyway.

Mickey sighs, his arms finally falling to his sides. "You are in God's hands now."

Ian's eyebrows crawl up his face, shocked. "Can you read that shit?" he asks, disbelieving.

Mickey shakes his head with a small smile. "Nah, just know it cuz it's always been there. She could, though. Read it, write it, speak it."
Ian's shocked. He knew Mickey's father was Ukrainian, because of the family's last name, but he had no idea his mother was too. How did he not know any of this shit?

"Was she born there?" Ian asks, desperate for more knowledge, now that he's aware just how fucking clueless he really is.

Mickey nodded again. "Yeah, her family came over here in the 70's. She met Terry at a bar in the old Ukrainian Village. She never shoulda fucking been there, she was only 13 for christ's sake, but it was a different time, back then in that neighborhood, shit was commonplace, apparently." Mickey let a bitter laugh slip from between his lips. "They got married with her parents blessing a few months later, when she found out she was pregnant with Tony. Joey came a year later, Iggy two years after that, then me two years later, and Mandy only ten months after that. It's crazy to think she had us all in such quick succession, but you know all about that, don't you, Gallagher? Your mom was the same way."

Ian nods. It's true. Monica had all of her kids in a pretty short span of time, although she wasn't as young as Mickey's mother when she started. Fourteen is really young. Ian can picture it, though. A tiny girl with Mandy's hair and Mickey's eyes, her small frame eclipsed by the round swell of her belly as she prepares to give birth to her first Milkovich baby. He can see her scared face, maybe a black eye or a split lip, as she stares at the monster she married as he raises his hand to slap her again.

Ian shudders at the thought. He can't imagine how a teenage girl could ever hold her own with Terry Milkovich. It must have been terrifying.

As if reading his mind, Mickey speaks again. "She may have been young, but she was tough as nails." he laughed lightly, a genuine smile on his face at the memory of his mother. "I don't remember a lot, cuz I was so young when she died, but I do remember her standing up to Terry, tryin to protect us when he got drunk and wanted to beat on someone. She could take a punch, that's for sure." he grimace and Ian's heart splintered.

Shit.

Mickey continued without looking up at Ian, missing the devastated look on his face. "You know, I think sometimes Terry got her strung out so it would be easier to control her. Once he got her hooked on that shit, she didn't stand up to him anymore. He called the shots, kept her desperate and willing to do anything to get off E. She didn't try to get between us and him anymore. Didn't try to stop him when he beat on us. Didn't bring us to see our grandparents anymore. The drugs were all that mattered, and as long as Terry kept her high, she turned a blind eye to all the bad shit going on at home. I don't blame her, not really." he says, mostly to himself. "She was abused just as much as the rest of us, Terry treated her like fucking shit. Fucked with her head too. Like, he always made it clear he didn't love us kids. Never even pretended too. We were his little army. Slaves and soldiers. There to fetch his beer and collect his debts. But with her, he would treat her good sometimes, you know? Tell her he loved her and everything, make her feel good and shit, just to turn it all around on her in a heartbeat. Next thing you know, she's a worthless whore cunt bitch, only good for fucking or beating on. It was hard to watch, even as a kid. The way he fucked with her head was something else. By the time he started pimping her out, she was convinced she was good for nothing else but forty dollar fucks." Mickey cleared his throat, unsure why he shared so much. Even with Ian, who he trusted with more than almost anyone, it felt like he was far to exposed. His memories of his mother were the most personal thing he had. He'd never spoken to anyone about her. He can't even remember the last time he spoke about her with Mandy.

He feels overwhelmed. Suddenly his throat is closing up and his eyes are burning.

Motherfucker. No.
He sniffs once, his hand nudging his nose as he turns away from Ian and stalks over to the grave in three long strides. He unceremoniously drops down in the snow and starts wiping dirt and debris off the neglected headstone. His grandparents have been dead for years, and lord knows his siblings don't bother to come down here. Mickey is suddenly furious with himself for letting his mother's final resting place fall to such disrepair. Even if he hasn't even been in Chicago the whole time, he still feels irrationally responsible. He promises himself he'll get down there more, keep it clean.

She may have been a junkie and a whore, but she was his mother and she fucking loved him. She deserves a little respect, in death. Since she never got an ounce of that shit when she was alive. Ian watches as Mickey wipes his gloved hands down the front of his mother's tombstone. He's still trying to process everything Mickey just told him. He knew Mickey's childhood was dark, and he knew his mother died of an overdose. He had an idea, in his head, that she would have been abused by Terry, like the kids were, but hearing it described in detail was an entirely different thing. He's reminded in that moment that although Frank and Monica were selfish assholes, addicts in their own right and abusive in their neglectful way, Ian's childhood was fairy tale compared to Mickey's. He can't imagine what it must have been like, growing up in that hell.

"You know." Mickey says from his spot kneeling in the snow. "I found her. When she died."

Ian is taken aback, yet again. This shit just keeps getting worse and worse. How Mickey is even a semi-functioning adult speaks to his strength and resilience. "I was ten. It was a fucking Tuesday. Don't know why I remember the day. Terry was outta town, some drug run or whatever, you know how he was. Mandy had gone to a friend's house after school, thank fuck. I don't know where my brothers were, they were hardly around, even way back then." Mickey paused, running a hand over the top of his mother's gravestone. "So I run up into the house that day, so fucking happy cuz it was gonna be just me and Ma. She always let me watch cartoons after school, fucking Terry hated that shit, never let me. So I tear into the house, screaming for my Ma to mix me up some chocolate milk. I was allowed one glass a day, after school, cuz milk's expensive shit." Mickey laughed wetly at the memory. "But I walked into the house and it was quiet. Like way more quiet than it ever was in my house. I mean, I knew no one but Ma was home, but it didn't feel right. She always at least had the radio on... Fuck, I sound so stupid." Mickey rubbed furiously at his eyes with the heels of his hands. Ian reached out for him, but Mickey stepped back, seemingly desperate to finish this story now that he's started it. "So I'm yelling for her, you know, going through the living room to the kitchen, bathroom, whatever. I get to her and Terry's room, and the door's like halfway open. And I just stand there on the other side, looking at the door. I'm scared as fuck to go in there. Dunno why, I just was. So I called to her." Mickey took a deep breath, hand running through his hair, pulling the strands as he continued to avoid Ian's eyes. "I'm calling 'Ma, what the fuck? I'm home.' Swearing like a little prick cuz I know she hates that shit and I just wanna hear her scream at me. Cuz I fucking knew. I knew something was really fucking wrong. So I finally grow a set and push my way into the room. And when I saw her, I knew what it was. She'd OD'd before. But Terry called 911 and they narcan'd her. But I remembered what it looked like. I knew what it was. At first I thought maybe she'd gone into a nod, right? She did that a lot. But her eyes were fucking open, and you don't nod out with your eyes open." Mickey let a tiny laugh slips through his lips, shaking his head. "She was laying on the bed, in this black dress she used to wear all the fucking time. She had the belt around her arm still, needle still buried in her vein. He head was tilted back against the pillows, and she had this look on her face. Eyes open staring up at the ceiling, but she looked fucking happy. I dunno, it's weird. But she just looked fucking peaceful, y'know? And I remember, the first thing I thought was 'maybe she's fucking happy now.' How fucked up is that?" Another disbelieving laugh, another rueful shake of his head.

Ian couldn't hold back anymore, he lunged for Mickey, pulling his unwilling boyfriend up off the ground and to his chest in one fluid motion, wrapping his arms around him tightly. Mickey didn't cry or scream, but he didn't pull back either. He just kind of settled against Ian's chest, letting the other
man comfort him the best he could. It was a moment before Mickey spoke again. He let out a
shuddering breath against Ian's chest, but didn't look up at him when he opened his mouth to finish
his story.

"I didn't know what to do. Like, Milkovichs don't call the cops, y'know? But I remembered when
Terry called 911 when Ma OD'd the first time. So I grabbed the landline and called. Then I just went
back into the bedroom and sat with her til they all came and took her away. It was fucking crazy.
The cops couldn't get ahold of Terry. No one knew where he was. So the cops picked Mandy up at
her friends house and took us both to my Aunt Rand's house. You remember her? Mandy used to
stay with her when Terry was being particularly pervy?"

Ian nodded, resting his chin on Mickey's head as he continued to listen to this horrific story.

"After she died, we never spoke of her again. I remember at the funeral, we weren't allowed to cry.
Terry smacked my face and told me to man the fuck up and quit with the pussy whining shit. We
weren't allowed to talk to my grandparents, either. They hated Terry by that point, and Terry hated
them right back. That was the last time I ever saw them, standing across the casket from us. They just
stared at us kids. I remember being so pissed at them. They knew who Terry was, what he did to Ma
and all us kids, but they never tried to help or intervene. They just turned a blind eye like everyone
else. I didn't even know they were dead til just now." Mickey pointed to two graves right next to his
mother. "Fuck those assholes too."

Ian squeezed Mickey so tight he could feel the air rushing out of his lungs. He thought he knew all
Mickey's sad stories. He thought he knew all Mickey's ghosts and demons.

How fucking wrong he was.

He feels like the biggest asshole. He's been knowing and loving Mickey for years and years, and all
of this shit is news to him. Mickey knows almost everything about him. About his fucked up
childhood, his fucked up brain, and all the awful shit he's done in his life. He knows Ian's hope and
dreams, disappointments and pain.

And Ian's over here just now learning Mickey's mother's name. Never mind her tragic and short life
story.

Ian feels like the most selfish asshole alive.

"Anyway, enough of this depressing shit. Let's get you home." Mickey says, rubbing up and down
Ian's arms. "Cold as a witch's tit out here. Your bony ass is gonna get frostbite."

Ian chuckles lightly, smiling softly at his boyfriend. When he had asked Mickey to come to the
cemetery with him, he had no idea it was going to turn out this way. He was ecstatic that Mickey
would agree to accompany him at all. He had never thought in a million years that he would get this
glimpse into the most hidden parts of Mickey's life.

They climbed back into the truck, Mickey starting it up, letting it warm up while the radio played
softly in the background. Mickey had one hand on the wheel, fingers tapping nervously, the other
resting on the bench between them. Ian looked over at him, staring out the window, eyes still a little
glassy.

Ian doesn't think. He acts on instinct. He reaches over and laces their fingers together. Mickey
doesn't react. He doesn't look over, doesn't squeeze his fingers. He just continues to stare out the
windshield while the truck's engine continues to warm up.
After about five minutes, Mickey pulls his hand free and puts the truck in gear. He weaves his way through the narrow passages between rows of graves, until he's through the gate and back onto the snowy streets of Chicago.

Ian sits there, in the truck with Mickey, as Pantera's 'Cemetery Gates' flowing from the stereo, the irony makes Ian smile despite the dark mood. He looks over at the other man and turns that smile on him.

They may be going through some shit right now. Ian's still having issues with his family, angry with them for turning their backs on him when he needed them. Mickey's coming to terms with the fact that Yevgeny is moving away. They still have so much to learn about each other, this trip to the cemetery makes that glaringly obvious.

But they are here, together. Supporting each other. They continue to learn about each other and give and take support as needed. It's not perfect, it's hard fucking work.

But it's worth is.

They're fucking family, and that's just the way it is.
Exorcising your demons

Chapter Summary

mick and ian deal with some unpleasant business. but they do it together.

Chapter Notes

just a heads up, there are some triggering talk in this chapter. corrective rape is discussed more than once, along with lots of other instances of rape and coercion. also some bottom!ian thrown in towards the end.

you've been warned. enjoy.

This is it. The day has come. Mickey has been doing his best to prepare himself for this moment. It feels a lot more final than it really is, but Mickey can't help the way he feels.

He's standing outside Svetlana and David's house, watching moving men coming and going, bringing boxes and heavy furniture out of the house and depositing it all into several large moving vans.

He's never seen a moving production quite like this one. It's like an army of buff dudes moving in choreographed dance or some shit. It makes his moving truck scam look small fucking time. And it also reminds him of a weird porno he saw once as a teenager. Hot dudes moving couches can be quite enticing in the right setting.

Mickey shakes his head at his ridiculous thought. He needs to keep his head out of the gutter and his mind on his son.

Yevgeny asked him personally to come here today, to see him off. He asked him to come alone. No Ian, no Mandy, no Jack. Just Mickey.

Mickey gets it. The kid wants to spend time alone with his father before he moves. It warms his heart as much as it scares the hell out of him. He like to have a buffer between himself and Yevgeny's new family. Someone to have his back. Someone to talk him down when he inevitably starts to lose it.

But the kid wanted just him, so here he is. Standing on the sidewalk, waiting for someone to come out, because he can't bring himself to go inside. He just wants to get this over with.

It's a cold Saturday in the middle of December. He's been waiting for about ten minutes, debating with himself about going in or not. He's got two big plastic bags full of wrapped gifts for Yevgeny, since he will be long gone by the time Christmas rolls around in a couple weeks. Mickey can't deny the sadness he feels about not being able to spend Christmas with his son. He's never had that before. And he didn't even realize it was something he wanted until these past few months, where the threat of losing his son morphed into a promise. Now all he can think about is all the shit he's missed out on, all the shit he will continue to miss out on. And it kind of breaks his heart.
But he's used to that shit. Being broken. He'll be okay.

And he has to keep up a good front for the kid, at least until he's not around to see Mickey break down again.

The door swings open, and two of the off-brand moving porn dudes come out, their arms full of boxes, immediately followed by Yevgeny and David, each carrying a box of their own. Yevgeny's eyes light up when he sees Mickey, and Mickey's heart constricts painfully in his chest. He takes a deep breath, using all the willpower at his disposal not to fucking cry.

"Daddy-Mickey!!" the boy screams, his box unceremoniously dropping in the snow as the child forgoes all else to run full steam toward his father. Mickey kneels down in the street, paying no mind to the slushy mess. His knees hit the wet pavement, his arms wide open to receive his son for the last time in God knows how long. He wraps his arms around Yevgeney's small frame, squeezing him to his chest as he stands back up. The boy wraps his legs around Mickey's waist and tucks his blond head into Mickey's shoulder.

"Hey buddy." Mickey whispers, resting his head on Yevgeny's as they just hold each other for a minute.

Finally, or way too soon, Yevgeny pulls back and looks at his father. "Hey Daddy. You come to help me move to my new house? You can come see my new bedroom and my tree fort, even if it's cold out, and you can come to get Chester with me!! That's the name of my new puppy!! And we can go sledding! And Mamma can make hot cocoa!!"

"Yevgeny." David's voice filters out from behind Mickey and Mickey turns on the spot, Yevgeny still in his arms. "We talked about this. Daddy Mickey can not come with us today. It's just the family." his voice is firm, but not cruel. It sounds like they've had this conversation more than once.

Yevgeny's face fell, and Mickey's heart splintered a little more. By the end of this visit, he was only going to have a chest cavity full of broken shards, where his heart used to be.

Fuck.

"Hey," Mickey said, pulling his son's face to his with two fingers. They stared into each others eyes. The same shade of blue, the same consuming sadness. "I can't go today, but your Mama said we can Skype later. You can show me all that sh-stuff. It'll be just like I'm there. And maybe sometime after Christmas, I can come see ya. Bring Aunt Mandy and Uncle Iggy too. Would you like that?"

Yevgeny sniffled, nodding. "What about Uncle Ian and Jack? I miss them too."

Mickey smiled. This kid was so lucky, to be loved so much by so many people. He never would have guessed this was how his son's life was going to turn out. But is he ever fucking glad it did.

"We'll see, kiddo. I'll talk to Mama and see what I can do. But I promise, it won't be long before I can see all your cool new stuff in person, okay?"

"Okay." Yevgeny smiled back at him, and Mickey thought it was one of the best things he'd ever done, made him feel better like that.

"So, I won't be around for Christmas, but I brought all your gifts." he said, placing Yevgeny back on the ground so he could grab the bags back up. He handed them to David, who had been standing to the side the entire time. "There's gifts in there from everyone. From me and Ian, Jack and his parents, Lauren and Javier, you remember them? Daddy's friends from the beach?"
Yevgeny nodded, a giddy smile on his face.

"But you can't open them 'til Christmas, so don't get any ideas." Mickey said, ruffling the kid's hair. He wondered why the hell he wasn't wearing a hat. It was cold as balls outside. Before he could ask, Svetlana came out of the house, locking it behind her, and making her way over to the three men standing at the end of the driveway.

"You came." she said.

"Always do." Mickey replied simply.

"We must go. Is long drive." she stated, turning to her husband. "Put Daddy-Mickey's gifts in the smaller box truck. We will put under tree with all the others after we have unpacked some."

David nodded, moving to do as told without another word.

"You got him trained well." Mickey said, motioning with his head towards David's retreating form.

"He knows how to make a woman happy. Something you do not." Svetlana smiled. Mickey was unsure if that was a dig at him or not. Sometimes it's hard to tell with Svetlana.

"Don't need to." Mickey replied.

Svetlana just nodded, no use in arguing that point.

"So, listen. I was hoping I could Skype with the kid later." Mickey said, watching Yevgeny playing in the snow a few feet over. The boy looked up at him and smiled. Mickey smiled back, giving him a little wave.

"He will be tired later. Long drive." Svetlana said, her eyes also on their son.

"Please, Svet. Don't start this shit already. I don't wanna talk to him all night. I just wanna say hi. He asked me to, and I don't wanna let him down." Mickey was as close to begging as he ever got, and he didn't like it.

"We will see. You may call. But if he is tired or cranky, you will not speak to him. He comes first, before your feelings, or mine. Yes?" Svetlana's eyes softened as she looked between Mickey and Yevgeny.

"Of course." Mickey easily agreed. Because it was true.

"I did not believe it." Svetlana said, still not looking at Mickey. "When you first came back, wanting to be a father to our son. I did not believe it. I thought you would go back to being Terry's son. Violent and afraid. I thought you would be junkie with your jailhouse fuck buddy. I thought you would hide in arms of your orange lover. I thought you would be same old dirty, mean, unreliable Mikhailio."

Mickey scoffed, crossing his arms over his chest. Fuck this bitch.

"I am rarely wrong." Svetlana sniffed. "But this time, I was."

Mickey's eyebrows shot up to his hairline. What now?

"You are not always good person. Not always good father. But you try now more than I ever thought you would. You are here. You show up. You give a damn. Is good for Yevgeny. Pleases me, also."
"Don't do it for you." Mickey bit out, watching his son to make sure he's not hearing any of this shit.

"I know. You do it for him. Is good. Is how it should be. We have a lot of dark shit between us, Mikhailio, but he is the light in the midst of it all. I do not feel guilt, is weakness. But I do regret what happened that day, between us. But I cannot regret it all, since it gave me him." Svetlana is looking at her son with so much love in her eyes that Mickey can't help but soften a little too. "I think you feel that way also, now. Is good, to focus on the light, instead of the dark."

"Okay, Yoda." Mickey laughed.

Svetlana laughed at that too, punching him lightly in the arm. "Asshole." she smiled. "You call tonight, seven pm, Yevgeny will introduce you to Chester."

Mickey smiled back, feeling those slivers of his heart fusing back together.

"What kinda name is Chester for a dog, anyway?" Mickey chuckled.

"Ask your son." Svetlana laughed.

Just then, David came back, and Yevgeny stood up, wiping off his snowy pants and running over to his father. Mickey put a hand on his shoulder without thinking. It felt like second nature, just wanting to touch the kid. Ruffle his hair, squeeze his shoulder, whatever. Just to feel him, to know he was still there. For the moment.

"Car's all warmed up, moving men are ready to go." David said, draping an arm around Svetlana's shoulder, but addressing the whole group. "Gotta get going, guys."

"Have a safe trip." Mickey said, reaching out a hand to David, who took it, a genuine smile on his face.

"Thank you, Mickey."

Mickey nodded to David and Svetlana before dropping back down on the snowy road to be eye level with his son.

"Okay, buddy. Mama said you can Skype me later, but only if you're good for the whole ride, you think you can do that?"

"Oh yeah, Daddy. No problem. I'm just gonna read and play my video game." Yevgeny nodded, smiling.

"That's good, kid. Real good. Have a good trip, and I'll talk to you tonight, okay?" Mickey said, still holding it together, miraculously.

"I'm gonna miss you, Daddy." Yevgeny said, falling into Mickey and burying his head in his shoulder. Mickey held him for a long time, until his knees started to ache and his whole body started to shake with the force of keeping his emotions in.

He pulled back and Yevgeny was crying. "Hey, come on. I'll see you all the time. No need to cry. You're a big kid now. You cry if you have a reason, but this isn't a reason. It's a happy time. I love you." Mickey pulled the kid back to his chest one more time, for a much quicker hug. He dropped a kiss to the top of his head, and then gently handed him over to his mother.

Yevgeny reluctantly started following his mother and step father to the car, looking back every few steps to see if Mickey was still there.
And he was.

He stood there on the sidewalk, waving every time Yevgeny turned around, until the car and the moving trucks were driving down the street, moving further and further away from Mickey.

Mickey got back into his truck, started it up, but didn't move.

He rested his head on the steering wheel, breathing deeply.

His breath hitched once. Then again. And it was a wrap. Tears streaming down his face. It wasn't the violent, body-wracking crying that had caught him off guard in Ian's apartment. No, this was quiet, resigned tears you cry when you know you've already lost.

Mickey let himself cry. Something he never would have done years ago. But he let himself now. Because feeling shit was better than pushing it all down until it exploded all over you.
He put the truck in drive and moved away from the curb. Away from this part of his life, and toward something new. Venturing to hope, maybe something good.

---------------------------------------------------------------

"I'm fucking fine. I wish Jack never showed you guys how to do a group call. This shit is fucking ridiculous." Mickey griped, gripping is phone in one hand as the other wrapped tightly around the steering wheel of the truck.

"I hear what your saying, Carino, but I'm not believing a single word of it." Javier's accented english traveled over the phone line, both comforting and infuriating Mickey.

"God damn it. It's not fair for you guys to gang up on me like this." Mickey grumbled, hitting his blinker and merging into the right lane.

"Nobody is ganging up on anybody, Mickey-baby." Lauren's melodic voice flowed into Mickey's ears. It calmed him immensely, just hearing the sweet tone of her voice. But it was not enough to make him forget why he was pissed in the first place.

"Guys, seriously. I'm fucking fine." Mickey sighed.

"Then how come you canceled lunch with me this Wednesday?" Jack interjected.

Mickey sighed, knowing his friends were right. He had been avoiding them. Not on purpose, not really. But he had been so consumed with Yevgeny's move, and just trying to hold it together as best he can. It had only been a week since Yevgeny moved away, but that was apparently long enough for his friends to notice a change in him. He'd made time for work, and Ian, but that's pretty much it. And even when he was with Ian, it wasn't like it usually was. Mickey was quiet, reserved. Ian let him be whatever he needed to be, never pushing. Which was what Mickey needed at the time. Which is also probably the reason he'd been avoiding his friends. He loved them dearly, but they never allowed him a moment's peace. Although they knew him better than almost anyone, they had never really gotten on the 'let Mickey breathe' bandwagon. Always pushing him to open up and talk about his shit. He appreciated it most of the time. But when he didn't appreciate it, he blocked them the fuck out, until he was ready to give them what they needed.

Looks like he's ready, since he accepted the call.
"I know I blew you off, man, sorry." Mickey said, stopping at a red light. "I just needed a little time alone after Yev left. It was just Ian and me sitting in silence for the past week, so it's not like you guys missed some big emotional break through."

"I kow." Jack replied. "I talked to Ian yesterday."

"You did?" Lauren asked. "How is he? I tried to call yesterday and I didn't get an answer. From either of you jerks, I may add." she was aiming that last part at Mickey, he guessed.

"He's good." Jack replied. "A little fucked up over the survivors group on Friday, since he has to speak this time, but I tried to talk him down."

Mickey cringed. He almost forgot about that shit. Fucking rape group. God damn it. That is the last fucking thing he ever wants to do. He'd rather have surgery with no anesthetic than attend this god forsaken group. It's been awful already, and he hasn't even had to talk, just listen. Fuck parole. Once he's done with this, he's never getting arrested again.

If he can help it, that is.

"Ian's been going to the group?" Javier asked.

"Yeah," Mickey replied. "He says it's for himself, but I think he's just going for me."

"Why do you say that?" Jack asked.

"Yeah," Lauren agreed. "Doesn't he have several assaults in his own past?"

Mickey startled, pulling the phone away from his ear to stare at it. He had forgotten he'd told Lauren and Javier so much of Ian's personal shit while they lived in Mexico together. Back when he thought he'd never see Ian again, and protecting his privacy seemed more like a idea than a need.

"Uh, yeah. He did." Mickey said, rubbing his eyebrow with his thumb.

"Then maybe this is just the catalyst he needs to get there. It's probably easier for him to go if he feels like he's not alone. Do you feel that way?" Javier asked. Mickey can hear him shuffling around on the other end of the line. He can almost see them in his mind, fidgeting on their old worn out sofa in the living room, Javier almost pulling Lauren into his lap so they can both hear Mickey. God, he fucking misses them.

"Yeah, I guess." he replies. "But it might also be kinda weird, right? Like, what if it's harder to open up in front of each other. Not to mention fucking Trevor will be there."

"And me." Jack interjects.

"Huh?" Mickey asks, switching on his turn signal and making a wide left turn.

"Yeah, Mick. I thought you knew, I gotta go too. Part of my treatment plan. Remember that shit I kinda-not-really told you about when we were locked up?"

Mickey remembers. Jack had been assaulted. It's not something they talked about a lot. It just wasn't a topic of conversation either of them had been really driven to discuss. It came up once, years ago. Something like 'Fucking sucks to get forced. Fucks you up.' to which Mickey had replied. 'Yeah. It really does.' Mickey feels like an asshole for not knowing more, but he understands how fucking personal that kind of shit is. It's not like he told his friends the gory details of how his son was conceived. He had given them barely anything. He and Ian got caught by his father. A fight ensued,
which they lost. Svetlana was called over to fuck him straight. End of story.

So he's not super surprised he doesn't know the story of Jack's own assault. Or assaults. Maybe Jack's like Ian, and he has a laundry list of dudes that took advantage of him. Mickey has to admit, if only to himself, he's not looking forward to opening up all these old wounds. He's worried what the end result will be of digging up all this ancient history.

"Yeah, man. I remember." Mickey said, finally pulling up in front of Ian and Mandy's apartment. "You cool with talking about that shit in front of all of us?"

"Yeah, well, if you guys are all gonna do it, I think it'll make it easier for me." Jack replied.

"I think it's good." Javier said. "You guys have suffered so much. It saddens me. I'm glad you will be able to help each other like this."

"I agree with Javi." Lauren said. "You poor babies. I'm glad you have each other. Don't worry about the ex, Mickey. He's there to do a job, you guys are all there for each other. Okay?"

"Yeah, okay. Thanks for talking me off the ledge, you guys." Mickey smiles, truly thankful that he's got this little group. He never considered himself the kind of guy that needed friends, but he can't deny the fact that this little band of misfits is irreplaceable, and they help him more and more as time goes by.

"Any time, carino. Te amo." Javier's sweet voice flows over the line, giving Mickey that floaty feeling again.

"Te amo, Mickey. Talk soon, yeah?" Lauren says.

"Te amo, guys. Talk soon, for sure. Miss you." Mickey replied, and his friends hung up.

"Mick, you still there?" Jack asked.

"Yeah, man. Pulling up in front of Ian's right now."

"Cool. So, I'll see you here tomorrow afternoon? Not gonna bail or get wasted instead?" Jack has a teasing tone to his voice, but Mickey knows him well enough to hear the seriousness underneath.

"I'll be there. Don't worry." Mickey says.

"Cool. G'nite. Give your ginger dick a good lick for me." Jack laughs, hanging up before Mickey can tell him off.

"Fucking Jack." Mickey mutters to his empty truck.

Mickey stands in front of Ian and Mandy's front door, digging in his pocket for his key. He can hear loud music on the other side, flowing under the door and into the hallway. The neighbors must be thrilled. Who doesn't love to hear Elvis' 'Blue Christmas' at ear splitting volume on a Friday night? Jesus.

"Hello? Guys?" Mickey calls, elbowing his way in and kicking the door shut behind him. He
wanders down the hall. He can now hear the voices of his sister and boyfriend mixed in with the
King, although their voices are significantly more off key, making Mickey smile. He's got two six
packs of some expensive hipster beer his sister's girlfriend requested. She always requests the
expensive shit when it's his turn to buy.

He puts the beers in the fridge, grabbing a couple for him and Ian. If the girls want a beer, they can
get them themselves. He smells something delicious, so he turns and opens the oven. He peeks
inside, seeing a tray of yummy looking cookies baking on the sheet. Looks like tonight's Christmas
cookie night. Mickey's not complaining. He pops the tops off the beers and make his way towards
the living room. "Hello? Where the fuck is everybody?" he calls out again, wondering if anyone can
even hear themselves think over the volume of the damn music.

He wanders into the living room, leaning against the wall, beers dangling from his hands as he
watches Ian dancing with his sister and Macy.

He's fucking gorgeous. That wide, bright smile stretched across his lips, that sparkling in his green
eyes, the flush of his skin from all that bouncing around. Beautiful.

That's what Mickey's thinking, standing there as he watches Ian twirl Macy before grabbing his sister
around the waist and dipping her deep. It's Mandy who finally notices Mickey's there at all, from her
upside-down vantage point in Ian's arms.

"Shit, Mick!" she yells, startled, jumping. She almost falls out of Ian's arms, but he wraps her up
tighter in his grasp, before setting her on her feet, right side-up. "You scared the hell outta me." she
barks, walking over to him and smacking his arm hard.

"What the fuck, bitch, I yelled like nine times." Mickey replied angrily, rubbing his sore arm with his
fist. "Not my fault you guys are so fucking caught up in your Christmas spirit you can't hear me."

Ian laughs at that, crossing the small distance between them to get right in Mickey's space. He grabs
Mickey by the face and pulls him in, kissing him softly. Mickey makes a small noise in the back of
his throat, totally involuntary. His hands hang by his sides, forgotten beers dangling from his fingers
as Ian deepens the kiss. One of his hands leaves his face to wrap around his waist. It's difficult to get
close enough, since Mickey's still wearing his big winter coat, but Ian tries. He tips his head to the
side, pushing his tongue past Mickey's lips, licking into his mouth as his arm tightens around his
waist. Mickey groans, pushing his body as close as he can, given the circumstances. Ian smiles
against his mouth, turning his head to go in for more when Mandy clears her throat behind them.

"Do you guys mind saving that shit for later? We aren't done with the cookies yet, and I don't really
wanna see you guys bang right now."

"I wouldn't mind watching." Macy offers, chuckling.

Mickey pulls away from Ian, handing him his beer so he can flip off Macy with his now free hand.

"You wish, pervert." he chides without malice.

"Guilty as charged. I may be bisexual, but that doesn't mean I'm not appreciative of beautiful things.
And the sex you two have has got to be a thing of depraved beauty. Damn." she laughed, fanning
herself dramatically.

"Fuck off with that shit, Mace, you're talking about my brother and my best friend. I don't need those
visuals." Mandy whined, making a disgusted face.

"Sorry, babe. You know you're the only one who gets me going, besides gay pornhub." Macy
giggled.

"Knew I never shoulda shown you that." Ian laughed, pulling Mickey back to him with one arm while he placed his own beer on the coffee table. "Hey." he whispered against his hair, nuzzling his nose against Mickey's ear.

"Hey yourself, Red." Mickey smiled despite himself. He's gone so soft for Gallagher. He thought he was soft for him before, back when they were kids, but he's goddamn putty in his hands this time around. "Missed you." he added on, because it was the truth. He slides his jacket off and lays it over the back of the couch.

"Missed you too. Glad this week is over." Ian replied, pulling Mickey close again and sliding his hands into the back pocket of his jeans.

Mickey took a sip of his beer, eyes wandering over Ian's face. He returned his smile, resting his forehead against Ian's. "Not really over, though, is it? Gotta get to the mall for Christmas shopping, and gotta head up to Victory House for that fucking group too." Mickey didn't wanna bring it up, but felt like he couldn't stop himself.

"Don't worry about that." Ian said, pulling his hands free from Mickey's pockets so he could drag the other man toward the couch. "It's an hour, tops, and we probably won't have to share too much. I dunno how Trevor runs his group, but I've been in enough group therapy settings to know it probably won't be too intense the first time." Ian said, dropping onto the couch and pulling Mickey down with him.

"Whatever you say, man." Mickey replied, not really wanting to talk about it any more than he already had today.

"Whatcha making in there?" he asked, pointing over his head towards the kitchen.

"Don't act like you didn't look, Mick." Mandy laughed as her and Macy sat together in the overstuffed chair across the room. Those two always had to sit right on top of each other. Stupid.

"Gingerbread cookies." Ian answered, pulling Mickey towards him bodily, and draping his legs over Mickey's lap. Sitting on top of each other was significantly less stupid when Ian instigated it.

"Mmmmm. Love me some gingerbread." Mickey goaded, slipping his hand under Ian's t shirt, running his fingers over Ian's abs. He smiled when he heard Ian's breath hitch.

Still got it.

"Keep it in your pants, we are sitting right here." Mandy groaned.

"All you ever do is cock-block me." Mickey sighed, removing his hand from Ian's stomach and grabbing his beer again.

Mandy just chuckled, as Macy got up and walked back into the kitchen, presumably to take the cookies out. Mickey heard the oven open and close, the clanging of the cookie sheet on the metal top of the stove.

"Hey, Mands?" Mickey asked, the tone of his voice quieter than before. He instinctively wrapped a hand around Ian's arm as he spoke. "What do you really think about this group therapy shit I gotta do tomorrow? I mean, you're doing it. You think it's really gonna make a fucking difference?" Mickey didn't know why the fuck he was asking, or why he was asking now. It made him feel vulnerable as fuck, like a total pussy.
Asking his baby sister for advice about therapy of all things. Jesus, what the fuck happened to him? He felt Ian's hand slide over his, probably sensing the change in the mood.

Mandy, for her part, looked totally surprised by the question. Her mouth opened and closed a few times before she looked over her shoulder, checking to see if Macy was still indisposed. When she deemed the coast clear for some actual honesty, she looked back at her brother. Her expression was soft, fond. If she had looked at Mickey like that when they were kids, he would have lost it on her. But now he just stared back, waiting.

"It's not easy, especially at first." she said, her eyes bouncing between Ian and Mickey. "It's fucking hard to talk about that shit, never mind with a stranger. But I gotta tell ya, Mick, I feel so much better after I go. Fucking lighter. Like I'm not carrying around all that dark shit inside me anymore. I've been having less nightmares, about you know..." she waved her hand vaguely between the two of them, but Mickey knew. Terry. He still has his fair share of Terry nightmares. He wonders in that moment if Ian ever dreams about that day. His eyes shift over to his boyfriend, and by the way he's staring at the wall instead of looking at Mandy gives Mickey all the answer he needs. "And it's really been helping with me and Mace. It feels good, to get it all out, to process it and let it go. I mean, I don't think I'll ever be able to be totally free of it all. I don't think that's possible. But I don't have to let it rule my life anymore, either. And that's a fucking win in my book. Don'tcha think?" she looked over at her brother with pleading eyes. It was like she needed his approval for this or something. Like Mickey would ever look down on her for getting better.

And it hits Mickey in that moment. Why does he want his sister in therapy? Why does he want Ian to go? Because he loves them and wants them to be happy. To put all the bullshit pain in their heads to rest. So they can let go of the past and live a better life. Why can't he want that shit for himself? What the fuck is he afraid of? Terry can't fucking hurt him anymore. His memories and anxieties only have as much power as he gives them.

Fuck. He's god damn Freud now. Wonderful. Hanging out with all these emotionally stable people is turning him into an amateur psychiatrist.

"Yeah, okay." is all he says, since he's too overwhelmed to articulate any of the shit in his head at the moment.

"Cookies, bitches." Macy calls, returning to the living room with a plate full of hot gingerbread cookies.

Mickey reaches out and grabs one immediately. Ian tsks him, ripping it out of his hand and dropping it back on the plate.

"Jesus, Mick. You gotta let 'em cool. They're too fucking hot, you're gonna burn yourself."

Mickey smiled, the seriousness of the previous moment forgotten. He grabbed Ian by the hips and pulled them together again.

"You sayin' you're the only hot ginger I'm allowed to have in my life, Gallagher?" he smirked.

"Damn straight." Ian laughed, dipping his head for another kiss.

Mickey lost himself in the kiss. The gentle passes of tongue, the big hand gripping his hip. It was almost enough to drown out the gagging noises of his sister in the background. Almost.
"So, you think you're really ready?" Ian asks later that night, while they are slowly undressing each other in Ian's bedroom. Ian curls his fingers around the bottom of Mickey's t-shirt. Mickey lifts his arms to help and Ian pulls it over his head, dropping it on the floor behind him.

"Dunno." Mickey replies honestly. His hands are busy, working Ian's belt and zipper. He pushes his jeans down over his narrow hips and down his legs. Mickey feels his own cock stir to life from just these simple touches.

Ian must be feeling it too, if the breathy sigh that escapes his lips is any indication. Mickey smirks, running his hand over the curve of Ian's ass, his fingers tickling lightly until Ian jerks a little from the sensation.

"C'mon, Mick. No fucking around." Ian laughs, pushing Mickey with two hands to his chest. Mickey just smirks wider, backing up a step to get out of his own pants.

Ian pulls his t-shirt over his head, and once they are standing there in their boxers, Ian pulls Mickey back to him. Their bodies mold together perfectly, just like always. Ian wraps an arm around Mickey's waist, using his free hand to tip his head up and slot their lips together.

It's slow tonight. Not rushed or frantic like their sex is a lot of the time. The whole evening feels quieter, softer. Mickey's not sure why.

Ian kisses Mickey over to the bed, pushing him over backwards when Mickey's legs hit the mattress. Mickey laughs lightly, staring up at Ian with mischief dancing in his eyes.

Ian returns the smile, his own eyes playfully lustful. He reaches down and tucks his fingers into the waistband of Mickey's boxer briefs, and starts to tug them down. Mickey lifts his hips to help, not giving a shit if it makes him look overeager. He's always eager for Ian's dick. No shame in that.

Once Ian had divested Mickey of the last of his clothing, he striped his own underwear and crawled over Mickey's prone form. He propped himself up on with an elbow on either side of Mickey's head, dipping his head to kiss him, his mouth covering Mickey's as their tongues lazily tangled together. Mickey gasped when their hard cocks knocked together, causing a dirty smirk to break out on Ian's face. Ian reached down with one hand and grabbed their dicks together, squeezing and stroking as they continued to make out.

Mickey groaned, thrusting up as best he could from his position, breaking the kiss so he could loll his head around on the bed. Ian growled, rocking his hips down a little harder.

"Ian, Ian." Mickey breathed, pushing his head further back into the pillows.

"What do you want?" Ian asked, trailing his tongue along the tendon in Mickey's neck, biting softly into the meat of his shoulder. He rolled his hips again, still slowly jerking them off together.

Mickey sighed, pushing his hips up again before he brought a hand up and shoved Ian hard. Ian went flying over backwards, landing on the mattress with a surprised huff.

Mickey sat up without missing a beat. Now hovering over Ian, he kissed him almost desperately. From his new position on top, he deepened the kiss, shoving his tongue past Ian's lips, exploring every inch of his gorgeous mouth, getting drunk on the taste of Ian. He ran a tattooed hand down Ian's chest, thumbing a nipple before giving it a pinch. He was rewarded for this with a sharp gasp.
from his lover. Mickey smiled, moving his hand down further, mapping out every dip and muscle like he had a million times before.

"You're fucking beautiful." the words were past Mickey's lips before he even knew he thought them. He was surprised to find he wasn't embarrassed at all, having uttered those words. They were true, always had been, but Mickey hadn't been man enough to say them.

It felt good.

Especially when he saw the look on Ian's face. He looked totally and utterly shocked, and smitten at the same time.

"Fucking kiss me." Ian begged, lifting his head up off the mattress.

Mickey obliged him for a moment, easily falling back into their make-out session with gusto. After a moment, though, he pulled back, causing a whine to tumble out from between Ian's parted lips.

"I gotcha, don't worry." Mickey smiled, planting one more kiss on Ian's lips before he continued his downward trek, kissing and licking all along Ian's chest and stomach. He swirled his tongue around one of Ian's nipples, thoroughly pleased with the reaction. Ian's body bowed off the bed, Mickey having to settle him back down with a strong hand on his hip.

Mickey licked his way down to Ian's hip, sucking a dark mark into the pale skin there. Mickey loves marking Ian up, always has. It's a primal, possessive part of him that just screams 'mine.' He pulls away when he's satisfied with his handiwork and starts kissing a sloppy trail along his stomach toward the other hip, purposefully avoiding Ian's straining, leaking cock. It's so hard it's standing away from his body, just bobbing there in mid air. It's making Mickey's mouth water.

But Ian's not the only one who likes to tease, so Mickey completely bypasses Ian's painfully hard dick to bite gently into his other hip bone, running his tongue along the sharp angle before dipping it into the soft curve. He feels Ian's hand settle on the back of his head, his long fingers gripping his skull, pulling his hair.

"Mick. Jesus." he whispers. His voice sounds wrecked already, and Mickey loves that he still has this kind of effect on Ian after all these years.

Having had enough teasing himself, he grips Ian's erection in a tight fist, and swirls his tongue around the swollen head.

"Fuck." Ian chokes out, and Mickey smiles. He takes the head into his mouth and sucks lightly, flexing his fingers around the shaft. The stuttered breath from the man above him makes a possessive pride swell in his chest.

Mickey slides his lips down, taking as much of Ian into his mouth as he can, bobbing his head and jerking the base. He works up a rhythm that has Ian shaking above him.

Mickey is so turned on now. The weight of Ian, hard and heavy in his mouth, the taste of his excitement on his tongue, the hand in his hair, pulling and guiding his movements. The noises Ian is making are almost enough to make him come by themselves. He's painfully hard, thrusting softly against the mattress as he continues to suck Ian off with vigor.

"Mick. Mick." Ian gasps. "Baby, you gotta stop. I wanna fuck you. C'mon." Ian's hands are pulling Mickey's shoulders, desperate to put some space between his dick and Mickey's mouth. Mickey chuckles, pleased with himself that he can still drive Ian so crazy. There is nothing hotter than getting Ian hot. It drives Mickey fucking insane.
Mickey sits up, wiping his wet mouth with the back of his hand. He smirked down at his lover, playful glint in his eyes.

"Well, have at it, firecrotch, nobody's stopping you."

Ian laughed, pushing himself up and wrapping his arms around Mickey's middle, twisting them around so Mickey landed on his back on the mattress. Ian leaned down, kissing Mickey almost violently. The heat and passion between them was palpable as Ian rutted against Mickey as their tongues pushed against each other sloppily.

After a few minutes, Ian pulled away, looking down at Mickey with blown pupils, his chest red and splotchy, hair sticking up in all directions.

Mickey smiled up at him, pushing a stray strand of hair out of his face. Ian curled into the touch, rubbing his face against Mickey's hand like a cat, before pulling back entirely. He slid down Mickey's chest, his lips and tongue blazing a trail down his body.

He totally bypassed Mickey's dick, much to the man's chagrin. But any protests he had died on his lips when he felt Ian settle on his stomach between his spread thighs, and hitch his legs over his shoulders.

"Arch your back, baby. Gonna open you up with my tongue." Ian said, his hot breath ghosting over his entrance.

Mickey shuddered. He reached behind him to grab a small pillow and the lube. He stuck the pillow behind the small of his back, and tossed the lube down on the bed next to Ian's head. Ian looked up at him, looking sinful as hell, all sex and want. He grabbed the lube, but didn't open it yet, just rested it on the comforter next to Mickey's shaking thigh.

Mickey tilted his head back, anticipation flooding his system.

He didn't have to wait long. He felt Ian's lips on the inside of his thigh, gentle and soft, causing him to break out in goosebumps. Next, he felt the tip of Ian's tongue along the crease where his ass melted into his thigh.

"Fuck." Mickey sighed. He did his best not to move, not wanting to miss a single sensation.

Ian ghosted his tongue along Mickey's perineum, gentle licks and nips to the underside of his sack. Mickey's breath was coming out in short puffs, barely able to hold it together at this point. By the time he felt Ian's flat tongue slip against his hole, he was a fucking mess. His whole body jerked, fingers twisting in the sheets.

"Shit." he gasped.

After that first lick, Ian was relentless. His tongue was everywhere. One movement it was softly lapping at his clenching hole with long, languid licks then he'd point the muscle, dipping it as far in as he could go, only to seal his mouth around it and fucking suck. Holy shit. He worked diligently, eating Mickey's ass like it was his fucking job.

Mickey was a sobbing mess by the time Ian paused to slick up his fingers. He wouldn't have to finger him much, having worked him over with his mouth so long.

Mickey's vocabulary was reduced to two words: "Ian" and "please" He didn't mind being this needy bitch, not with Ian anyway.
"Shhh, I gotcha." Ian said, sounding just as far gone as Mickey felt. He pulled his mouth back just far enough to slide a finger in. He worked his finger alongside his mouth, pumping in and out of Mickey's ass, sinking his teeth into his thigh as he twisted his wrist just right, stabbing into Mickey's prostate.

"Jesus fuck! Ian." Mickey moaned, his head thrown back in pleasure. "Please, god, Ian. Now, I'm ready, please, now." Mickey's back arched, his head whipping around wildly.

Ian groaned, so turned on by Mickey's excitement. He pulled his fingers out and slicked his dick up in quick succession, tugging at it roughly a few time before lining himself up and pushing forward slowly.

Mickey sighed, wrapping his legs around Ian's waist, his hand flying up to his shoulder, pulling him flush against his body. Ian groaned, incredibly turned on by Mickey's vehemence. He tilted his head down to capture Mickey's lips in a biting kiss as he rocked his hips into Mickey's welcoming body.

They moved together without much thought, their bodies knowing each other so well after so much time.

Ian hips thrust, Mickey's back arches. Mickey pulls Ian's hair, Ian bites down hard on Mickey's shoulder.

"Oh fucking hell, please Ian, right there. I'm gonna come." Mickey moaned, his fingernails scratching down Ian's back, the sting sending electricity down Ian's spine.

Ian propped himself up on one elbow, gripping Mickey's throbbing dick in his hand, pumping it in time with his hips.

It only took a few strokes to have Mickey shuddering through his orgasm, painting their chests in his cum.

"Oh Mick, fuck." Ian moaned, totally gone on how hot his boyfriend was. The sight of him coming undone, coupled with his ass clenching around his dick, had Ian coming deep inside him, his hips stuttering before he stilled, his head dropping to Mickey's shoulder again.

"Damn, firecrotch. I think we get better at that shit each time." Mickey chuckled, running a hand through Ian's sweat dampened hair.

"Practice makes perfect, and all that." Ian mumbled, voice muffled by the flesh of Mickey's body. He lifted his body up, slowly pulling out. Mickey winced a little, but said nothing. Ian grabbed a pair of discarded boxers off the floor and cleaned them both up the best he could.

Mickey just laid there, letting Ian complete his little post-coital routine. He used to hate it when they were kids, Ian trying to clean up their mess after sex. It made him feel like a chick. He didn't want anyone wiping up his junk. He was a god damn man, he could do that shit himself. But now he revels in it, Ian wanting to take care of him. It's such a little thing, but it means much more to both of them.

Ian leaned over and kissed Mickey tenderly. Slow, gentle passes of lips and tongues, until Ian pulled away. He pecked Mickey's lips twice more before backing off completely.

Ian rolled over and turned the light off, falling back onto the mattress in the darkness. He reached out and pulled Mickey to him with an arm around his shoulder. Mickey came easily, cuddling up to Ian's chest, resting his head right over his heart.
The gentle thud of Ian's pulse was like a sedative to Mickey, always had been, and he was drifting off before he knew it, loose and sated from the sex they just had.

Ian's quiet voice floated into his ears, pulling him back from the precipice of sleep.

"Mick, you're not worried about group tomorrow, are you?" the question caught Mickey off guard, but what shocked him more was the fearful tone of Ian's voice.

Here Mickey had been, all damn day, worried about himself. What this therapy shit was going to do to him, how it was going to affect him, how he was going to deal with it.

He hadn't stopped for one second to think about how all this may be affecting Ian. How Ian may be fearful and uncertain too. Nervous about being exposed like that. Scared to drag all his personal shit to the surface again.

Mickey felt like the biggest dick. Again. Fuck.

Mickey cuddled closer to Ian, head on his chest, resting a hand right over his heart.

"Nah, Gallagher, we're gonna slay that group." Mickey said. "We're in this shit together, we're gonna be fucking fine."

Ian let out a long breath, his whole body seemingly deflating.

"Yeah, Mick. We are." he said, dropping a gentle kiss to the top of his head.

They fell asleep shortly after, both secure in the fact that no matter what came their way, they were, in fact, in this shit together.

---------------------------------------------

Mickey supposed it made sense to have this kind of group on a Saturday. Most people didn't have to work, and if you got super fucked up or emotional over what went down during the hour, you could either spend the rest of the day recovering from it, or drowning your sorrows in cheap whiskey.

Although, he's pretty sure that type of coping mechanism is frowned upon at Victory House.

Whatever.

Mickey was pacing outside the Victory House, his booted feet crunching on the icy remnants of a snow storm earlier in the week. He puffed on his cigarette, his fingerless gloves doing little to stave off the chill in his hands.

He kept telling himself he was waiting for Ian to arrive before going in. It would be rude to go in without him, he reasoned.

But the truth of the matter was that he was stalling. He didn't want to do this shit. He has no idea how Ian does this every couple weeks. Therapy. He can hear Terry's voice booming in his mind.

'Fucking pussy faggot shit.'

Mickey shook his head violently, desperate to rid himself of the specter of his father. The man's been
dead for years, he has no say in how Mickey lives his life anymore.

That's what finally convinces him to go inside. Terry would fucking hate it. And if he could do anything to separate himself further from his father's ghost, he was going to do it.

He took another long drag of his cigarette before ashing it in a bin by the door that led to the basement. When he looked up to open the door, Ian was coming up the driveway, looking harried.

"Fuck, Mick, sorry I'm late. Fiona kept me at the house longer than I expected. Had me looking at the sink in the downstairs bathroom, like I know fuckall about plumbing." Ian sighed, coming up to stand next to Mickey.

"Tell her to call me, I'll come by and take a look." Mickey replied, stuffing his hands into his coat pockets and leaning back on his heels.

Ian's face bloomed into a huge smile. "That's really nice of you, Mick, thanks." he smiled, closing the distance between them and pressing his lips to Mickey's in a tender kiss.

"It's no big deal, firecrotch." Mickey mumbled against his lips. He held himself back from deepening the kiss, instead gripping the back of Ian's neck and holding their foreheads together.

"You ready for this shit?" he asked quietly.

Ian sighed, his hands coming up to rest on Mickey's hips. "Only one way to find out."

They had been coming to group for two weeks now. Today would be their third session. Andy had been understanding, letting them get their bearings, listening to the other men in the group share their stories. But he had made it clear when they left last Saturday, today would be the day they had to start opening up.

Mickey was not looking forward to it.

It was so strange to him, sitting in a circle like a bunch of drunks, but instead of sharing war stories about boozing and drugging, it was a bunch of fags talking about how they'd been raped by a priest, or pimped out by their mom, or molested by a babysitter. It was off-putting, and it was disturbing. Mickey didn't feel like he belonged in this group at all. Sure, he'd had some less than pleasant sexual experiences, some of them against his will, but he still felt like he got off pretty easy when he listened to these guys' horror stories.

And hell, if that didn't fuck him up even more.

The basement of Victory House reminded Mickey of the basement of a church. It had the same low ceiling, the same checkerboard tile floors, the same cement lally columns holding up the floor above them. The walls were faded paneling, probably from the 70's. The room was dominated by a group of metal folding chairs, set up in a wide circle. It again reminded Mickey of all those AA meetings he had been required to attend during his probation as a teenager.

The room was already full of people. Men of all shapes and sizes, ages and race. Some Mickey could tell were gay just by looking at them. Little twinks like he'd see when Ian worked at the club, or when he used to cruise the park after Ian ran away. The gay just wafted of them, like really strong cologne. But with others it was harder to tell, like Mickey himself, they looked like hardened street thugs, ready to break bones. And sprinkled in among those two polar opposites was a group of unassuming dude that looked like they just wandered over for the free coffee, Mickey got no vibe from them whatsoever.
It was a little jarring. Mickey didn't know what he'd been expecting at that first meeting, but this group of normal looking dudes wasn't it.

A thought occurred to Mickey in that moment. What does a rape victim look like? Mickey didn't think he looked like one. Ian certainly didn't. So who was he to assume he could guess what was going on in another person's life based on their damn appearance?

He chastised himself mentally for falling into such a judgmental mindset. That shit wasn't him.

He felt Ian's arm wrap around his waist and pull him close. Mickey went without a fight. He actually appreciated the contact in the moment, too caught up in his head for his own good.

"C'mon, Mick, let's sit." Ian said, his voice low, mouth right next to Mickey's ear. Mickey nodded, allowing Ian to pull him to a couple of unoccupied chairs.

Just as they settled into their seats, Jack and Rowan came bounding down the stairs, Trevor right behind them. Andy followed, shutting the door to the basement and clapping his hands loudly to quiet the chatter in the room.

"Okay guys, you know what this is, but for the first-timers, My name is Andy, and I'm the director of Victory House, this here is Trevor." he put a flat palm on Trevor's head, mussing up his curly hair, causing Trevor to slap his hand away in mock aggravation. "This one will be running the show, but I'll be signing everyone's slips for parole and probation, so stick to the rules, and fucking share, because that's why you're here. If you don't open up, I'm not signing shit." Andy let his appraising eye travel over the group. "But you should know, this is a safe space, whatever you share here stays between us. We are here to help you. You are here to help each other, and yourselves. I know it's uncomfortable, and it's probably gonna hurt like a bitch, but it helps, trust me on that." Andy nodded once, to no one in particular, before turning to Trevor once again. "This kid knows what he's doing, and I trust him implicitly. You can too." and with one final clap on Trevor's shoulder with his meaty hand, Andy turned and walked back up the stairs, leaving the group in silence.

After Andy was gone, Jack made a bee line for Mickey, Rowan in tow.

"Hey Mick." Jack said, pulling Mickey into a hug before the other man could greet him. Mickey fell into the embrace, taking comfort in his friend. Jack pulled back and gave Mickey a small smile.

"You ready for this?" he asked, and when Mickey nodded mutely, he continued. "This is my first time in this particular group, I've only been to AA and NA so far. So we can pop our cherries together." Jack winked, but Mickey could see the trepidation in his eyes.

He and Jack had talked about the shit they'd been through, though some shit had always been off limits. Hell, he'd talked to Jack more than almost anyone, Ian included. When Mickey finally got comfortable talking about the shit in his fucked up head, Ian had been long gone. Now that they were together again, words flowed more freely, but there are certain things that are still to painful to bring up on a regular day.

The shit they are going to delve into tonight is a perfect example of that.

Mickey huffed out a breath, eyes travelling from Jack to Ian then back again. Ian's hand came up to rest on Mickey's lower back, calming his fraying nerves instantly.

"Yeah, man. It's gonna be fine, gotta do it to stay outta trouble, so it is what it is." Mickey rubbed his top lip with his thumb, his eyes flicking toward the floor before finding Jack's again.

"I get that, man." Jack replied. "I mean, I know I don't know the whole story of what went down..."
before." he locked eyes with Ian for a moment before returning his gaze to Mickey. "But I was there for that shit with McFarlane, and that was fucked up."

Mickey nodded, not really wanting to get into it before he had to. He wanted to spill all his shit in one go, then not have to talk about it again until he was forced to. Because he's fairly certain one session is not going to be enough to fulfill the terms of his parole, much to his dismay.

Ian, for his part, was nervous as hell. Mickey knew about what happened with Brian, but not a lot of details. Mickey also knew Ian had some scary stories from his dancing days, and his subsequent hooking days, although at the time, he hadn't seen it that way. He'd been so lost in mania, he had no idea what he was doing was dangerous, and he barely considered it illegal. He was hustling, like any good southsider. He cringes when he thinks of that time in his life, at a loss to understand how he let himself fall so far.

"Well, I just want you guys to know I'm glad we can do this together." Jack continued. "I, uh, hope that you don't think it's weird or whatever, having me here when you guys do this shit."

"No, Jack." Ian spoke. "Its not weird or anything. It's gonna be hard no matter who's around, but it will be nice knowing we have support in the group, right Mick?"

Mickey nodded again, trying to get himself in the right kind of head space to talk about this shit. He idly wondered if he could get away with just talking about Cassie. But he dismissed that thought right away. Trevor may not know the whole story about what happened the day Yevgeny was conceived, but he knew Ian would wonder why Mickey had held back. And if Ian was brave enough to spill his guts about the evil shit his ex had done to him, Mickey had to grow a set and be honest too. It was only fair.

"That's so great, guys." Jack smiled genuinely. He looked over at Rowan, who gave his own nod. He was a quiet kid, but Mickey was sure Jack did enough talking for the both of them.

Just then, they heard someone slamming their hand on the back of one of the metal chairs. The men looked up from their conversation to see Trevor standing in the middle of the circle, a clipboard in his hand.

"Okay guys, time to get started." he said, not taking his eyes off the printed sheet he was perusing. "Everyone have a seat, please." he continued, sitting in a chair near the door.

Ian and Mickey returned to the seats they had abandoned to greet Jack and Rowan. Jack sat on Mickey's other side, and Rowan sat next to him.

The other men found seats quickly, and as soon as the noise had died down, Trevor stood back up.

"Hi guys. Some of you know me, and some of you are new here. My name is Trevor, and I work here part time at Victory House. I also work at a LGTBQIA shelter here in town, which some of you know me from. This group is called 'Gay Rape Survivors, Chicago', and trust me, I've been trying to have that name changed forever, but bureaucracy is real, and every task is harder than it should be." he chuckled at his own joke before continuing. "Why don't we go around the room and introduce ourselves to start?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

Mickey barely suppressed an eye roll. This shit was stupid. Trevor was stupid. This group was stupid.

And rape was especially stupid.

Mickey tried not to zone out too much as the group of men introduced themselves, giving the group
basic information about themselves.

Too soon, they got to Rowan. Mickey's turn would be soon. Fuck. They weren't even to the 'sharing shit' part of the night, and Mickey was a nervous wreck.

Rowan cleared his throat. "Hi, um, my name is Rowan, and I'm 19 years old. I'm, uh, I'm transgender and I live here at Victory House." Rowan cast his eyes down, signaling his introduction was over.

Mickey felt a new wave of nerves overtake him. He had to do that whole spiel? Fuck this shit.

Jack clasped his hands together, staring at them twisting in his lap for a moment before meeting the gaze of the group again. His demeanor was not helping Mickey's anxiety at all. Jack had always been one of the most confident, unflappable people he knew. Right up there with Ian, really. To see him so nervous made Mickey a little sick.

"Hi, I'm Jack. I'm from the north side of Chicago. I'm gay, obviously." he sighed. "I live here at the house, and this group is part of my treatment plan." he leaned back in his chair, clearly over talking for the moment.

It was Mickey's turn. He looked up, seeing all eyes on him, and his throat closed up. He was never good in groups, and the implications of this meeting were making him exponentially more uncomfortable. His eye darted wildly around the room, staring out at all the people staring back at him. Judging him.

Just then he felt a hand slip up the back of his shirt, a cold palm resting on the small of his back. He jumped minutely, but settled quickly when he recognized it as Ian's hand. The soothing circles the other man was rubbing on his back melting the cold lump of fear in his chest instantly.

He ran a hand through his hair, then rubbed at his upper lip with his thumb. Okay, he could do this.

"I'm Mickey. I live in Canaryville. I'm a fag, and this is for parole." He said simply. No use in sugar coating shit.

He could see Trevor giving him a disapproving look, probably due to his word choice, but fuck that guy. He's not here to cater to his delicate fucking sensibilities.

The hand that had been doing wonders to ground him disappeared, and he looked over to Ian, who was now playing with his hands in his lap.

"I'm Ian, I'm also from Canaryville, and I'm also a fag. My shrink thought this group would be a good idea, so here I am."

Mickey looked over and gave Ian a small smile.

They were in this shit together, after all.

-------------------------------------------------

Some of these stories were truly appalling.

Like, horror movie awful. These men had been through hell and back, and Ian felt like he didn't
really belong here. He had been assaulted, yes. He'd been assaulted more than once, by more than one person. And it had fucked him up, real bad.

But listening to these guys spin these tales of being pimped out by their parents for drugs, or being gang raped in prison, or being raped on camera when they were eleven years old, had Ian feeling like a complete pussy for being so fucked up over what happened with Brian.

These men were strong. Ian was not.

He felt a little disgusted with himself. He dipped his head, as if to hide his shame.

Micky's mind was also spinning. He was stuck, his mind replaying the day of Yevgeny's conception on loop. If this is what therapy brought on, he could do without it.

He tore himself out of his head at the still unfamiliar sound of Rowan's voice. The kid was so damn quiet. Mickey can count on his two hands all the time he's heard the guy speak. Mickey's not sure if he's shy, or if he doesn't like Mickey. Not that it really matters either way, if Mickey's being honest with himself. Rowan is not his friend, Jack is.

"Okay." Rowan starts again, after taking a moment to gather his thoughts. "Like I said, I'm trans, right? Well, that shit didn't go down too well with my parents. They aren't super religious, but once they found out I wanted to transition, they started going to this weird church, like they thought I was trans because they weren't devout enough?" he ended his statement as a question, like even he couldn't believe what he was saying. "So this pastor, one of those 'pray the gay away' guys, told my parents that it was easy to fix me, or whatever, that if they prayed hard enough, went to church enough, and gave the church enough money, I'd get better." he paused, rubbing under his nose with the back of his hand, obviously trying to will his tears away. "So it started out simple enough, I wasn't allowed to wear pants anymore, always dresses or skirts. Then I had to grow my hair out, paint my nails, wear full make up, stupid shit like that. I was probably around thirteen then. When that shit didn't work, the pastor told them to step it up. They tried all kinds of stupid shit to make me more girly, more like the Elizabeth they thought I was."

Ian was shocked, having never heard Rowan's birth name. This story seemed so personal. It was different, being in group therapy with people from his life. He was used to faceless strangers spilling their guts, not people he knew and cared about. It made it all seem so much more personal. These stories are hard enough to tell when you feel anonymous. But this is exponentially harder.

"It all came to a head one night, my parents were at their wit's end with me. I just wasn't the beautiful daughter they wanted. I was a trans man, and I was gay on top of it. They didn't understand, how if I liked men, why couldn't I like them as a woman. They didn't want to understand, they just wanted me different. They wanted a normal daughter, as they called it. So they got in touch with this man, who worked with their pastor in the past. He specialized in what they called 'corrective therapy', and he came to my parents house and raped me." Rowan said it so casually. Like it was nothing. But the tight set of his jaw, and the way his eyes are glassy told another story. "It always happened the same way. The man would come over to my parents house, my parents called him Peter, but I don't know if that was his real name or not. Anyway, we'd sit together in the living room and pray for about an hour. Prayers about God saving me from my perversion. Save me from being gay, save me from wanting to mutilate my body. Prayers for me to give my life to God and become a good Christian woman. After, the man would take me back to my bedroom, while my parents continued to pray in the other room, and he would rape me. The first time I tried to fight. I bit that fucker, hard. But he hit me in the face and I blacked out. He raped me anyway. So after that, I just laid there. It was easier." Rowan cleared his throat, wiping at his eyes. He kept his eyes down as he finished his story. "After a few months of that, I just couldn't take it anymore. I ran away, started hooking. Dudes are always
willing to pay to fuck a freak. That's what I felt like, back then. I ended up with this guy, rich prick. He paid for me to get on hormones, got me my top surgery. It was like a dream, I was so happy. But he only did that shit so he could pimp me out to a different clientele. Got me hooked on H so I'd stick around, and it worked. I stayed with him until he got locked up. I thought he loved me, but at his trial, I found out he had a ton of other dudes on his payroll, and in his bed. I was just another specialty trick he could exploit. I was on the streets for a long time after that, ended up at Victory House when I wandered into the drop-in center on day. Trevor got me a bed here, and the rest is history." Rowan looked up, locking eyes with Trevor, who nodded.

Rowan leaned back further in his chair, tilting his head up to stare at the ceiling. He looked totally beat, like sharing that story had taken everything out of him.

Ian couldn't help but draw the parallel between Rowan's story and Mickey's. Sure, they used God instead of a gun, but they had tried, just like Terry, to fuck the gay out of their own kid. Mickey shivered, disgusted on the poor kid's behalf, and feeling a little sorry for himself at the same time.

"Okay, thanks Rowan, that's good for today." Trevor gave the man a small smile before turning to Jack. "You're up, kid."

Jack looked spooked, like he'd forgotten why he was there at all. He instinctively looked to Mickey, which was not lost on Ian. Those two were a lot closer than Ian had originally thought, he was continually surprised with how much Mickey had changed in the past few years. He was a good friend, and Jack was lucky to have him.

Mickey nodded, raising his eyebrows in a look that Jack understood just as well as Ian.

Get on with it.

Jack nodded back, clearing his throat before looking up again.

"Okay, well. My story's not nearly as bad as Rowan's." he started, only to be interrupted by Trevor.

"Jack, we don't compare here. All your stories are important and traumatizing. All of your feelings are valid."

Jack nodded again and Ian did his best not to scoff out loud. Trevor had this shit down to a science, constantly sounding like a cheesy self-help book. Of course all of their feelings were valid, but if Trevor really thought that everyone's stories were equally terrible, he was out of his mind. He had gone through hell, but he had not been raped at ten years old by his father, like the kid across the room had. Jesus.

"Alright." Jack said, ready to speak again. "I'm a junkie, have been for a really long time. That's not really the point, though. My parents are great, always had my back, never gave me shit for being gay, and never gave up on me when I got strung out. If you want to be technical about it, I've been assaulted a few times. Screwed guys for dope when I didn't want to, too sick or incoherent to consent. I'd wake up sore or bloody and wonder what the hell happened, but to me that shit didn't really count, cuz I asked for it, right? Got me off E, so it was what it was." Trevor looked like he wanted to interrupt again, but wisely kept his mouth shut. "There was only one time I was ever truly raped, or whatever. You know, the fighting, screaming, kicking kind of rape you see in the movies or whatever. It was in jail, like a really bad porno, you know?" Jack chuckled darkly.

No one else laughed.

"So it was a few months before Mick here became my celly. Mick, are you okay with me including
you in this?" Jack asked, almost as an afterthought.

Mickey nodded without hesitation.

"Yeah, man. Besides, statute of limitations is up on that shit." Mickey smiled.

What? What the hell? Ian was beyond confused now.

Jack smiled back. "So, the first time was a few months before Mickey came to the prison. I wasn't new or whatever, I'd been there a while, but I'd kept my head down and stuck to myself mostly. It's easy to do time that way, usually. But there was this one guy on the unit that didn't like me for whatever reason. Heard through the prison grape vine that I was into dick, and he didn't like that shit. Kept saying stuff like they should put the fags on their own unit, so the rest of them didn't get infected with our ass-reamer disease. He was a real piece of work. Monroe, that was his name. This big, bulky dude. Like, steroids big. He had this whole crew of lackeys, like mean girls, but with dicks, and they just started hassling me. Tossed my food on the floor in the chow hall, fucked with me in the yard, kicked my ass a few times, but nothing I couldn't handle. I may be small, but I can take a punch." Jack smiled sadly, rubbing his eyes with his fingers. "Anyway, I was in the shower one day, I know, like I said, bad porno, and Monroe comes in. I was alone, which wasn't rare, I always tired to shower when no one else was in there, safer that way. So, I'm guessing he had a partner or whatever, someone to watch the door, or a CO he was friendly with, cuz no one came in the whole time he had me in there. I don't wanna get into all kinds of gory details, but he cornered me in there, while I was still wet and naked. He backed me up against the wall, crowded me til I could barely breathe. Told me I was a no good faggot, and that he should just kill me. But instead, he grabbed me by my hair and forced me to my knees. I remember thinking the tiles must be so gross, dirty, you know? Stupid thought. He made me suck his dick that day. It was rough, but I didn't get stabbed, so I took it as a win." Jack looked down at his hands, clearing his throat. "Anyway, it went on like that for a while. This huge fucking homophobe just cornered me whenever he wanted to get a nut off. It started out with only blow jobs or whatever, but soon that wasn't enough, and he started actually raping me. It fucking hurt. I'm not sure if it's because there was no prep or whatever, or if it was cuz I wasn't into it at all. But it was the most painful thing I'd ever been through. Guy never said why he did it. Just called me a fucking faggot the whole time he was plowing me. 'Fucking faggot, take that shit.'" Jack made his voice deep and menacing while he imitated his rapist. "'You love dick so much, how much you like it now?' I never really understood what he got out of it. Like was he gay? In denial or whatever? Or was it all about power? Making me feel small and shit? I never told anyone, especially not the CO's. That shit will get you shanked with a quickness." Jack sighed, locking eyes with Mickey. "But then, I got this new cellie, and he had some words with Monroe, and that was the end of that. Once the guy got out of the infirmary, he never laid a finger on me ever again." Jack's eyes stayed locked with Mickey's, until Mickey gave him fond smile. Jack turned to Trevor then "That good for today?"

Trevor nodded, taken aback by what Jack had just said. Mickey didn't seem like the night in shining armor type to him. He wondered what else Mickey had done to take care of Jack.

"Okay, thanks Jack." Trevor said, instead of voicing his queries. "Mickey, are you ready?" he asked, unsure what kind of history this ex con had. Trevor didn't really believe this guy had any real horror stories, probably just told his jail shrink that shit to get sympathy for busting some guy's head in or something. Ian hadn't told him much about the man while they had been dating, just that he was a violent felon that had issues with his dad. But who doesn't, honestly? That Freudian garbage can't explain away the shit this guy's pulled.

"Not really." Mickey replied honestly. "But fuck it, don't really got a choice, do I?" Mickey rubbing furiously at his upper lip with his fingers. He looked towards Ian for silent reassurance, and when Ian
nodded, placing a hand on his thigh, Mickey draped one of his hands over it, lacing their fingers together. He usually wasn't one for public hand holding, but he needed the contact at the moment.

"Um, I dunno." Mickey said, at a loss of where to begin. "I'm here because my PO read my prison file, and my, uh, rape was discussed with the shrink in there. There's not really much to it. I was nineteen, in the closet. Like, so fucking far in the closet that no light ever got in." Mickey chuckled, repeating Lauren's words to the unsuspecting group. "I had been hooking up with this guy for a long time, but no one really knew, cuz that shit would get me killed. My dad was the biggest homophobe nazi I've ever met. We used to beat up fags as a family. It was just what we did. Terry hated everyone. Jews, Mexicans, blacks, whatever, but he hated the fags the most. He was a scary dude, and I'd seen him bury enough bodies by then to know he meant fucking business. So anyway, me and this guy..."


"Fuck, fine." he huffed. "Me and Ian." he said. He watched as understanding bloomed in everyone's faces. Trevor looked especially shocked. Did he not know this story? Did Ian not tell him? He figured Ian would tell that story to his boyfriend at the time. It had been a big deal, and Ian had nightmares about it still, so he was a little flattered and a lot relieved that his shameful experiences had not been the topic of discussing while Ian had dated the other man. "Me and Ian were at my house, fucking or whatever, and my dad came home. The prick was supposed to be gone until the next day, but he had to come home early and fucked everything up." Mickey paused, trying to remain calm. He's gotten better about talking about shit, but this day in particular had a way of making him lose control. "Anyway, he beat the shit out of us both. He had a gun, cuz he always had a gun. He pistol whipped me, I was barely conscious. Ian was a bloody mess, we were both still mostly naked. My dad called this Russian pimp he knew, had him send over a girl to, and I quote, 'fuck the faggot out of me'. I'm not sure how long it lasted, her riding me while my dad and Ian watched, gun trained on all of us. I, uh, couldn't finish or whatever. I was obviously going soft, right? I mean, who stays hard through something like that. But I knew if I didn't finish the act, Terry would probably kill all three of us, so I flipped her over, thought of Ian and nutted in the bitch." Mickey coughed uncomfortably, shooting Ian a sad look. "And that's how I got my son."

There was a few audible gasps throughout the room, but the story was so old to Mickey now that most the power had been stripped of it. He wasn't shaking, he wasn't having trouble breathing. So he had obviously come a long way in the past few years. He had to get this over with, he was so emotionally drained, so he powered on. "Then, a few years later, I got locked up for some bullshit. There was a female CO in there who also raped me. It was more complicated than that, but she used her position to force me to fuck her, and I guess that's the definition of rape, so here I am." Mickey finished, crossing his arms over his chest protectively and staring at the floor. He focused on the feeling of Ian's hand entwined with his. The simple contact calmed him immensely.

"Uh," Trevor started dumbly. "Thank you for sharing, Mickey, that's good for your first time." Trevor looked utterly shocked. That was the last thing he expect to hear.

"Ian, you're the last to share tonight." he said, looking at his ex/sometimes friend.

"Okay." Ian said, steeling himself for what he was about to do. He twisted his hand out of Mickey's grip to run it through his hair, a sure sign of distress. "So, like a lot of your stories I have heard tonight, I've been assaulted more than once. More times than I care to remember, honestly. A lot of that shit happened while I was manic, so I don't remember, which is a blessing and a curse. I used to work at a club in Boystown, stripping or whatever. Guys would pay me to do shit to them, sometimes take it by force if I wasn't receptive, but that's whatever, that's not why I'm here. I'm here because I was raped by my boyfriend. An ex, now, but at the time I didn't even know what it was. I
thought I owed him, you know? He made me feel like no one else would ever love me, that I wasn't worth it. The last time it happened was the worst. Usually I would go along, you know, just to keep the peace. But this last time I didn't fucking want it. He was so brutal, holding me down and just using my body. I was really fucked up for a long time after that. I had to check into the psych unit, I couldn't let anyone touch me. My therapist thought this group might help me, so here I am." Ian sighed, sitting back in his chair and unconsciously reaching for Mickey again. Mickey let Ian take his hand without a fight, realizing his boyfriend needed the touch just as much as he did in the moment.

Trevor just sat there for a moment, thoroughly shocked. He knew Ian had had some trouble with that Brian guy, but he had no idea it had gone that far. Ian was one of the strongest people he knew, physically and emotionally. The idea of him being a victim like that contradicted everything he thought he knew about him. Maybe he didn't know Ian as well as he thought. He shook his head, getting back into the game.

"Okay, that's good. Thanks guys." Trevor said, standing up. "Please, put the chairs back in the rack and I'll see you all next week."

The room erupted into controlled chaos. Everyone stood up and once and went about tidying up the room.

Mickey and Ian were putting their chairs away when they heard a guy on the other side of the room speaking.

"That fucking guy doesn't belong here. Raped by two women? Come the fuck on. How did he even get hard if he didn't wanna fuck them? I bet you anything he's just here to fulfill his parole. Probably fucks chicks all the time. I feel bad for his boyfriend, a guy like that deserves way better."

Ian turned, eyes wide, trying to get a hand around Mickey's arm before he could do anything, but he was too slow. Mickey was across the room and on the dude in a heartbeat.

"What the FUCK did you just say?" he growled, flexing his fingers around the kid's scrawny neck. Ian was there now, as were Jack and Trevor. Ian put a hand on Mickey's shoulder, but he shook him off.

"No, Ian." he spat. "I wanna hear that shit again."

The guy shook his head as best he could, with his windpipe still being crushed by Mickey's tattooed hand.

"What's that? Got nothing to say now? You had no problem running your mouth a minute ago. Saying all this fucked up shit like you fucking know me or something. Go ahead, kid. Tell me how much I liked it when my dad almost killed me and then forced me to fuck a bitch. Tell me it ain't rape cuz I was fucking hard. Tell. Me." Mickey growled.

Trevor got in between them then, wedging his hand between their bodies and forcing Mickey further away until Ian's strong hand on his shoulder pulled him back.

The other guy gasped for air, clutching at his throat. "Fucker." he said hoarsely. "You're insane. Trevor, did you see that? I want him gone. I don't want to be in this group anymore if he's gonna be here." the kid said indignantly.

"Yeah, Ed, I think that's a good idea." Trevor said, and Mickey's heart sank. He'd fucked up. He needed this shit for his parole, and he'd fucked it up already.
"I don't think I can have you in this group anymore, Ed." Trevor continued, shocking Mickey. "I heard what you said, and it's against group rules to say those things about another man's trauma. Who are you to say he's lying? And if you actually knew anything about rape, you'd know that having an erection does not equal consent. It's biological, and the body responds to stress differently for everyone. Besides, from what Mickey shared with us, I think having sex with women was more of a survival instinct than a result of genuine attraction. But none of that shit matters, because it's none of your fucking business. You are done here, Ed. I'll call your probation officer and tell her what happened here tonight. And I'm going to spread the word to all the other groups I know that you are trouble. If I were you I'd get lost."

"But my probation!" Ed yelled. "I'm gonna get locked up again."

Trevor shrugged, unphased. "Should have thought about that before you opened your mouth, now get out of here." and he did a little shooing motion with his hand.

The guy left without further comment throwing his hands up in disgust, the whole exchange leaving both Mickey and Ian shocked.

Trevor standing up for Mickey was the last thing either of them expected.

Jack had come to stand next to them, Rowan having gone back upstairs.

"Jesus, Mick. All the assholes always find you." he chuckled.

"No shit." Mickey replied, still a little keyed up from the confrontation.

"Gotta go upstairs, but good group, huh?" Jack laughed.

"It was interesting, that's for sure." Mickey replied. "You gonna be okay? I know talking about that shit fucks you up."

"I'll be fine, Mick. What about you guys? That shit was heavy." he let his eyes fall on Ian for a moment before looking back to his friend.

"We'll be okay. We got each other." Mickey said, reaching down to lace his fingers with Ian's, causing the red head to smile like an idiot.

"Of course you do." Jack smiled, pulling both men into an awkward three way hug. "Talk soon, love you guys." Jack pulled away and was out of the room before either of them could reply.

The men shrugged on their coats, ready to brave the Chicago cold, only to be stopped before they could exit the room. Trevor was standing by the door, arms crossed over his chest.

"What now?" Mickey groused. "We just wanna go home, dude."

Trevor cleared his throat uncomfortably, letting his hands fall to his sides. " Look, I just wanted to thank you for sharing in group, both of you. I know how hard it can be to talk about that kind of thing. I had no idea your trauma was so severe, Mickey, and I apologize for being a judgmental dick. I had no right to assume I knew your story."

Mickey just stared at him for a moment, nonplussed.

"Anyway, I just wanted to say that. You guys have been through some serious shit, and you came
out on the other side. Takes a lot of strength to recover from something so damaging, and I think you both have a lot to be proud of."

"Ain't proud of shit." Mickey said, shifting on his feet. "You either get over it, or you fall the fuck apart. And how does that help anyone?"

"Yeah, I guess so." Trevor said slowly. He's not sure he'll ever understand this guy, or what Ian sees in him, but he can at least admit the guy's a lot more complex than he had ever anticipated.

"We gotta go, Trev, see you later, yeah?" Ian said, sounding tired and weak. This group had taken a lot out of both of them, and he just wanted to go home.

"Sure, yeah, okay." Trevor babbled, stepping aside. "See you guys later."

The two men walked out into the cold evening, walking close enough that their shoulders touched with every step they took.

---------------------------------------------------------

"Jesus, man, that shit was a lot harder than I thought it was gonna be." Mickey said, sitting on the couch in Ian's apartment. Mandy and Macy had fucked off to god knows where, leaving a note saying the would not be back until the morning.

"You did great, Mick. I didn't expect you to say so much. Proud of you" Ian said, sinking down on the couch next to his boyfriend, passing him a beer.

Mickey took a sip, gripping the TV remote in his other hand. "You did good two, Red. I know you hate talking about what that prick did to you. Did it make you feel any better?" Mickey asked, turning on Netflix and flipping to some show he's been binging.

Ian smiled, taken by how at home Mickey looked on his couch. He couldn't help but fantasize about a time when they could share a place again. Make a home together, make a future together. He took a sip of his own beer, not taking his eyes off of Mickey. "Yeah, I think it did. I know we didn't really grow up in homes where you talked about your feelings or whatever, but it has been helping me for years, therapy or whatever. This was different, but good."

Mickey nodded, turning his head to look at Ian. "Yeah, man. If you would have told me when I was sixteen that I'd be spilling my shit to a bunch of fags in a basement, I'd have knocked you out." he laughed. "But it's kinda cool knowing we're not the only people with fucked up history. Some of those stories made me feel like a bitch for even complaining."

"I know." Ian agreed. "I was thinking the same thing. That kid who had to do porn when he was like eleven....How do you come back from that?" Ian grimaced.

"Dunno." Mickey shook his head. "But like your super hero ex said, we're not supposed to compare, right? That's what he said."

"Yeah, I know. Just makes me feel lucky, I guess. And that's pretty fucked up. To feel lucky that my rape wasn't as bad as someone else's."

Mickey looked over at Ian, an unreadable expression on his face. He put his beer down and scooted
closer to Ian on the couch. He reached up and clasped Ian's face in his tattooed hands.

"Ian, what happened to you was horrific. You trusted that prick, and he abused you. You let him into your life, into your body for fuck's sake, and he used you up and tossed you out. And that's not even taking into account that he beat on you."

Ian nodded, his moments hindered by Mickey's grip on his face.

"You too, Mick. You know what that asshole Ed said isn't true, right? What happened to you wasn't your fault, nobody thinks you wanted that shit."

Now it was Mickey's turn to nod. He ran one of his hands through Ian's hair before settling it on the back of his neck.

"I know that. I did what I had to do to survive. I'm just glad my dick got the memo, cuz if I couldn't get hard for chicks, I'd probably be dead right now." he laughed lightly, even though he didn't find it funny.

Neither did Ian, if the stricken look on his face was any indication.

"We're kind of a mess." Ian sighed, wrapping an arm around Mickey's shoulder and pulling him to his chest. "You know what the worst part of it was, with Brian?" he asked suddenly.

"What?" Mickey asked. He stretched his hand out as far as he could without having to dislodge from Ian's embrace. His fingers were just long enough to grab his beer from the table without having to sit up.

"It's gonna sound dumb, but I had actually liked to bottom before that. You know, not all the time or anything like that, but it was nice to mix it up once in a while. Give up control for a change. But now I don't know."

"That's not dumb, Ian." Mickey said, surprising him. He pulled back, giving Mickey a confused look. "What? I get it. Of course I get it, I'm like 90% bottom, after all." he smirked. "I know how much of a turn on it is to give yourself to someone like that. But I also know how much trust is required, which is why I spent my life before and most of it after you as a fucking top. I don't let just any prick fuck me. You know what I mean?"

Ian nodded, tears in his eyes. "Yeah, I get it." he said, sniffling.

"Hey." Mickey said, nervous. "Why are you crying now?" He sat back further so he could look into Ian's eyes.

"Nothing. God I'm such a pussy." Ian said, wiping his eyes angrily with his fists.

"Ian, come on, what the fuck is wrong?" Mickey asked, putting a hand on Ian's hip and rubbing soothing circles on the skin underneath his shirt with the hand not clutching his beer.

"I just don't want Brian to have that kind of power of me anymore. I don't want that memory to be the one I think of when I think of bottoming. I want to...." he trailed off, unsure of how to finish his thought.

"You wanna take your power back?" Mickey asked, shocking Ian once again.

"What?" Ian asked dumbly.
Mickey chuckled, still rubbing gently on Ian's hip and side. "You wanna take your power back. Mandy says that shit all the time. When someone stomps her heart or makes her feel like an asshole. So she does something empowering, to get her mojo back or whatever. That's what you want, right? To replace your bad memories with good ones? To feel like you own your body again, like you get to say what you do with it, and with who?"

Ian nodded, still lost on what Mickey was saying.

"Wanna make some memories with me?" Mickey asked, swinging a leg over Ian's lap so he was straddling him, untouched beer dangling from his fingertips over the back of the couch.

"You wanna top me, Mick?" Ian asked, laughing lightly. He reached his hands around automatically, resting his palms flat on Mickey's round ass. "What happened to 'if I wanted to fuck another dude I would have stayed in prison.'?"

"Ian, when I said that shit to you, I was in a really fucked up place. You remember? We were just about to fuck in the car on the side of the road, and you said that shit about bottoming. It made me think of all those pricks you'd been with since I got locked up. Made me fucking angry that they got it first. Jealous. And I was still so amazed you were there with me, still so scared to lose you. I just wanted to feel you like I had been dreaming about for so long. I wanted to have the old 'us' back. Something familiar. It's not that I didn't wanna top you Ian. I've been thinking about that shit since we were kids."

"Huh?" Ian asked, confused. "Why didn't you say anything?" He had a warm feeling blooming in his chest. It was the same feeling he got every time Mickey talked about when they were kids. Whenever Mickey confirmed that he's been hung up on Ian since the beginning. Whenever Mickey openly talks about his damn feelings. Ian's chest gets all tight and his skin gets tingly. Mickey fucking loves him, and he has for a long time.

"How are you feeling, after all that shit at the group?" Mickey asked, instead of answering Ian's question.

"Huh?" Ian asked again, his hands sliding up and down Mickey's taught thighs absentmindedly.

Mickey tilted his head to the side, his eyebrows raised. "The group, man. Don't play dumb with me. You were just talking about Brian and how he fucked up your feelings about bottoming. Did the group bring up all that nasty shit? You feeling panicky or whatever? Anxious?"

Ian shook his head, a small smile playing at his lips. "I was, for a second there, but I feel better now that it's just the two of us. I really think the group could help, you know. It's a lot different that therapy with Caroline, but it's actually kinda nice to know that I'm not alone in how I feel."

Mickey nodded in agreement, a frown etched on his face. "It's kinda fucked up though too, right? That of all of the people we know, three of us have been sexually assaulted?"

"You know, Caroline told me in one of my sessions that forty percent of gay men, and 47 percent of bisexual men have been sexually assaulted."

Mickey's eyes grew wide as he shook his head in disgust. "What the fuck? That number is really fucking high."

"I know." Ian agreed. "So I guess it would make sense that we would know other victims personally. I know it sounds awful, but I'm actually glad you guys understand what I'm going through. Not that I would ever wish this kind of shit on you or Jack." Ian said, his eyes tearing up again.
"Hey, hey." Mickey soothed, running a hand through Ian's hair. He squeezed his legs around Ian's hips to get his attention. "All that shit's done. We're all away from that crap, and we're all doing shit to put it all to rest. We don't gotta keep reliving the past." Mickey pulled lightly on Ian's hair, causing him to hiss his through his teeth.

"You're right, of course," Ian agreed, his hands trailing up to Mickey's plump ass. "So, what were you saying about fantasizing about topping me when you were younger?" the flirty, teasing tone was evident in Ian's voice as his hands continued to squeeze and release Mickey's ass cheeks in his hands.

"Oh come on now, Gallagher." Mickey laughed, tipping his head down to run his tongue along Ian's neck. Starting up by his ear, he blazed a trail down the tendon in his neck, sucking and licking until he got to his shoulder. He pulled his t shirt to the side so he could lave at his shoulder, biting down gently on his clavicle. "You were this super hot, sexy as fuck, dominate top. Even when you were sixteen, you were like a fucking porn star. Knew how to handle dick, that's for sure. What gay guy wouldn't want a piece of that? Besides, you were a gold star back then, and who doesn't wanna be the first guy to plant their flag?" Mickey laughed, biting down sharply on the meat of Ian's shoulder.

Ian hissed, bucking up, but he was pinned to the couch by Mickey's ass, still firmly planted in Ian's lap.

"Is that the only reason? Cuz you woulda been the first?" Ian asked, tipping his head back and closing his eyes. He was really trying to focus on the conversation, but felt himself getting lost in the sensation. Mickey just felt so good.

Mickey was rocking slightly in Ian's lap now, grinding his ass back and forth on Ian's rapidly filling cock.

"Nah, man. I mean that was part of it, wanting to be your first. Not for bragging right or whatever, just cuz it was you." Mickey kept his face tucked into Ian's neck so the other man couldn't see the look on his face.

Ian had been his first. The fist man he ever let fuck him. It was a big deal to him, even though he acted like it wasn't. And he had always hoped that if Ian ever decided to forgo his hard limit and try bottoming, Mickey could be his first too.

But like fuck he was telling Ian that shit now. After everything he'd been through, first being pressured to bottom by Trevor, then being raped by Brian, Mickey didn't want to make him feel bad. Didn't want him to think Mickey resented him giving it away to someone else.

"I just, fuck." Mickey sighed, finally pulling away from Ian's marked up neck so they could look each other in the eye. "I just wanted to make you feel as good as you make me feel. I wanted you to feel special, taken care of. Important. Cuz that's what you do for me. That's what you've always done for me. Even back in the day, when it was still just fucking. You made me feel safe enough to let my guard down like that. You made me feel like I was worth your time. I liked being that for you, with you. Vulnerable or whatever. You always took such good care of me. I wanted to do that for you."

Ian stared at Mickey, mouth open in shock. His hands had stopped their ministrations on his ass as he just gaped at his boyfriend.

Ian had no idea Mickey had felt that way all that time ago. Ian had always thought that Mickey didn't give a fuck back then. That Ian was just a fuck. He had no idea he was Mickey's first gay experience. He had always thought Mickey had let dudes fuck him in Juvie before they even met, even though Mickey had always said he did the fucking, Ian thought that was just posturing.

He was hit with the gravity of what Mickey had just said. And with that realization came a flood of
guilt.

Mickey should have been his first.

Not fucking Trevor.

Ian had never even broached the subject with Mickey back then. He was still young, and back then he was somewhat of a selfish lover. He did what he wanted, when he wanted. He took what he wanted, without really thinking of what Mickey would want or like. At the time, Mickey had no complaints. But Ian's starting to wonder now if maybe Mickey was still too scared or nervous to speak his mind.

So many missed opportunities.

Though Ian couldn't go back and change that shit, he could be better going forward.

"You are all those things for me, Mick. You are." Ian said, pulling Mickey to him with a hand on the back of his head.

The kiss was desperate from the first brush of their lips. Mickey slipped his tongue into Ian's mouth, pushing it against Ian's feverishly. He bit Ian's bottom lip, soothing the tender spot with his tongue before tilting his head to the side and going back in for more.

Ian's hands roamed along Mickey's back, back down to his ass, and up under his shirt, feeling the burning hot skin under his palms.

"Off." Ian mumbled, grabbing the hem of Mickey's shirt and tugging it up insistently.

Mickey chuckled into Ian's mouth, breaking the kiss long enough for Ian to pull the thing over his head and toss it on the floor before he was back on him. Mickey groaned as Ian kissed him fiercely.

Mickey leaned back again, balancing on Ian's thighs so he could help Ian pull his own shirt over his head. Once it had joined Mickey's on the floor, they picked up where they had left off. The feeling of their bare chests touching sent a jolt of electricity up Mickey's spine.

"Fuck." Mickey choked out, overwhelmed by Ian, as always.

They kissed for what felt like hours. Tongues lapping at each other, lips swollen and bitten. Mickey was so hard he was throbbing, rubbing his erection against Ian's as he continued to grind on him.

"Mick." Ian breathed, pulling away. Mickey took the loss in stride, attaching his lips to Ian's neck instead. "Mick." he repeated when he got no answer except heavy breathing and more dry humping. "Mick, I want you to top me." Ian said, his mouth close to Mickey's head, tongue sliding over the shell of his ear.

"What?" Mickey asked, finally pulling back from sucking a particularly dark mark near Ian's shoulder. "Ian, are you sure? After everything that happened today?"

It's not that Mickey wasn't into the idea. In fact, he got exponentially harder at the thought. But, he didn't want to trigger Ian. Mickey wasn't sure enough time had passed since Ian's assault for him to be able to put himself in that position again.

"You said it yourself, Mickey. I want to replace those bad memories with good ones. You are those good ones, Mick. I want this, with you. I only want to do this with you, forever. Me inside you, you inside me. We can do all kinds of amazing shit together. We have our whole lives to explore our kinks. But tonight, I want you to take care of me. Show me what you used to fantasize about when
"Jesus Christ, Ian." Mickey moaned, grinding his ass down on Ian's erection again. "Bedroom, now." he jumped up off Ian's lap and grabbed his hand, dragging him toward Ian's bedroom. Once they were through the door, Mickey pulled Ian back to him by the waistband of his jeans. He kissed him passionately, undoing his belt and zipper expeditiously before dropping to his knees. A soft thud echoed through the room when Mickey's knees hit the floor, dragging Ian's jeans with him. Ian stepped out of them and Mickey threw them behind him. He ran his hands up and down Ian's thighs reverently, taking in the feel of the hard muscles under his palms. He reached up and groped Ian's package over his boxers, causing the man above him to let out a low groan. Ian, lost in the sensation, let himself fall back against the wall, his head rolling on his neck as Mickey finally pulled his boxers down and off.

Mickey wasted no time, taking Ian's erection in his hand, pumping it slowly while he ran his tongue over the slit.

Ian moaned, banging his head against the wall.

Mickey licked the slit again, teasingly, still pumping the shaft painfully slowly. Ian tried to buck up into the sensation, but Mickey held him still with a hand on his hip.

"Ian." Mickey said, his voice deep with lust. "I'm gonna take such good care of you tonight. You want that?" he peered up at Ian from his spot on the floor, hand on his dick, mouth hovering centimeters from the pink head.

Ian looked down at him, eyes blown wide with lust. Fuck, he was beautiful like this. Chest flushed, hard cock visible through his boxer briefs.

"Yeah, Mick. I really want that." Ian sighed, willing himself to maintain eye contact as Mickey finally, finally, took him in his mouth. He closed his lips around the tip, running his tongue around the head in a circular motion, relishing in the taste of Ian. He bobbed his head down, taking a little bit more with each pass. He let his tongue undulate on the underside, putting perfect pressure on the vein there. His other hand came up to cup Ian's balls, gently rolling them in his palm, pulling and squeezing them softly.

When he heard a small whimper escape Ian's lips, he redoubled his efforts, taking as much of his hard cock into his mouth that he could manage. The tip hitting the back of his throat repeatedly as spit accumulated at the corners of his mouth.

"Fuck, Mick." Ian whined, his legs starting to shake.

Mickey hummed, picking up his pace as his hand snaked down from Ian's ball sack to run a dry finger over his hole.

Ian gasped, finally breaking free of Mickey's grip on his hip. He jerked forward, his cock jamming down Mickey's throat, almost causing him to gag. Mickey smiled to himself around Ian's girth.

This fucking guy.

He worked him for a little longer, deepthroating him while he ran his finger around his clenching hole in small circles. He didn't try to penetrate him yet, he was just trying to get Ian used to the sensation. He wanted to do this right.

Ian needed to be 100% comfortable if he was gonna do this.
Mickey pulled off with a wet plop, still stroking Ian's stiff dick at a deliciously slow pace. He gazed up at him from his spot on the floor, his eyes full of a potent mixture of adoration and lust. He ran his tongue once more from base to tip, sucking lightly on the leaking head before standing up. He pulled Ian to him with his free hand on the back of his head. He kissed him hard, pushing his tongue into his mouth as he continued to jerk him off.

He pulled away, breathless. "Go lay on the bed." he whispered, finally stepping away.

Ian was lost without the warmth of Mickey's body on his. He felt light headed and dizzy, and he just wanted Mickey to be touching him again. He shook his head a little, trying to regain his bearings as he did as he was told and made his way over to the bed. He laid down on his back, naked, watching Mickey like a hawk.

The other man went into his nightstand, pulling out a bottle of lube and placing it on the bed. He smiled at Ian as he stripped his boxers off and knelt onto the bed, his hard cock bobbing proudly as he crawled over Ian's prone form.

"You ready for this, tough guy?" Mickey asked, eyebrows raised.

Ian nodded, his chest heaving with arousal. This was really happening. He'd thought a lot of what it would be like for Mickey to top him, and if he's being honest with himself, he always felt like he missed an opportunity when they were traveling to the border together. But he's glad Mickey turned him down back then. This was going to be special, and Ian's glad they waited.

Mickey slicked up two fingers, dipping them down to circle Ian's hole again. "I'm gonna suck you off a little bit more while I open you up, okay? Let me know if I hurt you."

Ian nodded again, his cheeks flushed. Mickey was so good to him. Already taking such good care of him.

Mickey smiled up at Ian, taking his dick in his hand again and guiding it to his mouth. He sank his mouth down on the shaft just as he breached Ian's ass with a finger. He continued to suck him off eagerly as he fingered him. Pumping his finger in and out of Ian's incredibly tight ass. Ian may have bottomed his fair share while Mickey was away, but it had been a hot minute since Brian, and Ian was surely not used to the feeling anymore.

"Doing so good." Mickey breathed against Ian's thigh. "Jesus, Ian, so tight, fuck. Don't know how I'm ever gonna last long enough to fuck you." and with that he sunk his mouth down on his aching cock again, wasting no time. He sucked him off vigorously, pumping his finger in and out of his body. When he felt a little give, he added a second, never letting up with his mouth. He deepthroated Ian as best he could from his reclined position.

"Mickey." Ian sighed, his fingers tangling into Mickey's hair. "Please, Mick. Please." he begged.

Mickey pulled his mouth of Ian's dick, letting it slap back against his stomach. "Not yet." he breathed, fingers still moving. "Gotta make sure you're ready." he moved up Ian's body, kissing and licking at Ian's quivering form. He made his way back up to his mouth, licking his way in. Ian kissed him back fiercely. His body shaking with want, one hand fisting in Mickey's hair again, the other twisted up in the sheets so tight his knuckles were turning white.

Mickey kept on for a few more minutes, twisting his wrist and spreading his fingers, all the while sucking a deep bruise into Ian's neck. When he felt like Ian was finally ready, he pulled his face away from Ian's skin, marveling at how beautifully Ian's pale flesh bruised. He pulled his fingers back, earning a loud sigh from his partner.
"Okay." he mumbled, pulling back a little bit. He situated himself over Ian, grabbing his erection, and getting into position "Okay." he repeated, locking eyes with Ian. He looked totally gone. Skin flushed, pupils dilated, chest rising and falling rapidly. He gave Mickey a single nod of his head and an almost shy smile. Mickey nodded back, suddenly feeling oddly nervous.

He pushed the feeling down. There was no reason to be nervous. This was Ian. He wanted this, and so did Ian.

He couldn't help the small inkling in the back of his mind, though. That shit with Brian. How skittish Ian had been right after his assault. The panic attacks. The crying. And here they were right after their first share in group therapy, when all that shit was swirling around in Ian's head, and Mickey was gonna fuck him?

He stopped his forward motion, hand still on his aching dick, hovering inches away from Ian's stretched hole.

"You sure about this?" Mickey heard himself ask. He looked up at Ian, who was already staring at him.

"Mickey." Ian sighed, voice strained with lust, but littered with sad understanding. "Thank you so much for being so careful with me, but I am so fucking sure. Please, I need you. Now." he ran a hand up Mickey's side, his fingernails biting into the flesh of his rib cage.

Mickey nodded, smiling. "Okay." he said. With that, he gripped his dick a little tighter, pressing the head against Ian's hole. He took a deep breath, trying to center himself, and pushed forward. He rolled his hips minutely, just breaching his partner. He watched his face for any signs of discomfort or panic, but he didn't let up on his slow pressure. Ian's eye were closed, his hand still gripping Mickey's side, the other twisted up in the sheets again. Ian let out a slow breath, relaxing into the sensation of being filled. He was a little worried that he would start to panic, but as he opened his eyes to see Mickey staring at him with apprehensive adoration all over his face, those thoughts flew from his mind.

This was Mickey. His Mickey.

Ian reached up with the hand that had been gripping the sheets and cradled the back of Mickey's head. His other came up to rest on the small of his back, putting just the slightest amount of pressure there. He wrapped his feet around his calves, waiting.

Mickey smiled down at him, lowering his face for a kiss just as he bottomed out.

Jesus Christ. The feeling was unlike anything he'd ever experienced before. Ian was so tight, felt so fucking good. Mickey had to stay still, balls pressed up against Ian's ass, and just wait for his dick to chill the fuck out, before this all ended before it even started.

He kissed Ian harder, pushing his tongue into his mouth over and over. Ian moaned into the kiss.

"Fuck, Mick." he whimpered.

Mickey groaned lowly, finally pulling back and surging forward again. He set a slow pace, by their standards, still aware of Ian's mental state, and being sure not to hurt him. He thrust into him rhythmically, rolling his hips steadily.

"Fucking hell, Ian. You feel amazing. You are amazing." Mickey sighed. He leaned down on one
elbow, running his other hand down Ian's thigh.

Ian moved his legs to wrap around Mickey's lower back, pulling him in just that much deeper. Mickey huffed out a stuttered moan, overwhelmed by the feeling. He was quickly losing his tenuous grip on his control, rolling his hips faster and harder.

Ian groaned, his arms flying up to grip Mickey's shoulders. He pulled him down into a passionate kiss, tongues meeting outside their mouths wantonly.

Ian was losing his mind. Never before had bottoming felt like this. Every sensation was intensified. His skin was tingling, chills breaking out on his skin wherever Mickey touched him. He felt so fucking full, Mickey hard and throbbing inside him.

It was fucking incredible.

Mickey was really fucking him now. No more gentle thrusts, no more careful maneuvers. He settled his body over Ian's fully, his hands curling up around the edge of the mattress for better leverage. He surged into Ian over and over, their skin sliding against each other easily as sweat built up on their bodies. He angled his hips one way and then the other, searching for that spot inside Ian.

He knew he had found it when Ian's whole body spasmed, the man moaning loudly.

"Fuck yeah." Mickey groaned. "So hot like this Ian, so good for me." he rolled his hips harder, angling again for Ian's prostate. He uncurled one of his hands from around the mattress, running his hand down Ian's heated skin, splaying it over his chest. He tweaked one of his nipples, causing Ian to let out a low whine. Mickey smiled against Ian's neck, where his face was buried. He inhaled the intoxicating scent as his hand traveled lower, grazing Ian's taught abs before finally curling around his leaking cock.

"Holy fuck. Mick. Mick." Ian cried, bucking up wildly into Mickey's fist. His whole body got tense, his ass clench around Mick's dick. Mickey's breath hitched, and he swears he saw fucking stars.

"Ian. God." Mickey moaned, pulling his face out of Ian's neck to kiss him again. His tongue ran over Ian's, lapping deep into his mouth, as his hips rocked and he continued to pull on Ian's dick.

"Mick. Gonna come." Ian breathed, his nails scraping down Mickey's back, causing the most exquisite pain to shoot through his body.

"Go on then." Mickey replied, delivering a few more pointed pulses against his prostate.

Ian threw his head back against the pillow, growling lowly as he shot his load all over his stomach and Mickey's fist.

"Jesus fuck. So hot." Mickey murmured, losing the last vestiges of his control. He snapped his hips harder, feeling that heat starting to pool in his gut. Two more thrusts and he was there, throwing his head back in ecstasy while he shot his load deep inside his lover.

He collapsed on top of Ian, but did not let his full weight crush the man. He balanced on his elbow again, slowly pulling out, searching Ian's eyes for any pain or anxiety.

He found none.

Ian looked up at him, a small, almost shy smile on his face. He reached up a hand and ran it through Mickey's sweaty hair.
"Damn, Mick. that was amazing." he whispered.

Mickey smiled back at him, dropping a gentle kiss on his forehead.

"Not so bad yourself there, killer." he laughed.

"Fucker." Ian chided playfully, wrapping a hand around the back of his neck, pulling him into a tender kiss. There was no heat in this one, just love. Their mouths moved sluggishly, lips parting, allowing their tongues to dance lazily together.

"I fucking love you, Ian. And I'll do my best to make sure you never hurt like that ever again." Mickey said, voice dripping with sincerity.

"I love you too, Mick. You make me feel safe. And that's a big deal to me." Ian's voice was soft. He sounded so vulnerable.

Mickey wants that. He wants to make Ian feel safe. He wants to make Ian feel loved.

If nothing else comes of this therapy shit, Mickey will be satisfied with a boyfriend who feels safe, happy and loved.

Anything else is gravy, if you ask him.

Mickey rolled over, forgoing cleaning up their mess tonight and turned off the light, before returning to his position next to the love of his life. He grabbed Ian by the shoulders and turned him on his side, earning himself a huff of laughter from the other man. Mickey laid on his side as well, pulling Ian's chest against his back, tucking his ass against Ian's softening cock, and pulling his long, gangly arm around him.

"I may be down to fuck you once in a while, but when we sleep, I still want you to be holding me." he said into the dark.

"Always gonna be my little spoon, Mick." Ian whispered, smile evident in his voice.

"Fuck off." Mickey laughed.

"I love you too." Ian replied easily, pulling Mickey tightly to his chest.

At that moment, laying in the dark, holding each other closely, Mickey could admit to himself, that maybe exorcising these long held demons may not be such a terrible idea after all.
Happy Christmas, War is Over

Chapter Summary

The boys spend their first real Christmas together.

Chapter Notes

i'm a little behind, about two months behind to be exact. but the sentiment remains the same...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Jesus fucking Christ, Ian." Mickey grumbled, struggling to walk under the weight of all the bags he was carrying.

"He is the reason for the season, Mick." Ian chuckled, making his way back to the truck after a very successful Christmas shopping trip.

His hands were also full of bags, gifts for all of their friends and family. Ian was quite pleased with himself for getting all his shopping done, with one day to spare even. Better than any year he'd had previously. He always found himself scrambling to get all his shit done, running around like a mad man on Christmas eve. Not this year.

He's adulting like nobody's business, and the fact that he's doing it with Mickey makes him all the happier.

Mickey, on the other hand, is over the whole thing. He's never been one to go overboard with celebrations. Christmas, birthdays, none of that shit mattered to his family growing up. He's having a hard time keeping up with Ian's unbridled enthusiasm. But he's fucking trying. He kept his mouth shut when Ian insisted they get a tree for his and Mandy's apartment. He dutifully helped them decorate it, with ornaments he had never seen before. Some Ian had taken from his family's house, others him and Mandy bought together, and a few looked handmade. There was one that Mickey really loved, though he'd never admit that shit out loud. It was a silver bell frame ornament, with a picture of Ian, Mickey and Yevgeny in it, form Halloween. Svet must have taken it and sent it to Ian. Just the three of them, walking down the street together, Ian's arm around Mickey's shoulder, Mickey holding Yevgeny's hand. Mickey never thought he'd be the sentimental type, but every time he looked at the ornament, his chest got a little tight.

The only thing he could get totally on board with was the food. Christmas cookies, fudge, kettle corn. So many delicious snacks, it was insane. Ian had caught the cooking bug somewhere along the line, and Mickey was certainly reaping the benefits.

The tossed their bags into the back seat of the pickup and Ian started the engine. They weaved their way away from the mall and back towards Ian's house.

"So, run this plan for Christmas by me again. I honestly wasn't paying attention last night." Mickey
"I should know by now not to talk to you about important shit when you are in your post-orgasm fugue state." Ian chuckled, putting his blinker on and taking a left. Mickey had thrown the idea around to Matt about maybe letting Ian drive the truck, to which Matt had replied 'It's more yours than mine at this point Mick, just don't let your dude wrap it around a tree, and we're good.' Mickey could respect that.

"Fuck off. That was good fucking, and you know it." Mickey retorted hotly.

"Always is, babe." Ian chuckled.

"Again with the babe shit? Why do you keep trying to make that a thing?" Mickey sighed.

"Cuz you're my baby. Duh." Ian replied simply.

"I am not your damn baby. Now, shut the fuck up and tell me about Christmas."

"How can I shut the fuck up and tell you something at the same time?"

"Ian." Mickey warned.

"Okay, okay." Ian laughed lightly. "So we have to go to Fiona's, obviously. But I don't feel like doing the whole dinner thing this year. So I was thinking we'd show up after that and just do drinks and gifts."

Mickey nodded. There was no way he was going to argue with less Gallagher holiday madness.

"Then we were gonna go back to my place for that little get together we talked about. Mandy and Macy, and Jack and Rowan. We can do that before or after my family. There's no real time table on that."

"Jack and Rowan are pretty damn lucky Andy gave them both a pass for the holiday." Mickey remarked, pleased that Jack was doing so well at the house. It brought him great happiness to see his friend finally getting his shit together.

"Although, I have to tell you, I'm surprised Matt and Lexi left town for the holiday." Ian said, pulling up in front of his building and putting the truck in park. They gathered their bags and made their way into the house and up the stairs.

"I guess Lexi has been wanting to go to the Bahamas for Christmas for years." Mickey said, leaning up against the hallway wall while Ian set his bags down to get his keys out. "But they didn't wanna make the trip while Jack was strung out or in jail. So now that he's doing better, they figured why the fuck not."

"Does it seem weird to you, though? That Jack is finally better and they can be together, but they are choosing to go away?" Ian asked, opening the door and letting Mickey in first.

The other man walked into the apartment, toeing off his shoes and making a bee line for the living room to put his bags down. They were fucking heavy.

"Nah." Mickey said, rubbing his sore wrists and shaking out his arms. "I guess they talked it over, and Jack pretty much insisted they go. Said they earned it, taking care of his destitute ass for the past twenty something years."
Ian came into the living room, dropping his bags next to Mickey's. He shed his coat and draped it over one of the chairs before going back into the kitchen for some beers.

He handed one to Mickey before sitting down on the floor and going through the bags. He took out each gift, separating them into small piles.

"Mick, can you go into my bedroom and get the wrapping paper and shit?" he asked, not looking up from his task.

"Ian, come the fuck on. We don't have to do this shit tonight." Mickey practically whined.

"Mick. Tomorrow is Christmas eve. We literally have no time." Ian huffed. "Get the shit and get back here and help me wrap."

Mickey rolled his eyes but did as he was told.

"I better get compensated for my time somehow." he called over his shoulder.

"You know I always take care of you, BABE." Ian called back.

Mickey was gonna fucking slap that punk. Or kiss him.

It could honestly go either way.

-----------------------------------

Wrapping the gifts takes longer than Mickey had anticipated. Ian is a perfectionist, no surprise there. But not only does he have to wrap the gifts, he insists on putting fancy ribbons and bows on all of them, color coordinated and everything.

Mickey has never seen Ian acting gayer.

It's kind of adorable.

Ian places all the gifts under the tree, along with the ones that Mandy and Macy had put there, as well as the gift that came in the mail from Lauren and Javier. Mickey had sent their gift about a week ago. A stainless steel bar set and a bottle of Johnny Walker Black. It was Lauren's favorite, and Javier would always mix them all a drink after a long day of work. It was a reminder of their time together, and a promise to see each other again soon. Ian had commented on how Mickey had become such a nostalgic little softy, and Mickey had giving him a brutal horse bite.

After all their work was done for the night, the beers had been drunk and the wrapping supplies put away, Ian insisted they take a shower and go to bed.

Mickey followed Ian into his bathroom. It was one of those retro spaces all the hipster landlords were putting into their remodeled buildings. Mickey's done these black and white checkered tiled floors more times than he could count. There was a wide pedestal sink, littered with both Ian's and Mandy's insane amount of products. In the corner was a deep claw-foot tub, with a metal shower curtain rod standing above the tub like a halo. Mandy had chosen a novelty shower curtain, clear but covered with fake blood splatter. It made the shower look like a scene from 'Psycho'. (that always made Mickey chuckle, his sister was indeed twisted) On the far wall was a beautiful stained glass window,
the rainbow glass giving the room a kaleidoscope feel during the day.

But it was night now, and the only light in the room was cast from the vintage light fixture hanging from the center of the ceiling.

Ian turned on the water as Mickey started stripping off his layers. It was cold as fuck in Chicago in December, and Mickey never left the house without at least three layers on his torso. He pulls his sweater over his head, then his thermal, then his t-shirt. By the time he goes for his belt, Ian is already standing in front of him, naked as the day he was born, and looking fucking edible.

"C'mon, Mick." he smiled. "Some time today." as he slapped his hands away and undid his belt himself. He maintained eye contact with him as he unzipped his fly and pushed his jeans down over his hips, followed by his boxers. Mickey stepped out of his clothes and took a step closer, closing the distance between them. Ian's body was slightly chilled from the cold air in the room, and Mickey's skin broke out in goose bumps when their chests touched.

Mickey pushed up on his toes to give Ian a soft peck on the lips, allowing his boyfriend to take his hand and lead him over to the shower.

Ian stepped up over the lip of the tub and into the basin, dragging Mickey behind him and closing the curtain around them.

"You know, while you were gone, I thought about this a lot." Ian said, picking up the shampoo while Mickey ran his head under the spray to get his hair wet.

"Thought about what?" Mickey asked, sighing when he felt Ian's long fingers massaging the shampoo into his scalp. He loved this shit. Ian catering to him, taking care of him. He never considered himself a needy guy, but he can admit now that it's nice to have someone do these little insignificant things for him, just because they want to.

Mickey grabbed the soap and quickly washed his body while Ian continued massaging his soapy scalp.

"Showering with you." Ian replied as Mickey turned his back to the spray to rinse his hair while Ian soaped up his own red locks. "I used to think about how we used to shower at my house, how nice it was, those stolen little domestic moments. I never thought we'd have that again." Ian said the last part lowly, but Mickey heard him loud and clear.

"I missed this shit too, Ian." Mickey replied, gripping the soap tighter and turning Ian around so he could wash his back. "I missed washing your back for you cuz even your gangly arms can't reach this spot right here." he said, poking Ian in the middle of the back, causing the other man to chuckle and squirm, ticklish.

"Quit." Ian giggled.

Mickey relented. He continued to run the bar of soap over Ian's back and ass, crouching down to get his thighs and calves. Once he stood up, he turned Ian back around with a hand on his shoulder, running the soap along his chest and abs, down to his hardening cock and under his balls.

"Jeez, Gallagher, can't even get a proper shower without the monster coming to life?" Mickey laughed, putting the soap back on the ledge to run a soapy hand along Ian's swelling cock.

"Get serious, Mick. Nobody could stay soft with your hands running all over their body like that. I'm only human."
"Fair enough." Mickey smirked, slowly jerking Ian off.

"Mickey." Ian sighed, grabbing the soap back up and cleaning Mickey's skin expeditiously. "Oh god." he mumbled, arousal clouding his brain as Mickey's deft movements made him go fuzzy around the edges.

Ian slapped his hand away, and turned his body this way and that under the rushing water, cleaning the soap of his body. When he was clean, he pulled Mickey to him, wrapping a strong arm around his wet body, tilting his head down to capture Mickey's lips in a sensual kiss.

Mickey sighed into it, wrapping both arms around Ian's broad shoulders as Ian squeezed them flush together and gripped both their hard ons in one of his big hands.

"Fuck." Mickey muttered against Ian's shoulder, his body shaking slightly with the pleasure of it all.

Ian pulled on their cocks, his head pressed up against Mickey's, his breath fanning over Mickey's wet shoulder as the water poured down around them.

Mickey tilted his head up, nudging his nose against Ian's chin. The other man had his eyes closed, lost in the feeling. "Fucking kiss me." Mickey said. Ian opened his eyes and stared down at Mickey. His pupils were blown wide, and his whole body was hot and slippery. It was like a wet dream come to life, and Mickey could feel himself losing control already.

Ian smiled devilishly, kissing Mickey harshly while jerking them off together with clinical precision. He was just so fucking good at this shit.

They kissed until Mickey started to feel dizzy. Ian was everywhere, and it was glorious. The pressure of their cocks squeezed together like that, sliding over each other inside Ian's huge fist, his other hand roaming all over Mickey's back and chest, until it came to rest possessively on his ass. Mickey started rocking his hips, totally gone on Ian and his ministrations. His body started to tingle and he could feel his balls starting to tighten.

"Ian, Ian, fuck." he sighed as he came hard all of Ian's hand and chest.

Ian smiled against Mickey's lips, releasing his spent dick to finish himself off. Mickey huffed, slapping his hand away and taking the job over himself. Ian rested his head on Mickey's shoulder, one hand on his hip and the other still on his ass.

Mickey loved jerking Ian off. He loved doing anything to Ian, really. Making him feel good, causing him to fall apart.

"Jesus, Mick." Ian sighed into Mickey's wet flesh. He thrust up into his grasp, his breathing becoming erratic.

"C'mon, Ian. It's right there, hmm? Come for me." Mickey whispered into Ian's ear, biting softly on his earlobe.

That's what did it. Ian groaned loudly, his hips stilling as he came hard all over Mickey's stomach.

"Damn." Ian sighed, washing the evidence of their pleasure off their bodies and reaching to turn off the water. "You think we'll ever get bored of this shit? You think our sex life will ever get dull?" he asked as he pulled the curtain back and grabbed two towels off the rack, handing one to Mickey.

Mickey gave him an incredulous glare. "If it hasn't happened in the past ten years, I'm pretty sure we'll always fuck like porn stars." he said, wrapping the towel around his waist and following Ian
out of the tub.

"Why? Do you think you'll get bored with me?" he added on as an afterthought, hating how insecure it made him sound.

"Fuck no." Ian laughed, staring at Mickey through the reflection in the bathroom mirror. "Just thinking about how lucky we are. Not everyone gets to have sex this good."

"Don't I know it." Mickey muttered, moving around Ian to leave the bathroom, running a hand down his bare back as he walked by. "I think we're pretty lucky in a lot of ways."

"What?" Ian asked, following him into his bedroom and shutting the door behind him. He went over to his chest of drawers, drying his body quickly before tossing his towel into the hamper by the closet door.

"Well," Mickey said running his towel over his hair before tossing it overhand toward the hamper, where it landed on the floor with a wet thud, causing Mickey to give an irritated scoff. "We got lucky enough to find each other, back when we were kids. In this shithole city, with two asshole families. We had a split second to really love each other. We lost it all for a while there, but found each other again. Neither of us are in jail, and we are both healthy." he gave Ian a meaningful look, causing the other man to blush. "No one's trying to kill us or tear us apart. So I think we are pretty fucking lucky on a few fronts." Mickey shrugged, bending over to pull on his clean boxer briefs. He didn't get very far. Ian tackled him from behind, tossing him onto the bed. He laid over Mickey's back, his chest pressed against his shoulder blades, pinning him to the mattress.

"That was the sweetest shit I've ever heard you say." Ian mumbled into his shoulder, tucking his face into Mickey's cool, damp skin. "You're an undercover romantic. Have you always been this way? How did I not know?"

"It aint sweet, Ian. It's just the truth. Now get the fuck off of me, I can't breathe, you giant ginger fuck." he elbowed Ian in the ribs and the other man rolled off him, laughing breathlessly.

"No boxers." Ian said, ripping the clothing out of Mickey's fingers and tossing them to the floor. "We sleep naked tonight."

"Aye aye, captain." Mickey chuckled. He let Ian manhandle him, pulling and pushing him until he was laying on his side, Ian wrapped around his back like a super handsy blanket. Ian reached over Mickey's body to turn off the light, plunging them into darkness. He pulled Mickey close to his chest, his ass resting in the bowl of Ian's pelvis. Ian inhaled deeply, the scent of Mickey, freshly showered, filling his senses and calming him immediately.

"You are sweet, Mick. You're so many things. I love you." Ian whispered, nuzzling his nose against Mickey's ear.

"Love you too, now go the fuck to sleep."

Ian chuckled lightly, pressing a gentle kiss to Mickey’s shoulder, but said nothing else. They fell asleep to the rhythm of their shared breath and their synced heartbeats.
Ian is used to working holidays. It's just how it is when you work in emergency medicine. He got lucky this year, having worked Christmas and New Years last year, it was his turn to have the holidays off.

Last year was nothing to remember. Ian had just gotten together with Brian. He had moved in way too soon, convinced that it was the right move. He had been desperate to get out of his family's house, desperate to move on with his life after Mickey. It hadn't worked with Caleb or Trevor, so looking back, Ian's not sure why he thought it would work with Brian of all people.

So Ian had worked all day Christmas, and when he had gotten home, Brian's apartment was empty, a note on the kitchen counter saying he'd gone out with some friends for drinks, and Ian should wait for him there.

So Ian had waited. Fiona had called wondering why he hadn't come over. Lip had texted him. Ian had thought about going over there, but it was already after ten pm by that time, and he just ended up sitting on the couch in his sweats, watching 'It's a Wonderful Life' on Netflix, waiting for Brian to come home.

He never did.

Looking back, that was the first of many signs Ian had ignored in his early relationship with Brian. If Ian hadn't been so desperate to make a relationship work, maybe he would have seen the signs. But that is neither here nor there, that shit is over and done with.

He has to keep reminding himself of that. When he wants to dwell on his own pain, when he feels sucked in by the memories and the regret.

He shakes his head to clear his thoughts as he stands in front of his locker at the station. It has been a long, busy day at work, and he's ready to get home, with three days off for the holiday, he can't get his jacket off fast enough.

It had been a bad day too, if Ian's being completely honest.

They had a suicide. Attempts are common on the holidays, sadly, but Ian and his coworkers are usually able to bring the patients back from the brink. Saving lives is what they do, after all. But today, there was nothing they could do. The call came too late.

So Ian had stopped chest compressions, and Sue had called the police. It was a guy, around Ian's age who had overdosed on opiates, leaving a note of apology for his mother. Ian can't imagine what the poor woman is feeling right now.

Ian's mind goes to Jack immediately. That night all those months ago. His overdose had been accidental, but the end result would have been the same if Ian had been unable to save him.

Ian's glad he saved him. He would never wish that kind of thing on anyone, but over the years he's come to believe everything happens for a reason. After that OD, Jack started to get his life together, and Ian found Mickey again. So he is glad for it.

Ian gives himself a moment to think of the dead man from his call. If only he had held on a little longer, maybe things would have turned around for him, like they did for Jack, and Ian himself.

Such a shame. He makes a mental note to talk to Caroline about it when he sees her after the holiday. He doesn't want this shit festering in his head.

He makes his way out of the station house and to Sue's waiting car. She had offered to give him a
ride home, and since it's so late, he accepted. Mickey has got to be sleeping by now. Ian and Sue had
worked the odd 3pm-3am shift, which Ian usually hates. But Carlos and Shayla, his other coworkers,
have small children, and Christmas Eve is a big deal, so Ian doesn't mind taking the late shift for
them.

He gets to Sue's car and opens the door, sliding in without a word. The car is warm, thank god, it
feels like the Siberian tundra outside right now.

"Long night, huh Gallagher?" Sue chuckles, taking Ian's sallow skin and the bags under his eyes.

"You don't look so hot yourself there, Suzy." Ian replied dully.

"What does a guy like you know about good looking women?" Sue teased playfully, hitting her
blinker and pulling into the abandoned street.

"I'm gay, Sue, not blind." Ian laughed tiredly.

"Whatever you say." Sue said, turning the radio on low. 'Jingle Bell Rock' flowed out of the
speakers, doing little to lift Ian's spirits.

They didn't speak for the rest of the ride, Ian lost in thought about that call, Sue probably thinking the
same shit if Ian knew her like he thought he did.

Fifteen minutes later Sue pulled up in front of Ian's apartment building. She put the car in park while
Ian grabbed his bag out of the back seat. He went for the door handle after he grabbed all his shit, but
Sue's hand on his arm stopped him.

"That shit was fucked up tonight." she said lowly.

Ian didn't have to ask what she was talking about. He just nodded.

"You gotta talk to someone about it." she said, watching Ian carefully.

"I will. You too." Ian replied.

"Yeah, sure." Sue said, giving Ian a small smile.

Ian returned the smile, nodding once more before opening the door and stepping out into the deserted
street.

"Merry Christmas, Sue." Ian said.

"Merry Christmas, kid." Sue said.

Ian closed the door and walked up the sidewalk to his apartment.

He was ready to get some sleep, and forget about everything for a little while.

--------------------------------------------------

Ian woke up to an empty bed, but he heard noises out in the apartment, so he knew he wasn't alone.
He grabs blindly for his phone on the nightstand, prying his eyes open slowly.
Good. He got almost eight hours of sleep.

Mickey had not stayed over last night. It was pointless, seeing as Ian didn't even get home until close to four am. Although, Ian admits it would be nice to come home to Mickey sleeping in his bed. But Mickey had had shit to do at his own house, helping Tessa with some Christmas shit.

How fucking cute is that?

Ian is constantly amazed by how much Mickey has grown and matured since they were kids. A teenage Mickey would have laughed in Tessa's face if she had asked him to help her wrap Christmas presents.

Ian's grown a lot too in the past few years. But he had the help of his family and friends and Caroline to expedite his progress. Mickey did a lot of his growing on his own. Sure, he had Jack and his Mexico friends, but Jack had been unstable and unreliable for most of their friendship, and Lauren and Javier have only known him a short while.

So Mickey had to get where he is mostly on his own.

Ian both hates and loves that. He loves how strong and resilient Mickey is. But he hates that Mickey had no choice but to do it all alone.

Ian promises himself for the millionth time, Mickey will never be on his own again.

Ian stretches his arms out over his head, twisting his back until it cracks before planting his feet on the floor and standing up. He stood a bit too fast, swaying a little when he got a little light headed.

He reached under his bed, grabbing a pair of sweats and pulling them up his legs, leaving his chest bare. Mandy kept the heat on 'sauna' setting, and Ian was never cold.

He walked out of his room, dipping into the bathroom quickly to piss and take his meds. As he was washing down his pills with some water from the tap he heard someone laugh, following the sound until he came upon an unexpected sight.

There, in his common area, were Mickey, Mandy, Macy and Jack. The men were in the kitchen. Mickey was pulling something out of the oven, while Jack was kneeling on the counter, fanning the smoke detector with a pot holder. Ian suppressed a chuckle while his eyes traveled over to the girls, who were slow dancing in front of the TV, while 'It's a Wonderful Life played in the background.

Ian was privately grateful he decided to put his sweats on. He wasn't a prude or anything, but having the whole crew see him in his boxer briefs and sporting brutal morning wood would have been a tad embarrassing.

Just as Ian walked into the living room, Mickey turned around, dropping a plate of what looked like sugar cookies onto a cooling rack on the counter top.

Mickey baking?

A Christmas miracle, obviously.

Ian chuckled lightly, and at the slight sound, Mickey's head jerked up and they locked eyes across the apartment.
Like fucking magnets.

"Hey sleepy head." Mickey said fondly. "Get some good rest?"

Ian nods, scratching the back of his neck as he makes his way toward the kitchen.

Jack jumped down off the counter, waving to Ian as he turned around and quickly poured a cup of coffee, handing it over to Ian as he stepped into the kitchen. Ian took the cup with a quiet thanks, placing it right back down on the counter in favor of pulling Mickey into his arms for his customary 'good morning'.

He wrapped his long arms around Mickey's bare back, pulling him flush against his chest. With one hand around his waist, he tipped Mickey's face up with two fingers on his jaw and kissed him. He kissed him hard and long, lost in the feeling until he heard Jack clearing his throat behind him. He pulled back as Mickey scoffed.

"Fuck off, Jack. It's not my fault your boy toy is a no show." Mickey said, backing away and shaking his head. He turned around to shut off the oven as Ian took a seat at the counter.

"Shut up, Mick. Rowan's gonna be here. He just had shit to do before. He promised Trevor he'd help with the Christmas lunch down at the shelter. Like fuck I was gonna do that." Jack laughed, sitting down next to Ian with his own coffee. "The less time I have to spend with that pretentious dick, the better I feel. Just being around his bitchiness makes my nuts retract back into my body. He's such a fucking ball buster." Jack sighed. He turned to Ian on his stool, smiling. "Amiright?"

Ian nodded, smiling back. He took a sip of his coffee before replying. "Yeah, being around him for too long always makes me feel like I'm a failure as a gay man." he chuckled. "He's always got some kind of cause to support, or some young life to save. It's nice that he's so passionate, but his constant need to boast about is exhausting. Not to mention he's always harping on me to do more. Like it's my job to be this politically involved civil servant because I like dick. That's his shit, not mine." Ian's not sure why he said so much, but Jack and Mickey both chuckle, so he leaves it at that. He's not really in the mood to talk about Trevor anyway.

"Ian!" Mandy called, coming up behind him and wrapping her arms around his middle. "Merry Christmas, asshole. Apparently these pricks forgot the reason we're all here today." she said, giving her brother a glare.

"Shut it, Mands. The guy just woke up. Your Christmas cheer can't wait 'til he's had his fucking coffee."

"It's okay, Mick." Ian smiled. He tipped his head back so Mandy could tuck her face into his neck. "Merry Christmas, Mandy. I'm glad you guys are all here."

Mandy squeezed around Ian's middle once before releasing him and hopping up onto the counter, her legs swinging back and forth. "You know what I was telling Mace this morning?" she asked, just as her girlfriend came into the kitchen. She stood next to Mandy, running a hand up and down her swinging leg. "I was telling her that we've never spent Christmas together like this."

Ian nodded, not looking up from his coffee.

"I can't believe that." Macy said, walking over to the coffee pot and pouring herself a mug. "From the way you guys talk, it sounded like you were inseparable back in the day."

"Yeah, well." Mickey started, grabbing the tubes of frosting and little candy bits for the cookies. It was Mandy's idea to make the fucking cookies, but anything sweet was good by Mickey. He did not,
however, agree to make them all by himself. His sister's a lazy bitch. "I was locked up or on runs with Terry for most of the holidays when we were kids. You know that, Mandy. This time of year is always a bonanza for drug dealers. People wanna party, or forget they're alone." Mickey said the last part quietly, his eyes fixed on the cookies, rearranging them for easier decorating.

"Yeah, I know." Mandy sighed. "I remember visiting you and Iggy both in lock up on more than one Christmas."

"Good times." Mickey muttered bitterly.

"Well, fuck that old shit." Jack said, leaving his stool to stand next to Mickey. He hip checked him out of the way so he could get to the cookies. "None of that shit matters now. We're all here together. Making cookies and getting wasted. Eggnog, anyone? It's got bourbon in it. I also brought some mulled cider. My dad makes it, put whiskey in it this year just for Mick." Jack flitted around the kitchen grabbing glasses for everyone, not waiting for an answer before pouring glasses for each of them.

Ian sat there in the kitchen, drinking his coffee, then his eggnog, watching his friends decorate their cookies. When Rowan finally arrived an hour later, they were pleasantly buzzed. Sitting on the couch, munching cookies and drinking holiday spirits. Mickey put on 'home alone' for whatever reason. It was all like some crazy dream for Ian. Never in million years did Ian think he'd have a Christmas like this.

But god, was he glad he had it.

"Okay, assholes. Present time." Mandy cheered, hopping up off the couch. She wobbled a little under the weight of all the eggnog she'd been drinking over the past hour. She giggled to herself as she made her way over to the tiny tree her and Ian had set up in the corner of the room. She grabbed all the presents one by one, handing them out until there was nothing left under the tree. She took her seat next to Macy and they laced their fingers tightly together.

Ian had put a shirt on, thank god. Mickey found it hard enough to concentrate around Ian, but shirtless? No fucking way.

And it would be embarrassing to end up jumping Ian in front of all of their friends and his fucking sister.

"Uh, who goes first?" Mickey asked. This is the first time he's ever had a real Christmas gift. Growing up, his family didn't do this kind of thing. At the most he and his siblings would exchange bottles of booze or small amounts of drugs.

A very Milkovich Christmas.

Mickey snorted at the idea. Ian gave him a questioning look and he just shook his head.

"Well, why doesn't Macy go first? Since she's the newest addition to our little band of misfits?" Mandy asked, rubbing her free hand up and down Macy's exposed thigh. The girl was wearing a weird dress. One of those 50's throw back things with the big skirts.
Mickey would never understand fashion.

"Are you sure you don't want her to go first cuz you're expecting some 'thank you' sex for the gift you bought?" Ian chuckled.

Mickey swatted at his chest with the back of his hand. "God damn it Ian. What did I say about talking about my sister's lesbian sex? That topic is off fucking limits."

Mandy laughed at that, grabbing up her gift for her girlfriend and taking the one Macy bought her.

The unwrapped their gifts, tossing the paper to the floor. They both oohed and ahhed over the gifts they exchanged. Girly shit Mickey had no interest in. Looks like some expensive perfume for Macy, and a charm bracelet for Mandy.

Mandy didn't wear a lot of jewelry, but she'd always wanted one of those charm bracelet things. If the look on her face was anything to go by, she was over the fucking moon.

"So beautiful, Mace, thank you." Mandy smiled, pulling her girlfriend to her for a sweet kiss.

"Eh, come on now." Mickey grimaced.

"Fuck off Mick." Mandy bit out. "I have to see you literally dry humping my best friend almost daily."

Mickey flipped her off while Ian chuckled.

"Come on now, open ours next." Ian said, handing Mandy a box. "It's for both of you, from both of us."

"Both of us?" Mickey asked.

Ian shrugged. "Well, yeah, Mick. I mean, I bought all the shit, but of course it's from both of us."

"Hm, I like Christmas more with you around." Mickey chuckled.

"Don't be too happy. We split the cost."

"Huh?" Mickey asked, turning to Ian as the girls opened their gift.

"I may or may not have taken some money from your wallet before I did the rest of the Christmas shopping." Ian said, smiling smugly.

"You fucking thief. That's low, Gallagher." Mickey laughed, pulling Ian toward him by the collar of his t-shirt. "You own me now." he mumbled against his lips, licking his way into his mouth. Ian tasted like eggnog and cigarettes.

Fucking delicious.

He pulled back when Mandy shrieked like a banshee.

"Bitch, what?" Mickey yelled, turning toward his sister.

"A spa day?" she screeched, jumping off the couch and pouncing onto Mickey and Ian, pulling them into a three way hug. "A fucking spa day!" she repeated, turning her head toward Macy. "Read that shit." she commanded, as Jack and Rowan giggled from their spot on the floor.
Macy picked up the gift certificate and read from it. "This certificate authorizes the receiver to one day full of luxurious spa treatments at Echos Day spa. Including a couple's massage and mani-pedis, as well as three treatments from our al la carte menu. - Oh, that sounds really nice." she exclaimed.

"And expensive." Mandy smiled, finally freeing her brother and best friend to go back to her girlfriend, plucking the card out of her hand to read it over herself. "Thanks guys, I'm really looking forward to this."

"Thank Ian. Obviously I had fuck all to do with buying you a spa day. Like I would ever think of something so gay...." Mickey chucked when Ian pinched his side.

"I know of a few things you do that are pretty gay, Mick." Ian breathed against his temple, kissing lightly behind his ear. His hands curled around Mickey's hips, pulling him closer incrementally.

"Calm yourself, Gallagher, jesus. We have company." Mickey chuckled, twisting away of Ian's pawing hands. He didn't go far, though. He settled next to him closer, tossing one of his legs over Ian's, pinning him down on the couch while laying back against the arm rest, taking up all the space on the couch.

Ian smiled fondly at his idiot boyfriend. "Okay, who's next?"

Jack and Rowan exchanged gifts quickly. Jack got Rowan a pair of jeans he'd been drooling over at the mall a few weeks ago.

Again, Mickey's not a fashion guy, but when Rowan saw the 'True Religion' pants, he almost pissed himself. Whatever the brand was, it looked like a big deal.

Rowan got Jack a signed copy of some album he was always salivating over.

"Oh my fucking god." Jack breathed, holding the vinyl record like it was a pound of gold.

"Who even listens to records anymore?" Mandy asked, earning herself a cold glare from Jack.

"Anyone with a soul." he spat. "And this isn't just any record. This is a signed copy of Elliott Smith's self titled debut album. This is super rare, and super expensive. Jesus, Rowan." Jack said, whipping his head around to look at his friend, who shrugged sheepishly, blushing.

"Oh god." Mickey groaned. "That's that whiny junkie bullshit you were always singing in jail, isn't it? Isn't that guy dead now?" Mickey would never understand Jack's taste in music. Give him heavy drums and brutal base lines over that piano and crying bullshit.

"Elliott was a genius. Don't you fucking blaspheme him in front of me, Mick, or we are going to throw down." Jack said it so seriously, Mickey threw his hands up in surrender. "Seriously Rowan, thank you." Jack said, crawling across the small spread of floor that separated them to kiss him tenderly. Mickey has only seen them kiss a handful of times, but this one seemed different somehow.

Mickey has a feeling Jack and Rowan are getting in pretty deep with each other, if the exchange of expensive Christmas gifts are any indication.

"Alright. You're next, Mick." Mandy said, handing Mickey a handful of colorfully wrapped gifts.

He arranged them next to him on an empty spot on the couch. He grabbed the smallest one first, reading the card out loud.
"To Mick and Ian, love always: L & Javi" he said, his voice soft, rife with emotion.

"Oh, that's nice. That's your Mexico friends?" Macy asked.

"More than friends." Mickey said, ripping into the paper. "Family."

He tossed the paper onto the floor, where Jack picked it up with minimal eye roll and tossed it in the trash bag he had.

Mickey opened the box and there was a note inside. Under the note was an object he thought he'd never see again.

It was an art glass. It was his art glass.

Fuck.

"What's that, Mick?" Mandy asked, sitting up more to eye the piece in Mickey's hands.

"Is that your glass heart?" Jack wondered, a little shocked.

"Yeah." Mickey breathed. "Shit."

"Glass heart?" Ian asked, confused. His eyes shot over to Jack, who had a strange look on his face.

"Yeah." Mickey said again, pulling out the card that was also in the box.

"Read it." Mandy said. "Out loud."

Mickey cleared his throat, not quite ready for what he knew was going to be in this note. Everyone was eyeing him curiously. Especially Ian.

Fucking hell. Okay.

"Carino, you left this with us when you went home. But we all know your naranja corazón de cristal belongs with you and your almas gemelas. When L and I bought this for you, you were a broken man. You believed love was not for you. I told you to keep this heart until yours was whole again. You told me it never would be. Now look at you! I wanted you to have it back, now that you have your diablo rojo again. Your heart is whole, carino. And we are so happy for you. Te amos, Javier and Lauren."

He looked up from the letter and saw all eyes on him. His own eyes were stinging with tears he refused to shed, and he shook his head a little at the questioning glances. He tucked the letter back into the box and picked up the glass heart.

"What does all that mean, Mick?" Mandy asked. She really could be dense sometimes.

Mickey sighed, glancing toward Jack, the only person besides Javier and Lauren that knew the story. His friend gave him a small nod, and Mickey took a deep breath before speaking, trying to settle himself.

"When I first got to Mexico, I was a mess. I didn't meet Lauren and Javier for a while. I was just wandering around the beach towns, stealing to survive and getting black out drunk. When I ended up hooking up with them and moving into the beach house, I was still a total shit show. L and Javi went to some outdoor flea market one day, came back with this hand blown glass heart. I guess they are common down there. Everyone has them, hanging from windows and porch rafters. I was like 'what the fuck do I need this stupid shit for?' but they were having none of it." Mickey chuckled wetly.
"They said all that shmopy shit about my broken heart, but it helped, knowing someone cared. That I wasn't alone. This heart was a reminder of that. That I had them." Mickey didn't dare look at Ian right now, being able to picture the stricken look on his face perfectly without having to see. "And that even though I was all fucked up back then, that I was worthy of love, and someday I'd see that and be open to letting someone in again." he did look at Ian then, his boyfriend twisting his hands in his lap, a single silent tear rolling down his face. "Who woulda thought it would be the same asshole that opened me up to the idea in the first place?" he said softly, reaching over to pull one of Ian's hands into his lap. He slid the small orange heart into Ian's big hand, closing his fingers around it. "This is your heart, Ian. That was the idea. Javier told me I still had it, even if neither of us knew it. That's why it's orange." Mickey chuckled again at Javier's odd sense of humor. "Understand? Even back then, after shit got all fucked up between us, it was always you. It's always been you."

"Fucking hell, Mick." Ian sighed, squeezing his fingers around the glass heart and pulling Mickey to him. He wrapped his arms around him in a hug so tight it stole all his air.

"I love you too. You know that." he whispered into his neck. "Fuck, I love you so much."

"Jesus." Jack sighed from his spot on the floor. "Is it the eggnog, or was that the most romantic shit you've ever seen?"

"No shit." Rowan said, leaning his head on Jack's shoulder. "It's like a gay romance novel."

"Fuck off, you two." Mickey barked, turning his head to pin them with a glare, much to everyone's delight.

Mandy and Macy handed out three boxes, wrapped in pink sparkly paper to the three boys. Rowan looked on, curious as the men tore into their gifts.

"Seriously, Mandy?" Mickey sighed, irritated.

"What?" Mandy asked, feigning innocence while all three men held up their matching purple butt plugs.

"What is this about?" Ian asked, chuckling despite the death glare his boyfriend was shooting him.

"We just figured we'd keep it simple." Mandy smiled evilly. "Get all the fags in our life matching sex toys."

"Like friendship dildos?" Jack giggled.

"Exactly." Macy said, trying to keep her own laughter in check.

"What's the point of that?" Mickey asked irritably.

"It's funny, that's the point." Mandy barked, sipping her eggnog. "Don't act like you're not going to use it, any of you." she said, giving each man a pointed look.

"She's got a point, Mick." Jack laughed, eyeing his new toy with interest, causing Mickey to scoff.

"Yeah, but every time you whip that shit out, aren't we all gonna be thinking about each other? Is that not weird to anyone else?" Mickey tried.

"I'm pretty sure it's just you, Mick." Ian smiled, tucking his toy next to Mickey's on the couch.

Mickey sighed, clearly in the minority.
"You next, Mick." Mandy said, taking in her brother's grumpy scowl.

Ian handed Mickey his gift, a small smile ghosting his lips, a little glint in his eye.

"Ian, what did you do?" Mickey asked, ripping open the first box. It was small, and Mickey was clueless as to what it could be.

He tossed the wrapping toward Jack, the lump of paper hitting him square in the forehead. Jack grabbed it up with a scathing glare and tossed it in the bag. Inside was a rectangular jewelry box. Mickey eyed Ian curiously, popping open the box to reveal a silver rope chain. Mickey's eyes widened, going from the chain to Ian and back again.

"Ian..." Mickey started.

"I know I owe you one, since my family got yours stolen at gunpoint." Ian said, taking the box from Mickey's hands and grabbing up the chain. "You tried to do something nice, to help us keep our house, and you ended up getting robbed for it. I've always wanted to make that up to you. And now I can." he clasped the chain around Mickey's neck, running his hands over it and down his chest when it was in place. "I know the last one was gold, but you know how much I hate gold." he chuckled, taking in Mickey's stunned face.

"What is it, silver?" Rowan asked, getting up onto his knees to get a better look at the thick rope chain hanging around Mickey's neck.

"Nah." Ian smiled "I mean, it's still GOLD, but it's white gold. I just hate yellow gold. Fucking tacky."

"Is not." Mickey said, looking down at his new chain, running a single tattooed finger along the links. "But this is fucking beautiful."

"Goes better with your skin tone." Mandy piped in. "I never did like the yellow one either."

"Okay, okay, I get it. Shit was ugly and this is better." Mickey groused. He turned to Ian, his expression softening immediately. "Thanks, Gallagher, it's fuckin' awesome."

Ian gave him a shy smile in response, handing Mickey his next gift. Mickey was not used to getting any gifts for Christmas, so sitting there opening gifts while everyone sat watching him like hawks was a little jarring.

It was all still so new to him.

Mandy and Macy got him a new pair of Doc Martin boots, to which Rowan had asked if anyone wore them anymore, receiving a smack in the head from Jack and disapproving looks from the rest of the group.

"You are so young and naive." Jack laughed as Rowan rubbed his sore head.

"Asshole." Rowan replied sullenly.

"This is your last one, Mick. From Jack." Ian said, handing Mickey the small rectangular object, wrapped in Mickey Mouse wrapping paper.

"Seriously, dude?" Mickey sighed, pointing to the ridiculous paper.

"What?" Jack laughed. "He's wearing a Santa hat and everything. Looks just like you."
"Sure thing, asshole." Mickey muttered, ripping into the paper and once again tossing it at Jack's head.

It was a framed photo. One Mickey thought he'd never again.

"How'd you get this?" he asked, his eyes traveling from the picture back to his friend.

"Uh, I took it with me when I wrapped my bid. Rob gave it to me after his project was done." Jack said, smiling brightly.

"Well, lets see the fucking thing." Mandy said, leaning over a little to get a better view. There was Mickey, in his orange prison jump suit, his hair a little longer than usual, a tiny shadow of stubble along his jaw. He was more muscular than normal, hours in the prison yard filling out his chest and arms. He was seated at the small desk that jutted out of the wall in the cell he had shared with Jack. He was writing something. He had a bright smile on his face. Jack was in the background, leaning against the wall, giving Mickey a fond smile.

"What is it? When is this from?" Macy asked.

Mickey went to speak, but found his throat had closed up. He was hit with a wave of nostalgia. Which was odd. Never in a million years did he think he'd be nostalgic for jail. His friendship with Jack had done strange things to him.

Jack spoke when he realized Mickey wasn't going to explain the gift. "Okay, so. There was this kid, Rob, a college student. Photography major, who was doing his thesis or whatever on prison life. He came in and took photos all over the jail. He and I hit it off, so to speak." Jack chuckled.

"You mean you fucked him." Mickey supplied, eyes still on the picture.

"Irrelevant, Mick." Jack chided. "Anyway, he took a lot of pictures of me and Mickey. Said we were photogenic or whatever, and the lives of gay men in prison is an often under-told story, blah blah blah. Anyway, in this particular photo, Mickey is writing a letter to Ian. For his birthday. One he never sent, if memory serves." Jack looked over at Ian, who's eyes were fixed on the photo, a pained expression on his face. "I know it's not a good memory for everyone." Jack conceded, eyes flitting from Mickey to Ian. "But I like to think of it like this. Even when you weren't around, Ian, you were there. We talked about you so much, I feel I've know you for years. I like to think of this picture as the first of many of our photos all together. The three of us. Cuz you know you're not gettin rid of me now." Jack smiled, leaning over to pat Ian on the knee.

Mickey smiled at his friend. A watery, happy smile. "Fuck, Jack. I forgot all about this shit. I can't believe you kept it." Mickey ran a finger down the side of the frame.

"Course I kept it. Now it's yours."

"Thanks, man." Mickey said, leaning up on the couch to meet Jack halfway in a hug.

"You're welcome." Jack whispered into Mickey's shoulder.

Ian sat back against the couch cushions, as a wave of shocked sadness passed over him. He knew, deep down, that Mickey had never stopped thinking about him while he was locked up. Just like Ian never really stopped thinking about Mickey. But Ian had let him down, and Mickey had never given up. This photo was a bittersweet reminder that Mickey has always loved him.

Fuck.
"Okay, who's next?" Mandy asked, pulling Ian out of his guilty revelry. "Give Ian mine." Mickey said. He was unsure of the gift he'd bought him, but it was too late for indecisiveness now. Mandy picked up the small box, wrapped in black paper, because of course, and handed it to Ian. Ian looked over at Mickey before tearing into the paper and opening the box. It was a watch. A really nice all stainless steel Movado watch with a black face. It was fucking gorgeous. Ian looked over at Mickey, shock coloring his features. "Mick." he whispered. Mickey just shrugged, taking the watch out of it's box and grabbing Ian's wrist. He slipped the piece onto his wrist and closed the clasp. "I remember you having a pretty serious watch kink back in the day." Mickey said, not mentioning the fact that he'd be filled with white hot jealousy when Ian had come around sporting some gaudy watch on of his geriatric lovers had tried to buy him with. "It's good to have a watch too, help you keep on track with your meds and shit." he said, finally looking up into Ian's eyes. Ian's face was still a picture of shock, but adoration was slowly bleeding into his features. "Jesus, Mick. It's beautiful. Thank you. So much." Ian smiled brightly, pulling Mickey into a fierce kiss. Looks like Mickey did good. His body sagged with relief. Mickey smiled back before pushing Ian away playfully. "Yeah, yeah. You're welcome. "Okay, who's next?" Mandy asked, eyeing the remainder of the gifts.

"This one's for Jack, from me and Mick." Ian said, handing Jack a small box, wrapped in striped paper.

"You guys didn't have to do that." Jack said, ripping into the paper.

It was an Ipod.

"Holy fuck. Come on, Mickey. You did not have to do that." Jack said, turning the box one way and the other in his hands.

"I remember, you sold your other one. When you were, you know." Mickey muttered, looking at his friend through his lashes.


"Know how crazy you are about your whiny junkie music." Mickey laughed. "As long as you keep it to the tunes, and not the actual junk, I don't see a problem."

"Thanks guys, seriously." Jack said, his eyes a little glassy.

"You're welcome." Ian said, smiling.

"Alright guys." Mandy said, lifting her glass of eggnog. "Here's to us. Merry fucking Christmas, kids."

Everyone raised their glasses.

"Merry fucking Christmas." echoed through the apartment.

Mickey looked around, at the happy smiling faces of his friends and family, taken aback by how relaxed and at home he felt, surrounded by people that genuinely cared about him, and each other. He never thought he'd have something like this.

Merry Christmas, indeed.

-----------------------------------------------------
"Alright, you ready?" Ian asked, hand poised to knock on the door of his childhood home.

"You going to ask that shit every single time we come down here? I'm fucking ready, Ian. Christ, we're hanging out with your family, not storming the beaches at Normandy."

"I see you've been watching the history channel again." Ian chuckled, knocking on the front door.

"Fuck off." Mickey grumbled, shoving Ian.

The door swung open and there was Fiona. She looked harried, her face flushed and her hair a mess.

"Hey guys, Merry Christmas." she said, ushering them over the threshold and pulling Ian into a tight hug.

"Thanks for having us." Ian said, pulling back to take in his sister's face. "See you've started partying already." he laughed, taking in the glow of the alcohol in her cheeks.

"Well, yeah. It's the reason for the season." she laughed. She took their coats and hung them up over the banister of the stairs.

Ian walked past her and saw Carl and Lip sitting on the couch, engrossed in conversation. "Hey guys." he said, flopping down next to Carl. He watched as Mickey followed Fiona into the kitchen, after booze, certainly.

"Hey Ian." Carl smiled, going in for a one armed hug. "How's your holiday been so far?"

"Good. Just Mick and me and some friends at my apartment. Nothing too crazy." he smiled at the memory. His first Christmas with Mickey had been wonderful so far. So much more than he would have dared to hope for growing up.

He couldn't get over how perfect it all felt. How right. It felt like this was the way it was always meant to be. He had a pang of sadness for all the years lost, but he pushed it down, deciding to focus on the here and now.

Just then Mickey dropped down onto the couch next to Ian, squishing his body between Ian and the arm rest of the couch. "Shove over, faggots." he barked, handing Ian a beer and taking a long sip off his own.

"That's offensive." Lip said, leaning back on the other end of the couch to pull out a cigarette, sparking it up while giving Mickey the side eye.

"No, it's not. I'm a fag, I can say that shit. If you say it, then it's offensive." Mickey replied easily, picking his feet up to drop them in Ian's lap.

Ian laughed, running his hands up Mickey's ankle and up under the cuff of his jeans, massaging what skin he could reach with the tips of his fingers.

"Whatever." Lip said.

"Not drinking today?" Ian asked, looking over at his older brother, who had a can of coke in front of him on the table.

"Lip's back on the wagon." Fiona supplied, coming in from the kitchen with a plate of finger foods. She dropped it on the table before taking a seat in the chair with her own beer.
"Really?" Ian asked, surprised.

"Yeah." Lip said, his eyes moving from Ian to Mickey then back again. "Not too long ago, someone told me I needed to get my act together. To look in the mirror and own my shit before I started running my mouth about how other people choose to live. I guess that shit stuck."

Mickey coughed, eyes wide. He looked over at Ian, who looked equally shocked.

"I've been going to meetings and shit. Been sober for about a month." Lip said, eyes downcast.

"Lip, that's great." Ian said sincerely.

"Not that big a deal. A month is nothing." Lip said, still not looking up.

"More than you had a fucking month ago." Mickey said, surprising everyone. All heads whipped over to stare at him. "What? It's fucking true. If there's one thing I've learned being friends with addicts in recovery, it's that every single day is a victory. Own *that* shit, Phillip. Give yourself some fucking credit." Mickey said, smiling around his beer bottle as everyone openly gaped at him.

"Mickey being nice to Lip?" Carl laughed. "Christmas makes people crazy."

"Shut the fuck up, Carl." Fiona tsked. "It's nice." she said, sounding a little shocked herself.

"Where's Deb?" Ian asked, still absentmindedly rubbing circles on Mickey's ankle.

"She took Franny to see Derek's family." Fiona said. "Dunno why, those people are assholes."

Ian nodded, not sure what to say. Those people were Franny's family, just like they were.

"So, Ian, you gonna tell us or what?" Fiona said out of the blue, her eyes on the fake Christmas tree in the corner of the room.

"Tell you what?" Ian asked. He had one hand curled around a beer and the other having crept up Mickey's leg to rest on his thigh.

"Tell us you and your man there are exclusive now." Fiona said, her eyes still averted, but a smile playing at her lips. "Mickey's been here for the past three Gallagher holidays, but when I asked him last time he said you were still figuring it out. Seems pretty figured out to me." she finally looked over, her eyes trained on Ian's hand gripping Mickey's thigh.

"What the fuck, Fi?" Ian laughed as Mickey blushed next to him. "I gotta take out an add in the paper when I get a new boyfriend?"

"New-old boyfriend, really." Lip chuckled.

"Whatever." Ian said. "I just didn't wanna make a huge thing out of it. We've been together a while now. Just didn't seem like that big a deal." he said it, even though it was a lie. It was a huge deal, the biggest deal. But he wanted to make sure Mickey was comfortable before he told his family the whole truth.

The smitten look on Mickey's face as Ian shares the news is comforting. Confirmation that he wants the Gallaghers to know too. That's he's happy too. That he's proud to be Ian's, like Ian is proud to be his.

Fiona nods, not bothering to say anything else, a satisfied smirk on her face.
They sit around the Gallagher living room for a few hours, talking and drinking. Kev and Vee swung by for a while, the music turned up and the dancing beginning before tapering off again. They didn't stay long, having to get the girls home after a long day. Fiona had decided to go out for drinks with some girlfriends she met through work, leaving the boys on their own after peppering them all with tender kisses and Christmas wishes.

Toward the end of the night, Mickey was feeling pretty damn good. He had a pleasant buzz going, feeling warm and fuzzy in his little bubble with Ian. Carl was in the kitchen getting some Jiffy Pop ready for the movie they were about to watch.

"Hey, Mickey?" Lip said, standing up off the couch. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

Mickey looked up at Lip, not moving to stand yet. "What? You can't talk right here?" What is with the Gallaghers and their private conversations? He had been subjected to more serious Gallagher discussions in the past few months than any one man should be expected to endure.

"I just wanna talk to you alone for a second. Please." Lip said it so sincerely that Ian looked over from the TV.

"You okay?" Ian asked, going to stand too, but stopped when Lip put his hand up, halting him. "Everything fine, Ian. Just wanna talk to your man. Is that allowed?" Lip teased, but Ian could see something underneath it. So he just nodded, settling back into the cushions.

"Sure, but don't be too long, the movie's gonna start soon."

Lip nodded, motioning for Mickey to follow him out the back door and onto the steps.

Once outside with the door shut behind them, Mickey pulled out a cigarette and lit it, leaning against the railing.

"What gives, Phillip? I could be inside making out with your brother right now." Mickey said, eyebrows raised.

"Oh come on with the gross shit." Lip said, making a face.

"Fuck off, you child." Mickey snapped. "What do you want?"

"Shit." Lip sighed, dropping down on the step and resting his head in his hands, pulling his hair in frustration. He didn't look up when he started talking, just kept his eyes fixed on the steps.

"You know how I said I'm back in AA?" he asked, voice quiet enough to have Mickey straining to hear him. He took a few steps forward and dropped down on the steps next to Lip.

"Since when?" Mickey asked, even though he knew the answer.

"Since that fucking game night from hell." Lip said lowly. "And I wanted to tell you that I'm sorry, Mickey. Honestly sorry. Not some bullshit AA making amends shit. I'm just talking to you, one guy to another. The shit I said at your house was fucked up. And none of it was true. You're not a bad guy, Mickey. I remember, when Ian first got sick, you were there for him. That shit didn't scare you off. If anything, you went harder for him. I never should have said that shit about you not deserving him. And your sister, shit, that was fucking stupid of me. I guess I don't have to tell you why I did it." Lip sighed, finally looking over at Mickey, who was sitting on the step, knees up, arms wrapped around his kneecaps.

"Ian said you were jealous. Cuz your life was falling apart. Cuz you had a chance to do something
real with your life, and you think you blew it. So you lashed out at me and Mands, cuz we got out of
our own shit and are making a good life for ourselves."

"Shit." Lip laughed. "Yeah, pretty much."

"I mean, it was pretty obvious, right, Phillip? Don't gotta be a psychic or a shrink to figure out that
shit. But I gotta tell you, that was pretty fucking low of you to do. Especially to Mandy. She really
cares about Macy, and you tried to ruin that for her. Me and Ian, I'm not worried about that shit. If
we got this far, we can weather anything you fucking Gallaghers try to throw at us, but she don't
know you like I do. Macy was really fucked up over the shit you said. Lucky for Mandy and your
sorry ass, she's a good girl who was willing to talk it through. Cuz if you had destroyed the one good
relationship my sister's ever had over some petty shit from the past, I would have fucking ended
you." Mickey said, locking eyes with Lip. "She deserves to be happy. More than me, and more than
you. You know what she's been through. So play nice from now on, or stay the fuck away from her.
We clear?"

"Yeah, Mickey. We're clear. You're right, and again, I'm sorry. I'd blame it on being drunk, but we
both know that's a stupid fucking excuse. Are we cool?"

Mickey clicked his tongue, turning away from Lip to look out over the barren yard. "Not really. But
we could maybe get there some day."

"Fair enough." Lip nodded, going to stand. "Let's get back inside before my brother sends a fucking
search party."

Mickey huffed out a laugh, going to follow Lip into the house.

Mickey making peace with Lip would be a Christmas gift Ian hadn't been expecting, that's for sure.

-------------------------------------------------------------

Ian pushed his way into the dark apartment, flipping on the switch by the door and bathing the living
area in the soft yellow glow of the overhead lamps.

"Jesus. I think we drank too much." Ian said, holding himself up against the wall while he tried to
kick his sneakers off without having to bend over.

Mickey didn't say anything, just followed behind Ian, untying his new boots and tossing them to the
side before taking his coat off, hanging it up in the closet. He then made his way over to the fridge
and grabbed a beer, his phone in his other hand, his gaze fixed on the device as he walked over to
the couch and dropped down onto it gracelessly.

"No such thing as drinking too much." Mickey said absently, eyes still on his phone.

"Tell them I said Merry Christmas." Ian said, grabbing his own beer and his bed time meds from a
the small case he kept on the counter, before dropping down on the couch next to Mickey. He laid
his head back against the cushions, and threw one of his legs over Mickey's lap. "How come we
don't just facetime them, like usual?" Ian took his meds with a mouthful of beer before grabbing both
bottles and putting them on the coffee table. He's not supposed to take his meds with beer, but
one time won't fucking hurt.
Mickey was texting with Javier, had been the whole way back to the apartment.

"They are at Javier's parents house. Not enough service for video chat down by the ocean. I'm barely getting any of these texts. Taking forever." Mickey said, annoyed.

"At least you got to say hi." Ian said, running a hand up and down Mickey's thigh. "Thanking them for the gift?"

"Yeah." Mickey sighed. "Just would be nice to see their faces. They said thanks for the bar set. They are doing shots in our honor as we speak." he chuckled. Ian could hear the anguish inflected in his voice, though.

"You miss them." he said a little sad.

"Fucking right I do." Mickey replied. He typed out a few more words and put the phone down on the coffee table. "They said Merry Christmas, Diablo Rojo." Mickey said, smiling as he hooked Ian around the middle and tossed him down onto his back on the couch, settling on top of him easily.

"Again with the red devil shit?" Ian laughed, squirming a little under the heavy pressure of Mickey on top of him.

"You will always be the red devil to them, Ian. Think of it as a term of endearment." Mickey said on a sigh, slightly rolling his hips as he felt Ian start to harden under him.

"I think you owe me my last Christmas present." Mickey added, grinding his crotch down against Ian's, causing the other man to hiss through his teeth, bucking up into the sensation.

Mickey grinned down at Ian, his eyes alight with lust. "C'mon tough guy, show me whatcha got."

Ian surged up, lips crashing into Mickey's, catching the other man off guard. Mickey kissed back once he got his bearings, opening up easily and letting Ian push his tongue into his mouth.

What he did not expect was for Ian to hoist him up, grabbing him underneath his ass and lifting him off the couch. He stood up like Mickey weighed nothing, carrying him toward the bedroom with long strides.

"Come the fuck on, Ian. We already talked about this shit. Put me down." Mickey giggled, fucking giggled, burying his blushing face in Ian's neck. Regardless of his protests, he wrapped his legs around Ian's waist and held on, just like he always did. No use getting dropped on his ass.

Ian kicked his bedroom door open, walking across the room and dropping Mickey down on the bed with a laugh. Mickey didn't miss a beat, pulling his sweater and his shirt over his head and tossing it off the end of the bed, laying back to get to his belt. By the time he was naked and spread out on the sheets, Ian was just kicking off his boxers, kneeling on the end of the bed, stroking his hard cock. He just watched Mickey for a moment, breathing hard, eyes hungry.

"C'mere." Mickey said, reaching for Ian. Ian crawled over to him, kissing up his leg along the way. He laid a sweet, lingering kiss to the inside of his calf before continuing upward, licking around his knee cap, making Mickey twitch at the ticklish sensation. He sucked a mark into his hip, running his hand along his chest and stomach.

Mickey sighed, his head tilting back into the pillows. He sucked in a harsh breath as Ian bit the skin right next to the base of his dick. "Fuck." he grunted.

Ian chuckled, his breath stirring the small hairs on the inside of Mickey's thigh. He kissed and licked
his way across Mickey's abdomen, bypassing his leaking cock to nip at his other hip bone.

"Gonna be a tease tonight, huh?" Mickey chuckled breathlessly.

"Wanna take my time with you. Show you how much you turn me on." Ian breathed, running his tongue along Mickey's stomach. "You wanna try that purple thing we got today?" he asked, smile evident in his voice.

"Fuck no. I think it's gonna take me a while to warm up to the idea of using a sex toy my fucking sister bought me. That's weird, right?" Mickey asked, his voice breaking at the end as Ian wrapped a hand around him.

"It's only weird if you make it so. A toy is a toy, doesn't matter where we get it. Not like we have to think of Mandy when we use it." Ian said, jerking Mickey's cock while lapping at the swollen head.

"Can we not talk about Mandy at all right now. Shit's a boner killer." Mickey asked, his voice breaking as Ian wrapped a hand around him.

Ian chuckled at Mickey's words, but soon got down to business. He sucked him off for a few minutes, alternating between slow and steady and fast and brutal. Mickey was a babbling mess thirty seconds in, and by the time Ian pulled off to reach for the lube, he was totally gone.

"Want you so bad." Ian sighed, slicking up a few fingers and sliding them along Mickey hole.

"God." Mickey choked out, throwing his thighs out as wide as they would go. "Fucking do it then."

Ian prepped him quickly, but carefully. His fingers scissoring while he continued to suck him off. He pulled his dick into his mouth over and over, one hand wrapped around the base, the other stretching him open.


Ian pulled off and away, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand and slathering the left over lube on his hand all over his rigid dick. He crawled over Mickey's body, propping himself up on one elbow while he used his other hand to guide him home.

He slid into Mickey with little resistance, groaning once he bottomed out. Mickey hooked his legs around Ian's calves, his arms around his shoulders, holding him close.

"Fuck." Ian sighed. "Fucking perfect. You're perfect." He pushed into Mickey's pliant body, feeling him flex and shudder around him. "So good, Mick, Jesus." Ian sighed. He kept his thrusts slow, wanting to savor the moment.

"God, Ian, right there." Mickey moaned, kissing and licking along Ian's shoulder and neck. Anywhere he could reach to he pressed his lips, sink his teeth. He loved the taste of Ian. Fucking intoxicating. Mickey gets high on Ian, always has.

"Mick, Mick." Ian groaned, his hips thrusting. He started to pick up the pace as Mickey dragged his blunt nails down Ian's back, drawing a long hiss out of him.

"Oh god. Ian. So close, fucking touch me. Please." Mickey moaned, meeting each of Ian's thrusts with his hips.

Ian smiled, pumping his hips faster, reaching a hand up to grab Mickey's erection. It was slippery with precome and Mickey fucking keened when Ian finally took him in hand.
It didn’t take long after that, Mickey gurgling out Ian's name as he came all over his tight fist. His body tensing as he clenched around Ian inside of him.

As soon as Mickey had spilled between them, Ian uncurled his fingers from his spent cock and grabbed onto his hips with both hands, fucking into him feverishly until he went rigid, stilling on a particularly hard thrust.

"Oh Mick, fuck." Ian moaned, coming hard, buried balls deep in his lover. He collapsed on top of him, breathing heavy into his neck.

They laid like that for a few minutes, still wrapped up in each other, covered in sweat and come. The only sounds in the room was their mingled harsh breathing and soft Christmas music flowing from the upstairs apartment.

Finally Ian pushed up and pulled out, eliciting a groan from the man underneath him. He grabbed a t-shirt off the floor to wipe them both down, tossing it back down when he was done. He crawled back into bed as Mickey lit a cigarette, taking a few drags before passing it over to Ian with a sated smile.

They smoked silently, Ian laying on Mickey's chest, Mickey's arm around his shoulder, holding him close. Ian ran a hand along Mickey's tattoo, fiddling with the chain that now adorned his neck.

"This was my best Christmas ever, Mick." Ian whispered, nuzzling his face into Mickey sweaty chest.

"Yeah, me too, Gallagher. Me too." Mickey sighed, his fingers lazily running through Ian's damp hair.

Ian gripped Mickey chin with two fingers, tipping his head down to slot their lips together. Mickey tightened his grip on Ian's shoulder, sliding his tongue into his mouth. Ian groaned, kissing back. They kissed each other breathless, Mickey finally pulling away to switch off the bedside lamp, darkness settling over the room.

"You ever get a hold of Yev?" Ian asked into the darkness. He could feel Mickey tense next to him, and he waited patiently for an answer he wasn't sure he wanted.

"Nah." Mickey said after a beat. "I'm sure they were busy though. I'll try again tomorrow."

Even in the dark, Ian could tell Mickey was upset. But Ian wasn't going to push it tonight. They had had a good day, and Ian was intent on keeping it that way.

"Okay. Maybe we could skype him. You wanna do that?"

Ian felt Mickey exhale against his body, his whole being relaxing again. "Yeah, sounds good." he mumbled, laying a tender kiss to Ian's hair. "Go to sleep." he whispered, his breath fanning across Ian's bare skin.

"Okay. G'night Mick. I love you. Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas, Ian. I love you too..."

Ian falls asleep almost instantly, his night time meds knocking him out as usual. But Mickey stayed up for a while, listening to Ian breathe and running his fingers up and down Ian's bare shoulder, smiling to himself every time the other man shuddered or sighed.
Mickey’s not a holiday person. He could take or leave the parties and the presents. But this shit right here, having Ian safe and happy in his bed, in his fucking arms, yeah, that was a gift indeed.

If this was what Christmas was like, Mickey could get used to it.

Chapter End Notes


naranja corazón de cristal - orange glass heart

almas gemelas - twin soul/ soulmate
the gang gets together for new years, and a little bit of chaos ensues.

Ian was kind of regretting his decision to stop by the house. It was only 7:30, but everyone in the house was buzzed already, Debbie aside. He had other things he needed to do that night, but he had promised his sister he'd stop by, so there he was, standing against the wall, nursing a beer, watching his older sister and brother have a little showdown in the living room. They are not arguing, not really, but Ian can feel the underlying tension all the way across the room.

"Lip, you promised you wouldn't do this tonight." Fiona said, her face twisted in a grimace as she attempted to control her temper.

"It's one fucking beer, Fiona, on New Years. Get off my back." Lip shot back, guzzling said beer, glaring at his sister the whole time.

"She's just trying to help." Debbie says, from her spot on the couch. She has Franny in her lap, balancing a plate of cut up veggies on her knee, her daughter grabbing up a cucumber slice and shoving it into her mouth.

"Nah, Debs, she's just trying to micromanage my shit." Lip spat. "I'm completely capable of taking care of myself."

"Are you, though?" Fiona asks, her voice low as she takes two steps to get up in Lip's face. "Cuz I remember not even two months ago you came home from god knows where, face all busted up to shit. You are out of control."

Ian chuckles at that, can't really help it. Fiona and Lip both turn to stare at him, twin looks of irritated disbelief on their faces.

"What is funny about that?" Fiona asks, taking a single step toward Ian.

"Was that game night, Lip?" Ian asks, eyebrows raised. The guilty look that washes over his brother's face is all the confirmation Ian needs.
"Game night?" Fiona asks, profoundly confused by this point.

"Yeah," Ian shrugs, walking around the couch to stand behind his little sister, who also looks perplexed.

Carl, for his part, looks totally disinterested in the whole fiasco, sipping his beer and watching the New Years Eve coverage on one of the network channels. It's still early, no one else is there except for the siblings. Ian doesn't intend to stay for the actual party. He's still kinda wishing he'd skipped the pre-gaming too.

Hanging out with his family had become more of a chore than anything, with Lip being the way he is these days.

And that's a fucking shame, because Ian loves his family, and he misses them. But this constant arguing and anger is not good for him. They all know that. But it's like they can't fucking help it. The chaos is in their DNA, after all.

"Game night." Ian repeats, pointedly ignoring his brother now in favor of explaining the situation to his sister. "Lip came over to Mickey's house for game night. We do it every couple of weeks." he expected the shocked expression on Fiona's face, doesn't even pause to explain it. That's not the point of this story. "Lip got shitfaced, insulted Mick and Mandy, pretty bad. Ran his mouth about shit that's none of his fucking business. Tried to break up Mandy and her girl, said some shit to Mick that made me wanna kill him. Mick laid him out, rightfully so. And I'm laughing about it now, because I thought he might actually have taken that shit to heart, and would have tried to get his shit together. It's funny, cuz I'm a stupid fucking idiot, apparently. Because this prick doesn't give a fuck about anyone but himself." Ian motions toward his older brother with his chin, his voice dripping with disdain.

"Ian, man." Lip starts, walking toward him, but Ian takes a step back. A single step, but it halts Lip's forward motion.

Lip has been Ian's best friend for as long as Ian's been alive. It was the two of them against the world since Ian even knew what the world was. Ian's had his back and Lip's had Ian's. They fought for an against each other countless times. But ever since Lip had started down this dark path of alcoholism, Ian feels like he doesn't even know his brother anymore.

Ian wonders if this is how Lip felt when Ian first got diagnosed as bipolar. When he was lost to his family and unreachable. When no one could help him or talk any sense into him. He knows now, how helpless and hopeless it is, to watch someone you love morph into someone you don't know. Someone you don't trust. A fucking stranger.

It's scary.

Fiona turns to look at Lip then, arms crossed over her chest. Ian has a fleeting thought, that he's glad Liam's not here to see this shit. Spending the night at some rich friend's house. He's seen enough bullshit in his young life. Watching his siblings tear each other apart is something the kid can do without.

"You did all that?" Fiona asked, sounding like she already knows the answer.

Lip's shameful nod is all she gets in response.

"Good for Mickey." Fiona says, and both brother's heads whip around to stare at her. Lip looks shocked, and a little hurt. Ian knows his face is full of grateful pride.
"From the sound of it, you fucking deserved it. And I'm honestly surprised you could even walk yourself home after that. Mickey must've been holding back for you benefit, Ian." his sister is openly smirking at him now. He face turns hard when she turns back to Lip. "Cuz I know if he was allowed to, he probably woulda put you in the hospital."

Ian can't help it, he's openly smiling now. Fiona taking up for Mickey is something Ian never thought he'd see. And even though he knows Mickey was in the right, Ian had always just assumed his siblings would always pick each other over Mickey, right or wrong.

Either Fiona's opinion of Mickey really has changed that much, or she's just so sick of Lip's shit, that anyone standing up to him is good in her book.

Ian thinks it's pretty awesome, no matter the reason.

"I don't need this shit." Lip says, running a hand through his messy hair. It's in that instant that Ian notices how unkempt his older brother looks. His hair is dirty, his skin look waxy and sallow. he's got fresh bruises on his knuckles, and one under his left eye. His clothes are dirty, and his jeans are ripped at the knees.

Either he's been on a bender, or he had been in some kind of scuffle. It could be either one at this point.

Before anyone can say anything else, Lip huffs and turns on his heels, flying out the door and down the stairs, into the cold winter night to do god knows what.

"I'm sorry about that." Fiona says once she's shut the front door again. She takes two steps so she's standing right next to Ian, putting her hand on his elbow. "He's been getting worse, I think. I don't know what to do."

"Can't do nothing." Carl says, not bothering to look away from the TV. "You know it just as well as the rest of us. The prick's gotta do it on his own."

Fiona sighs, resting her head on Ian's shoulder. "Still." she says, barely above a whisper. "Feel like I should do something. Fix it somehow."

Ian puts his arm around Fiona's shoulder, pulling her close. "You did good. It's just genetics. He's a drunk, I'm a bipolar queer, as Frank would say." his words draw a smattering of chuckles from his siblings. "It is what it is. It's on him to fix it, not you, Fi."

Fiona nods, but doesn't say anything for a while. They stay like that for a long time, The four of them in the living room. They talk about everything and nothing. Frannie's school, Carl's maybe girlfriend, problem's Fiona's having at her building, some things Mickey could help her with maybe.

An hour goes by, and when Kev and Vee finally show up, Ian decides it's time for him to go. He's got another party to attend tonight.

Saying his goodbyes always takes forever. Everyone wants a hug, everyone wants to tell him 'just one more thing', and by the time his coat is on and Fiona is seeing him to the door, it's forty minutes later than he wanted to leave.

"Ian, again, I'm sorry about that shit with Lip." she says, wrapping herself up tighter in the long sweater she's wearing.

"Fi, come on, that's not on you." Ian sighs, because it's really not, and he's tired of talking about it.
Fiona nods, pulling him into a tight hug. When she's got him pinned between her body and the front door, she pushes up on her tip toes to whisper into his ear.

"Don't let him shit all over your happiness just because he's bitter right now. I don't know what he said about you and Mickey, but don't believe a word of it. I know Lip's word has always been gospel to you, Ian. But he's always had something against Mickey. We all did, but not anymore. I don't wanna see you fuck up something good because of some poison Lip's trying to feed you."

Ian is so shocked by the words that he pulls back to look into his sister's eyes. Fiona looks sincere and determined.

"I'm serious, Ian. Do what makes you happy, with whoever makes you happy. That's the only thing that matters. Mickey still make you happy?"

Ian nods, because he can't find words right now.

"Good. That's all I ever wanted for you. And I know that's what Lip wants for you too, when he's not being a self destructive asshole. Don't let him get to you, okay? And don't let Mickey kill him.” she adds on the last part with a smile and Ian finds himself smiling back.

"Okay then. Happy New Year." she said, with one final hug she pushes him out the door and closes it in his face.

Ian is left standing on the stoop for an inordinate amount of time, confused as to what just happened.

Fiona being supportive of his relationship with Mickey, being supportive of his love for Mickey, was something Ian never thought he'd get. Never even bothered to hope for, since it seemed like such an absurdity.

Hearing her say those things just then had settled a calm happiness over Ian's whole being.

Something has changed between Fiona and Mickey, and Ian is fucking glad for it.  He's loved and supported, by his boyfriend and his family (most of them, anyway) His two distinct worlds: family and Mickey, may have a chance to meld, after all.

It's a new year, indeed.

------------------------------------------------------

It takes Ian almost an hour to get home on the L. The train is packed with drunk revelers, and the train stays at each stop twice as long as it usually would. Ian doesn't know why. He just stands against the back wall, his headphones in, ignoring the chaos around him in favor of making it home without getting himself into a fist fight. He counts it as a win that he doesn't take a single swing. Even when some drunk asshole cups his balls and then tries to 'no homo' him. Fucking asshole.

Ian extricates himself from the packed train and makes the quick walk back to his apartment. He walks down the silent streets, taking comfort in the fact that there is not a single soul on the entire block. After that train ride, he needs a few minutes to himself.

He walks down the frozen streets, taking a minute to notice how different Boystown is different from the south side. There are no homeless people huddling in store fronts, no drunks passed out on the bus stop benches. No crack pipes or used needles in the gutters. No chewed up chicken bones on the sidewalk. It truly was another world up here, and it confounded Ian that it was only a train ride away.
A whole other world, two stops away on the L.

He unlocked his front door and made his way up the stairs. He didn't hear the music until he got to his actual floor. He made his way to his door, smiling to himself. His people were in a mood today.

"Ian!!" Macy screeched, running to the door and jumping on Ian. He's not even fully inside when she wraps her tattooed thighs around his body. He stumbles a little, under the unexpected weight, but he puts a hand under her ass, feeling a little too much of Mandy's girlfriend for his liking. He pushes his way inside and closes the door with his ass. Macy is not letting go. He legs are still wrapped around him and she's still giggling.

"We got something for you." Macy mutters against Ian's neck, and he's not sure what she means, but he wants to find out. He pries her off his body and places her gently on the floor. She beams at him, bouncing off without another word and falling into Mandy's lap on the couch.

Before Ian can even get his coat off, Jack is in his face. He's not really surprised to see Jack at the apartment. He had heard from Mickey that Jack and Rowan got a pass for New Years, so he pretty much expected the kid to show up tonight.

"Hey Ian." Jack smiles warmly, pulling Ian to his chest. He's wearing hardly any clothes, a wife beater and board shorts, but Ian doesn't think too much about it. It's warm in the apartment. "Happy New Year." Jack breathes against his neck. Ian can't help but wonder why everyone is so touchy-feely tonight.

Maybe he's just on edge because of all that shit that went down at his family's house earlier.

He believes that for all of two minutes, until he makes it to the kitchen. Mickey is standing there, in front of the open fridge. When he hears everyone clamoring for Ian, he turns. "Ian.." he breathes, taking two steps to get into Ian's space and crushing himself against his body. "Fucking missed you." he mutters, his face plastered to Ian's chest.

Ian wraps his arms around Mickey on instinct, looking around the apartment for some kind of clue as to what the fuck is going on.

Jack wanders into the kitchen with a small smile on his face. He had something in his hand, but Ian couldn't see. "You wanna play tonight?" he asks, a mischievous glint in his eyes.

Ian stares at him for a minute, then lets his eyes fall to Mickey, who is still tucked against his chest.

"Mick, are you guys on something?" he asks, pulling away enough to get a good look at his boyfriend.

Mickey looks up at him, a wide, happy smile on his face. His skin is flushed pink, and his pupils are dilated so wide, there is hardly any blue left at all. Mickey runs his hand down the back of Ian's neck, squeezing gently. "Maybe." he says, giggling a little bit before tucking his face back into Ian's chest.

Jack laughs a little, revealing a small plastic bag he has wrapped in his palm. Ian knows what's inside immediately, flashbacks of his club days race through his mind.

"Is that fucking molly?" he hears himself ask, hand going for the bag without much thought. Before Jack can respond, Rowan is bounding into the kitchen. He's sweaty and his hair is a mess on his head, sticking up in all directions. He's also shirtless. Ian has never see Rowan without a shirt on. Jack had said in the past that he was self conscious about the scars from his top surgery. That didn't seem to be the case at the moment, however.
"It's pure." Rowan beams, motioning toward the baggie in Jack's hand with his head. "Got it from a friend of mine who used to do Dead tour."

"Like the Grateful Dead?" Ian wonders, his eyes traveling from Rowan's flushed face to the baggie in Jack's hand and back again.

"Uh huh." Rowan giggles. "He knows the chemist. This is the purest shit you'll ever see. No additives. No coke, no heroin, no fucking meth. Just MDMA, pure and simple. It's so fucking clean, and no come down."

Ian looks at the baggie again, nervous. Any drug is bad for him, with his bipolar disorder. He knows that. He's been doing so good. No real slips in a long time.

But looking around the apartment, seeing everyone feeling so fucking good, he can already feel himself slipping into that 'fuck it' mindset.

"Rowan promised me it won't fuck with your bipolar." Mickey says, still crushed against Ian's chest. He says it like he's reading Ian's mind. Maybe he is. "It's a shorter trip than regular E, and it's less intense. You won't feel like shit tomorrow, and as long as we take some 5-htp after, it should be like it never happened." he clutches Ian closer to him, running a hand up and down his side. "But if ya don't wanna, we got beer and weed and fucking champagne." Mickey pulls back and looks into Ian's shocked eyes. "Whatever you want, babe." Mickey smiles, cupping the back of Ian's head to pull him down for a kiss. "Anything you want. Always." he muttered against his lips.

Ian is fucking flabbergasted. Mickey must be super fucked up to call him babe in front of all these people. In that moment, he is struck with the overwhelming desire to get on Mickey's level. To feel these things with him, while it's happening.

He's never been smart. He's never had a real prominent self-preservation instinct. He had always had a 'right now' kind of mind. And right now, he wanted to be fucked up with everyone else.

So he let go of Mickey and stepped up to Jack, who was standing at the island, the small baggie still in his hand.

"How do I? Snort?" Ian started, but Jack put a gentle hand on his wrist. "Just lick your finger, stick it in the bag, and then lick it. It's that simple." Jack gave him a warm smile, which Ian returned without knowing. He looked over at Mickey, who was still so close to him. Mickey didn't nod or make any kind of indication that he wanted Ian to do it. He just watched, his hands hovering around Ian's hips, like he was just waiting to get his hands on him again.

Ian stuck his finger in his mouth, swirling his tongue around it a few times before dipping it into the bag. He coated his finger with the irridecent white powder, then brought it to his mouth. Jack and Mickey both watched, enraptured apparently, as he licked his finger clean.

It tasted bitter. Like crushed ibuprofen. He made a face as the substance dissolved on his tongue.

"Again." Jack said, eyes bright. "One more time should be good to get you where you wanna be." he was smiling so big, Ian thought his face must be hurting. He followed his instructions nonetheless, dipping his finger back into the bag and taking another dose.

Jack nodded, closing up the baggie and stuffing it back into his pocket.

"Now we wait." Jack mumbled, almost to himself. "Get a beer, lets go dance." and he was off, bouncing toward the living room, swaying his hips to the music along the way.
Ian's not sure if he did the right thing, but it's too late now. He can feel that anticipation burning in his gut. That same nervous energy any time he takes a drug. Waiting for it to kick in, wondering what it's going to be like. Excited. Nervous.

Those feelings only intensify when Ian looks over at Mickey. He's fucking wasted already, Ian can tell. His pupils are dilated so wide now, there is no blue left at all. There is a thin sheen of sweat on his exposed skin. The wife beater he's wearing is sticking to his torso. He looks fucking hot. And happy. So damn happy, Ian can't help but smile.

Okay, this is going to be interesting.

---------------------------------------------------------------

At first, he didn't even feel fucked up. Mickey had done E a million times, molly less times, but still enough to know what he was getting into. He had been wary of doing it with Ian. He knew this kind of shit could fuck up his bipolar. But Jack had always been good at convincing Mickey to do shit he was unsure of, and once the drug was in his face, it was almost impossible to say no.

It crept up on him. At first, he wasn't even sure the shit was real. But then, he found himself feeling loose, and warm. So fucking warm. Next thing he knows, his skin is tingling, just slightly, but enough to get him rubbing a hand up and down his stomach. A small smile blooms on his face as he watches his friends dancing with his sister in the living room. He's hit with a feeling of love so powerful, he knows then he's fucking high.

He loves these people so much, and he doesn't tell them that shit enough.

By the time Ian shows up, Mickey's neck deep in the shit, feelings of contentment and joy flowing through his veins just as much as the booze he's been steadily drinking. He just got off a video call with Lauren and Javier. They are celebrating at a huge beach party. Mickey wishes they were here. Or maybe he wishes he and everyone else was down there. He's not sure. He just wants everyone together for once. That would be fucking glorious.

It takes a while for Ian to catch up, having dosed about an hour after everyone else. Mickey can tell the exact moment it hits him. He's been watching Ian intently since he first got to the apartment. Can't tear his eyes away, if he's being honest.

And he wants to be honest. Especially with Ian.

Ian sighs, his head falling back onto the couch. Mickey watches his chest rise and fall before Ian's face tilts to lock eyes with him.

"Jesus, Mick." he giggles, a hand creeping up around his neck, pulling the muscle with his fingers. "This shit is good. Feels clean." Ian sighs again. "Fuck, what am I saying? Make no sense."

"Nah," Mickey says, scooting closer. Can't help it, he needs to be close to Ian right now. "It is cleaner. Jack said. I can feel it. No pounding heart, no sedated feeling. No grinding teeth. Just feels....good. Fucking perfect." he smiles, laying a hand on Ian's thigh. "Just like you."

Ian laughs at that, but Mickey takes no offense. It's funny. Mickey saying shit like that. But it doesn't make it any less true.
"I love you." Ian replies, pulling Mickey to his chest and wrapping his arms around him. "So fucking much it hurts. Always have. Always."

"Me too." Mickey mutters into Ian's chest. "Me fucking too." He closes the minuscule distance between their faces, their lips meeting in a kiss. It's slow and delicate, no real heat, just fucking love flowing from Mickey's mouth to Ian's.

Jesus, he's fucking wasted.

They separate when they hear screaming. Mickey looks up to see his sister and her girlfriend hopping around with Jack, dancing.

"I love this song!" Macy exclaims, grabbing Mandy's hands and jumping up and down. Jack wanders over to his phone to turn up the volume, some techno shit filling the apartment.

They sit there for a while, in their own little bubble, watching the chaos unfold around them. Mandy and Macy are wearing hardly any clothes at all at this point, tiny little tank tops and boy shorts, hair a mess. They are grinding on each other, faces close, words whispered between them. Jack is still shirtless, his body swaying on it's own accord. His eyes were closed, head tipped back as he mouthed the words to a song Mickey's never heard before. Rowan is sitting against the wall, in his own little bubble, doodling on a pad of paper with crayons he must have brought with him. Mickey can't help the odd thought that pops into his head at the sight. He looks fucking adorable, sitting on the floor coloring like a kindergartner.

"Jack." Mickey calls, pulling his face away from Ian's searching lips. "Jack, c'mere." he pats the couch next to where him and Ian are wrapped up in each other. Mickey is pretty much sitting in Ian's lap, both his legs thrown over Ian's thighs, his arms around his neck.

Jack's head whips around at the sound of Mickey's voice, and he bounds over without a second thought. He drops down on the couch and immediately rests his body against Mickey's, the three of them falling into a cuddle puddle without any warning at all.

"Hey Mick." Jack whispers, his lips right next to Mickey's ear. His hand snakes around his waist, his fingers locking with Ian's around Mickey's middle. "How you guys doing?"

"Good." Ian breaths, nuzzling his face into Mickey's neck. "How about you?" he asks, turning his face to look at Jack. He looks fucking elated.

"Real good." Jack laughs.

They sit like that for a while, just holding each other, Mickey in the middle. He never in a million years figured this is how he'd end up one day. Surrounded by so much love. So cared for. So supported. Being open to such affection, physical or otherwise.

"Hey Mick, does this remind you of that night? When Javier was visiting?" Jack giggles, his grip on the two men tightening a little.

Even through the euphoric electricity roiling through Mickey's system, that comment gives him pause.

"You mean the threesome?" he asks without thinking.

That got Ian's attention.

"Huh?" Ian asks, going to sit up, but the bodies entwined around him kept him in place.
"Don't get jealous, Gallagher, that was forever ago. Besides, don't even pretend you never did that kind of shit." Mickey's not mad, he's pretty sure he'd be incapable of feeling that way right now. He thinks it's a little funny if he's being honest. "And no, Jack, this doesn't really remind me of that. Because I love you both, but that shit will never happen with Ian, and you know why."

The both feel Jack nodding, his face buried in Mickey's shoulder. "Cuz Ian's it for you, and you've loved him forever. Lucky fuckers." Jack doesn't sound jealous, just happy. Like Mickey being happy is enough to make him happy. "Though I gotta admit, I feel like I missed out on both fronts."

"What do you mean?" Ian asks, finally sitting up enough to make eye contact with Jack over Mickey's body. Mickey tilts his head into Ian's shoulder, making it easier for the two men to talk over him. Ian wants to know more about this threesome, but also really doesn't want to know. What difference would it make now?

"Because, silly. "Jack continues undeterred, but he's addressing Mickey, like Ian never spoke at all. "I'm sure sex with the ginger Adonis is mind blowing, and I've always loved you just a little bit too much." Jack reaches up and runs a hand through Mickey's hair. "Always loved you way too fucking much. Stupid of me, I guess. But we have a good thing going now, and I'd never fuck that up. So no more sex for us." he clapped his hand on a stunned Mickey's cheek before his eyes traveled to Ian. "And no sex ever between us. Pity, really. I'm sure you could really turn me out." he punctuates his little speech by leaning over Mickey's stunned face and pulling Ian into a kiss.

Ian is shocked at first, his blown eyes going even wider. He doesn't pull away, though. Not at the first press of their lips, and not when Jack slips his tongue into his mouth. Jack's the one who pulls away, leaving a dumbfounded Ian in his wake, still clutching a chuckling Mickey to his chest.

"Now you." Jack says, dipping his head down and planting one on Mickey's smiling face. Mickey kisses him back, cuz why the fuck not? After a moment or two of their tongues dancing outside their mouths, Mickey pushes him away with a hand on his chest.

"You're a slut, Jack." Mickey laughed, cuddling closer to a stunned Ian. "I'm gonna chalk this up to the drugs and we're all gonna let it go. But you're not getting a threesome outta us. I'm not that wasted."

Jack laughs, running his fingers through Mickey's hair one last time before standing. "Just told you, dummy. Don't want that. You guys are fucking endgame. Even if it was the best sex I ever had, can't fuck with that shit. Love you both too much." he smiled fondly at them before strutting over to Rowan and dropping down onto the floor with him, picking up a crayon and starting to draw like none of that shit had just happened at all.

"What the fuck?" Ian laughed, pulling Mickey closer to him.

"I have no idea." Mickey replied. "But he's right about one thing." Mickey pulled Ian's face to his with two fingers on his chin. "We are fucking endgame." and he kissed him. Hard and forceful, his tongue dipping into his mouth as he crawled over his lap and sat down, straddling him easily. "Just us."

"Just us." Ian agreed, smiling into the kiss, his hands on Mickey's hips.
The clock ticked closer to midnight and the group was now sitting on the floor, The Talking Heads playing from Jack's phone. They had been embroiled in deep conversation for the past hour and a half. Talking about everything. Growing up, families, pain and regret. Happiness and craziness, things they'd done, things they wanted to do. Things they wish they'd never done. It was one of those talks that only happens when you are so fucked up, you can't help but tell the truth. Mickey was sure they'd never speak of any of this shit ever again, once the sun came up.

"Oh, I love this song." Jack sighed, leaning further back into Rowan, who was sitting behind him, his arms wrapped around his waist.

"Heaven." Mickey muttered against Ian's neck. Their position mirrored, Jack and Rowan, except Mickey was the one holding Ian for once. All night, Ian had wanted to be held by Mickey. And even though it was the opposite of their usual dynamic, Mickey had to admit, he kinda loved it. Loved holding Ian.

Mandy stated humming, Macy singing quietly. Then before anyone knew what was happening, every person in the room was singing along.

Mickey tilted his head forward, running his tongue along Ian's neck, whispering in his ear.

"Heaven, heaven is a place, a place where nothing, nothing ever happens..." he mumbled. "When this kiss is over, it will start again. It will not be any different, it will be exactly the same. It's hard to imagine that nothing at all could be so exciting, could be this much fun." Ian tipped his head back and Mickey kissed him, smiling into his open mouth as their tongues pushed against each other. "That's heaven, Ian." Mickey sighed, a swell of euphoria flowing through his body. He twitched a little, pulling Ian closer without thinking. "Being here with you, doing nothing, just you and me, every day. That's heaven to me."

Ian tilted his head back and hit Mickey with a wide smile that lit up his whole face. "Me too, Mick, always."

"I'm so sorry, Ian." Mickey whispered all of the sudden. No one else was paying them any attention. Macy and Mandy were dancing near the kitchen, Jack and Rowan still coloring by the window. Mickey felt, for all intents and purposes, that they were alone.

"Sorry for what, Mick?" Ian's face fell, sensing the change in mood.

"For fucking everything." Mickey sighed. "Back when we were kids, I was such an asshole to you."

"Mick..." Ian breathed, pushing further into Mickey's arms, but Mickey cut him off, squeezing his middle to shut him up.

"No, Ian. Let me say this shit. I've wanted to apologize to you for fucking years, but I'm too chickenshit to do it most of the time. I was so fucking drunk, and you kept trying to get me to admit that I was gay, and I loved you. Remember?"
Yeah, Mick. I remember." Ian whispered, memories of that awful afternoon flooding his buzzing brain.

"I kicked you right in the fucking face." Mickey said, voice wracked with pain. "All because I was fucking scared. You were right, though, man. I am fucking gay, and I have loved you for so long, I can hardly remember not loving you. I'm sorry. So fucking sorry. You need to know that."

Ian tilted his head back, staring at Mickey upside down, his head on Mickey's shoulder.

"Mick, I forgave you for that shit a long time ago. And I know you've always loved me. You didn't have to say it. I wanted to hear it, sure. Cuz I was an insecure kid who needed validation, but I knew. And if we're gonna compare notes on how many times we fucked each other over, you know I could make a list too."

"Nah, Ian. Don't do that." Mickey whispered, nuzzling his face into the crook of Ian's neck. "We don't need to unbury those bodies."

"You too, then. Let the past lie, Mick. We're here now. And I'm so fucking happy." Ian sighed, his body shivering with little thrills of pleasure.

"Hey Mick, your phone's going off." Jack sang, hopping over with Mickey's phone in his hand.

"Thanks man." Mickey took the phone, his hand sliding over Jack's for a moment. The touch was electric. Mickey's whole body was tingling. He smiled at his friend, before looking at his phone.

It was a text from Svetlana.

Well, shit.

He hadn't heard from his ex-wife or his son since they moved. It had been a while, not even a word on Christmas. But here they were, texting him on the one night of the year he was high out of his mind on fucking drugs.

If it wasn't so sad, Mickey would be laughing.

As it were, he just looked at the phone, stuck.

Ian tilted his head at an angle, his eyes falling on the screen in Mickey's hand. "Oh shit." Ian whispered.

"Yeah, oh shit." Mickey replied, reading the simple text over and over.

Svet: Yev wishes to say hello to his Daddy-Mickey. Happy new year to our favorite rainbow boys. xoxo

Since when did Svetlana send hugs and kisses? Maybe she was wasted too.

"You gonna text them back?" Ian wondered out loud. Mickey looked down at him, then his eyes traveled around the room. All four other pairs of eyes were on him.

"Jack, did you read my text, then tell everyone here who it was?" Mickey asked, already knowing the answer. Jack had no concept of fucking privacy.
"Maybe." Jack muttered, dipping around to hide behind a laughing Rowan.

"Text her back, Mick." Mandy said, still dancing with Macy to the music coming from the speakers. "Tell her we love her, and Yevvy. And we miss them. And we wanna see them. We should drive down there! Make a weekend out of it." Mandy gushed, twirling her girlfriend on the spot, smiling.

Mickey nodded, even though he knew as he was agreeing that it would never happen. Once the sun came up, all these plans would be dust. But he let his sister have her moment. She looked so happy, Mickey wasn't gonna take that from her.

Mickey stared at his phone for a moment longer, lost in feelings of love and loss so profound he shook a little bit.

Or it could be the drugs, who the fuck knows.

Mickey chuckled to himself, snuggling a little closer to Ian as he replied to the text.

Me: hey. happy new year. send my love to the little man. call me when he's got time to talk. miss the little punk. a lot.

He looked at the message for a moment, wondering if he'd said too much. He got a little away from himself when he was fucked up like this. But it's not like he didn't mean it, so fuck it. He'd let himself be brave for the night and deal with the ramifications at a later date.

He hit send and tossed the phone on the couch next to them. Still seated on the floor, Mickey stretched his legs out, feeling tendrils of electricity curl up his legs. He let out a shaky breath and Ian chuckled, pulling Mickey's arms tighter around him.

"I know, right?" Ian sighed, obviously feeling just as good.

"You're a good dad." Jack said out of nowhere, dropping his crayon onto the floor and giving Mickey his full attention.

"Fuck off." Mickey replied reflexively.

That got everyone's attention.

"You are, Mick. That kid fucking loves you. We all do." Mandy smiled, her head tilted on Macy's shoulder to peer over at her brother. She tapped her girlfriend on the hip and motioned toward the men on the floor with her head. The girls linked hands and skipped (fucking skipped) over to the boys, dropping down on the floor between both couples laying flat on their backs. "Right guys?" her head whipped around fast, eyeing everyone in the room, a blinding smile on her face. She got a round of enthusiastic agreement from everyone before turning back to Mickey. "Love you so much." she whispered, tilting to tip her head onto Ian's knee so she could stare up at her older brother. "Don't tell you that shit enough."

"Can, uh, can we not talk about the kid right now? I'm too fucked up. And it's kinda fucking up my buzz." Mickey fidgeted a little, not really upset, but feeling the seeds of something yucky being sowed in his gut. He didn't want to do this tonight. Not when everyone was having so much fun.

"Just wanted you to know. That kid fucking adores you. We all see it. Daddy-Mickey is the shit."
Jack smiled, crayon still poised over his paper.

"Hell yeah." Ian said, his voice sure and strong.

"Okay, okay. Thanks guys." Mickey replied, his insides warm. It never got old, being supported and cared about. Now that he knows what it feels like, he hopes to never have to go without it again.

He shakes his head to derail that train of thought. He doesn't want to fall down a self pity rabbit hole, not when he's feeling so fucking good.

"Guys!" Macy yelps, jumping to her feet. "It's seconds 'til midnight! Get up! Get the fuck up!" she's running toward the kitchen before anyone else is even standing. She comes barreling back in with a bottle of cheap champagne and some imitation crystal flutes. She pours and passes the drinks while everyone else finally gets to their feet. Mandy mutes the music and turns on the countdown. They have about thirty seconds, if the clock on the TV is correct.

Mickey is standing next to Ian, unable to stop touching him. He feels so good, his pale skin warm under the pads of Mickey's fingers. The cut of the muscles underneath. The way he flexes and twitches as Mickey's hands glide over his body.

"You're beautiful." Mickey whispers, and Ian's looking down at him with this blinding smile on his face. Mickey knows, realistically, that he's high as fuck. Rollin face, as his sister and her girlfriend keep saying. But he believes with his whole heart that Ian has never looked more fucking gorgeous than he does at that exact moment. Green eyes blown wide, skin glowing with a thin sheen of sweat, love and adoration radiating off him.

The kid is luminescent.

And Mickey fucking loves him.

As the clock ticks down, his friends start counting backwards, but Mickey can't tear his eyes away from Ian.

This is the first New Year he's ever spent like this. Not high, that has happened every year since he was eleven. No, this is the first year he's spent celebrating with people he genuinely loves. This is the first year he'll ring in with Ian. The most important person in his life. The person he loves the most. The person he never wants to be without, ever again.

It feels really big to him, standing there as time winds down. It feels like maybe this year can be the new start everyone's always babbling about.

Like this could really be the start of something better. A true, honest-to-god new beginning.

Maybe he was more fucked up then he thought. He smiled to himself as his friends continued their boisterous countdown.

Ian reached over and interlocked his fingers with Mickey's, turning to gaze into his eyes as the last seconds of the year ticked down.

Mandy and Macy were jumping up and down, Jack and Rowan were holding hands and spinning in a dizzying circle, but Ian and Mickey just stood there, eyes locked, smiling stupidly at each other.

"Five!" the girls screamed. "Four." Jack and Rowan spun faster, giggling while counting. "Three." Ian took a step closer, his chest rubbing against Mickey's, sending new shock waves of pleasure dancing across his skin. "Two." Ian reached up and cupped the back of Mickey's head, staring at him like he was the only thing in the universe. "ONE!!!!"
Then entire room erupted into chaos, but to Mickey, there was no one but Ian. He kept his eyes locked on his boyfriend, his body and brain overloaded with emotion. Unyielding love and overflowing adoration for the man in front of him. His whole being was throbbing with a passionate devotion for this man. He had never felt anything like it before. He could blame it on the drugs, but he would be fucking lying.

Ian was everything.

"Happy new year, Mick." Ian whispered, his face splitting into a blinding smile as he pulled Mickey to him with the hand still cradling his skull. Mickey fell into his arms, feeling like he'd been waiting to kiss Ian forever. Ian tipped his head down and captured Mickey's lips with his own. Mickey moaned into the kiss. If he wasn't so fucked up, he would have been mortified. But things being as they were, he just kissed back. He ran his tongue over Ian's, moving his mouth against his boyfriend's hungrily. Ian gasped, gripping Mickey's head tighter, his arm around his waist pulling them flush together. Ian pulled back first, his face flushed and glowing. He smiled down at Mickey, pupils dilated, goosebumps all up his neck where Mickey's fingers danced by his hairline.

"Happy new year, Ian." Mickey whispered against Ian's lips as he kissed him once more, unable to get enough of his redhead's beautiful mouth.

"Guys!" Jack bellowed, bounding over to them, his arms swinging wildly. "Happy new year!" he said, pulling Mickey away from Ian's embrace to wrap him in a hug of his own. He wrapped his thin arms around Mickey's body, pulling him close.

"Happy new year, kid." Mickey smiled. He was a little shocked when Jack pulled him in for another kiss. But it was a crazy fucking night already, so he let it happen.

"Gonna be a great year, Mick. Love you." he smiled brightly. "Love both of you." he added on, releasing his grip on Mickey to bring Ian in for a tight hug. "You're not getting off that easy. New year's kisses for everyone." Jack laughed, putting both hands on Ian's head and pulling the man down to his lips. The kiss was quicker than the last one, Jack releasing him almost immediately. "It's gonna be a great year." Jack laughed, releasing Ian to make a lap around the room bestowing new years kisses on everyone in the room.

Maybe it was gonna be a good year, after all.

--------------------------------------------------

It was close to 3 am by the time everyone started to come down. They had traded their copious amounts of water for a few beers, seated on the furniture instead of the floor. The music was still on, but it was much lower now. Jack sparked up a joint, passing around their small circle as the group sat in quite contemplation after a long night of excess.

"So, what's everyone's new years resolutions?" Rowan asked after a long silence.

Mickey took a long drag off the joint before stubbing the roach in the ashtray. It had made it around their small circle about a half dozen times, but Mickey was too wasted to fuck with the roach.

"Resolution?" Macy asked, her head lolling around on the back of the couch. "Uh, I'm gonna try to stop taking shit from my parents."
Everyone's eyes shifted to Macy, slightly confused by her confession.

"Huh?" Rowan asked, tilting his head to the side.

"Yeah." Macy said, nodding to herself. "They are always giving me shit, trying to control me with their money. I lived my life according to their plans for so long. Studied what they wanted, perfect grades, all the tap dancing and softball and band camp. I was the perfect daughter. Until I figured out I was bi. Until it became a reality that I may not ever marry the man they wanted, or have the grandchildren they wanted. Then it was all 'stop this insanity, or we're cutting you out of our lives, and cutting you off.' " Macy said with a bitter laugh. "It was around that time that I went through my rebellious phase. Went away for a bit. Got all these sweet tats." she giggled, presenting her arms and legs for viewing.

She was indeed, covered in sweet tattoos. Ian has never seen a woman with so much ink. It's a beautiful tapestry of color and shapes that wouldn't look quite right on anyone else. But Macy pulls it off wonderfully.

"I'm just so tired of listening to it." she sighed. " 'Macy, you are just confused, you'll find a nice man soon.' " she scowled. "Like it's fine that I date women, as long as it's just a placeholder until I marry some rich prick and give them a million grandchildren. I always suck it up and deal with their bullshit. Smile and nod, don't contradict. But I'm not gonna do that shit anymore. I'm gonna tell them the truth. That I love Mandy, and they can kiss their ridiculous expectations goodbye." Macy smiled slowly, running a tattooed hand up and down Mandy's thigh. Mandy beamed, astounded by her girlfriend's words.

Ian was impressed. It was nice to see Macy willing to stand up to her parents in defense of her relationship with Mandy. Mickey, for his part, wished he had half this girl's balls when he was younger.

But he has a feeling that Macy's white bread upscale parents are a far cry from what Terry was. His tenure in the closet was more one of self preservation that Macy's attempt to please her parents.

"On that note." Macy says, turning to Mandy. "Mands, you are the best thing that's ever happened to me. I love you more than I ever thought possible." she stroked the side of Mandy's face lovingly. "I want to know if you'll move in with me?"

Mandy's face was a picture of shock. She just sat there with her mouth hanging open for what felt like forever.

Mickey was surprised too. Macy and his sister had not been dating that long, and moving in seemed like a big step to him. But he supposes when you know, you know. But he is a little curious as to why Macy would ask Mandy this huge thing when they were all so fucking wasted.

Maybe she wasn't thinking at all. Mickey knows what that feels like. Love has made him do some questionable shit.

"Um, can I think about it?" Mandy asks, clearly thrown by the sharp left turn the conversation has taken.

"Of course, baby. Take all the time you need, just wanted you to know how I feel." Macy said, tipping forward to press a tender kiss to Mandy's shocked face.

"Okay, what about you guys?" Macy asked, directing her question to the rest of the room, clearly ready for the focus to shift.
"Well, mine's not nearly as compelling as yours." Rowan laughed. "I just wanna stay clean."

"Hey." Jack said, punching Rowan lightly in the arm. "That shit's a big deal, don't cut yourself down. It's not easy, and you're doing great."

Rowan nodded, a tiny smile playing on his lips. "Okay."

"What about you, Jack?" Mandy asked, sipping her beer slowly.

"Ah fuck, if I say staying clean now, it's kinda a cop out, right?" Jack laughed.

"Nah." Mickey said from his spot between Ian's legs. They were spread out on the couch, legs intertwined. They were still feeling the after affects of the ecstasy, the booze on top of it keeping them loose and happy. "I think staying clean is a fucking great idea, and you need to keep on it. This shit tonight, don't know how I feel about it." Mickey said, rubbing his top lip with his fingers. "Kinda feel like a dick for getting high with you tonight." he trailed off, casting his eyes down.

"Oh, come on Mick. This shit was my idea. Don't feel bad." Jack sighed, leaning over to rest a hand on Mickey's knee.

"Nah, man. I just think we may have fucked up tonight. I mean, what about you, Ian?" he turned his head, glancing at his boyfriend with worry in his eyes. "What if this fucks up your bipolar?"

"Mick." Ian sighed, running a hand through Mickey's hair, lightly pulling on the strands. "I'm a grown ass man. I listened to what Jack said about the molly, and I took a calculated risk. I wanted this. To have this with you. And we had fun. If I start to feel weird, I've got Caroline on speed dial. And I've got you, and my family, and all these wonderful people around me to help me out. Don't get all down on yourself. Did you have fun tonight?"

"Yeah, yeah I did." Mickey said, a small smile quirking his lips, though his eyes were still wary.

"Then focus on that. And if shit gets fucked up, we'll deal with it then." Ian smiled back, pulling Mickey closer to him with his arms around his waist.

"Okay, okay." Mickey laughed.

"I wanna keep up with therapy." Mandy said, unprovoked. "That's my resolution. It's really been helping me, although I still feel like a whiny bitch whenever I go. So maybe I'll work on that too." she laughed, shrugging her shoulders.

"That's good, Mands, that's real good." Mickey said, giving his sister what he's sure is the fondest look he's ever given her. He fucking loves her, and he just wants her to be happy. She fucking deserves it. More than anyone he knows.

"Now you guys." Mandy said, sipping her beer slowly. She finished it off, stumbling off the couch and towards the fridge, grabbing a few more beers for whoever was out. She dropped them down on the table and fell backwards onto the sofa again.

Mickey leaned forward, grabbing one of the beers, tipping his head back and letting the cool liquid flow down his throat.

"Maybe go back to the gym?" Ian said, shrugging. "See my family more."

"Generic." Mandy laughed.
"Fuck you." Ian chuckled, leaning over Mickey to swat at Mandy with an open hand.

"Mick?" Mandy said, waving off Ian's advances with her palms.

"New years resolutions are for assholes." Mickey said, without much thought.

"Jeez, thanks Mick." Jack laughed. "You saved that gem for after everyone else said theirs?"

"I'm not a follower, Jack. And I ain't got no resolution. So fuck off." Mickey said, smiling.

Jack put his hands up in surrender, giving his friend a smile of his own.

--------------------------------------------------

Around four am, when everyone else was passed the fuck out, Ian and Mickey were laying in Ian's bed, facing one another, running their hands all over each other's bodies. The ecstasy was still flowing through their blood, but it was just a shallow pulse now, no longer a torrential flood.

"Did you mean that shit? About resolutions being for assholes?" Ian asked, his tongue running along the shell of Mickey's ear.

"Ian." Mickey sighed. "You wanna talk more? We've been talking all night." he gripped the back of Ian's neck, pulling him over his body fully. "I wanna fuck."

Ian grinned. He settled fully on top of Mickey, grinding his boxer clad dick against Mickey's pelvis. "C'mon, Mick. Everyone else had something to say, and you punk out at the very end?" he swirled his hips, eliciting a delicious groan from the man beneath him.

"Please." Ian whispered, thrusting gently.

"Fine, fuck. If I had a resolution, it would be to do the one thing I've been trying to do for fucking ever. It's the same shit I've been trying to do for fucking years now." Mickey sighed, drowning in the feeling of Ian above him, all around him. "I just wanna take care of you." he whispered, suddenly feeling vulnerable.

Ian paused mid-thrust, turning his blown out eyes on his boyfriend. "Huh?" he asked, eloquent as ever.

"Jesus Ian." Mickey ground out, exasperation bleeding into his arousal. "All I ever wanted to do was take care of you. Back when we were kids, I wanted to protect you from my old man. From me. Then when you got sick, I wanted to protect you from yourself. Then when I went to jail, I wanted to protect from me again. My fucked up shit. My fucked up life. But I can't stay away. God knows I fucking tried. But I can't. So if I'm gonna stick around, I wanna take care of you. Keep you safe. Keep you fucking happy. So yeah, that'd be my stupid resolution. To take care of your giant ginger ass." Mickey trailed off, ghost of a smile on his lips, despite the weight of his words.

The drugs must still be working, because he's not even a little bit nervous about what he just said. He feels nothing but a slow creeping peace, and a desperate need to have Ian inside him. Right now.

"C'mon, man. I've been waiting all night." Mickey whines, fucking whines openly, thrusting up into Ian.
Ian grinned down at him, pulling his boxers off with one hand and throwing them over his shoulder. His hard on was standing proud, bobbing in the air as he held himself up over Mickey, peering down at him with a predatory glint in his eyes.

"Just get on me already." Mickey said, wrapping a hand around the back of Ian's neck and pulling him into a desperate kiss. Their tongues meeting outside their mouths sloppily. Mickey loved kissing Ian. It always sent a thrill down his spine and sent his arousal into overdrive. He had always thought this shit would fade over the years, but if anything, it seemed to increase as time went on. His hunger for the red head never satiated.

"Please, Ian." Mickey begged, no pride to be found, pulling Ian down on him harder, their bodies pressed together tightly.

"Mick, I gotta get you ready." Ian said, sounding pained. His erection laid hot and heavy on Mickey's hip, the tip already leaking.

"I don't fucking want prep." Mickey bit out, trailing his hand down Ian's shoulder, along his side to rest on his ass, grabbing and pulling. "I wanna fucking feel you. C'mon."

Ian moaned, loud, before pulling back just enough to strip Mickey of his boxers. "Okay, Mick. If you're sure." he mumbled, kissing and licking at his neck.

"Fuck yes I'm sure. Get the fuck in me." Mickey ground out, barely able to conceal his desperation at this point.

Ian nodded, sitting up on his knees for a moment. He grabbed the lube off his bedside table and slicked up his dick as quickly as he could with his trembling hands. Once his cock was as slippery as possible, he dropped down on one elbow, hovering over Mickey's body.

Mickey was just laying there, flat on his back. His chest was flushed pink, heaving with anticipation. His eyes dancing wildly over Ian's face and body. Ian gave him one more questioning look, which Mickey answered with a bob of his head.

Do it.

So Ian did.

He grabbed his dick and rubbed it against Mickey's entrance, pulling a drawn out moan from his boyfriend. Without further hesitation, he surged forward, pushing the tip of his dick past Mickey's rim. He watched Mickey's face carefully, searching for any signs of discomfort. But all he saw was unbridled lust and adoration, so he continued to push until his hips were flush against Mickey's ass.

"Oh fucking Jesus." Ian groans, not moving. He sits hot and heavy inside his lover, losing himself in the feeling. Fucking perfect.

"Ian." Mickey moaned. "Ian, please."

Ian growled low is his throat, wanting nothing more than to please his boyfriend. He pulled back almost all the way before slamming home again.

"Yes." Mickey whispered. "Yes, god yes."

Ian grinned against the skin on Mickey's neck before pulling back just enough to start pumping his hips with a steadier rhythm. He rolled his hips harder, grunting a little as he increased his pace. He moved away from Mickey's body, earning himself a disapproving grunt from his boyfriend.
Ian just smiled. He maneuvered around a little, pulling Mickey legs up until they were resting on his shoulders. Mickey's back arched and he threw his hands up over his head, fisting the sheets tightly in his hands.

"Fuck. Fuck." he chanted as Ian pounded his ass without mercy.

"You are so fucking sexy, Mick." Ian groaned, his hips snapping forward violently.

"Ian, fuck, right there." Mickey screamed, not giving a shit about the four other people in the house. Ian was fucking him into oblivion, and he was so gone on him nothing else mattered.

"That's it, Mick. Take it so good." Ian moaned, one hand tight on Mickey's thigh, still propped up on his shoulder, while the other trailed down to wrap around his leaking cock. He stroked Mickey in time with his thrusts. It didn't take long before he was coming all over his stomach, Ian finishing just seconds behind him, thrusting lazily until he was totally spent. He pulled out and collapsed on the mattress next to Mickey.

They didn't bother to clean up, content to just lay wrapped up in each other, covered in come and sweat.

They wavered on the line between sleep and wakefulness for a while, still too fucked up to succumb to sleep. A long while later, as the sun started to peak out behind the clouds and they were finally starting to drift off, Mickey muttered one last thing into Ian's shoulder as they both fell off the precipice into unconsciousness.

"I don't care if new years resolutions are for assholes, I promise, Ian, I'm gonna take care of you. Forever."

Ian smiled, placing a gentle kiss to Mickey's sweat-dampened hair.

This new year was off to a good start....
A little bit of upheaval is expected in life. But how much can one person take at once?

Mickey's about to find out.

uploading this chapter has been a major pain in the ass. the site has been giving me shit for days, and i had to step away for a while before i smashed my laptop.

looks like i finally figured it out.

hope it's worth the wait, thank you for your patience.

Time goes by fast when no one is paying attention. A month into the new year, and Mickey's not sure where the time has gone. He's been busy, working with Matt and spending time with Ian. He visits Jack at Victory House when he can, but he's been slacking as of late, caught up in the mundane responsibilities of his life.

He pulls up in front of his house after work one day at the tail end of January. Matt had him working on his own at a building on the lower west side, so it took him almost a half an hour to get home in rush hour traffic. He's covered in dirt, having been working in the basement all day. The place has a dirt floor, and he was down there reinforcing some shitty old lally columns most of the day. It wouldn't be good, after all, if the damn floor collapsed. But it was hard work, and there was no real way to avoid getting dirty. Not that Mickey cares, dirt is the least of his worries.

His brother had called him earlier in the day, asking if he would be home later. Mickey had been spending a lot of time over at Ian's, so he wasn't at the house that often. Not that Iggy had ever cared before. The whole thing had him suspicious.

That feeling only intensified when he got a text from his sister while he was on his way home. A simple 'call me when you get home, asswipe', but why the fuck wouldn't she just call? What was so important that it had to wait until he got home? Had she finally decided to move in with her girlfriend?

Macy's impromptu proposal on New Years eve had not come up since that night. Mickey chalked it up to the drugs, like a lot of things that happened that night. But over the past few weeks, he's seen less and less of his sister when he's over at Ian's place. She always off doing something with Macy. Going places Mickey never thought his sister would go. The theater and art installations, like a real-life hipster. The thought makes him chuckle to himself.

He jumps out of the truck and locks it as he pulls his coat a little tighter around his body, trying to stave off the freezing air. Even after living in Chicago almost his entire life, the brutal winters seem to
hit him harder each year.

Jesus, he's getting soft. He reprimands himself internally as he treks along the sidewalk to his house, making his way up the walk to the steps. He's glad to see Iggy finally decided to salt the damn steps. Mickey only had to ride his ass for two months to get him to do it. He's sure his offhand comment about Tessa splitting her head open one of these days probably had something to do with Iggy's newfound responsibility. That dude would do anything for his girl.

He climbed the steps and stuck his key in the lock, giggling it a little bit to finally get the deadbolt to turn. He shouldered his way inside, the door slamming against the wall as he walked into the house. He shut the door behind him, instantly bending over to unlace his boots. He set them aside, next to the giant pile of other shoes. He took his coat off and hung it on the hook, rolling his head on his neck to alleviate some of the tension in his shoulders.

"Igg? Tess?" he called out, walking into the living room. He could hear his brother and his girl in one of the bedrooms, but was shocked to see his sister moving around in the kitchen.

"Hey Mick." Mandy called over her shoulder, still busying herself in the kitchen.

"Mandy, what are you doing here? I thought you were busy tonight. Gonna call me later or something."

His sister turned to him, handing him a beer. She had an enigmatic smile on her face. If Mickey had a feeling something was up before, he's fucking positive now.

Before she had a chance to answer, Iggy and Tessa came back into the living room. They sat down on the couch, close together, fingers intertwined. Iggy was wearing loose sweats and a wife beater, Tess had on a really long, baggy sweater and some leggings. It looked like neither of them had left the house all day.

Must be nice.

Mickey had been slaving away all damn day, and now he's desperate to get in the damn shower. But looks like he was gonna have to suffer through whatever family drama was unfolding here before he could do the shit he really wanted to do. He dropped down on the couch, throwing his socked feet up on the coffee table. May as well get comfortable.

"You guys wanna beer?" Mandy asked, still hovering by the kitchen.

"I'll have one, but Tess is all set." Iggy said, running his hand up and down Tessa's thigh.

That caught Mickey's attention. Tessa was a hardcore party girl. It was unlike her to turn down a beer.

Before Mickey could inquire about it, his phone went off in his pocket. Mickey dropped his untouched beer on the coffee table before reaching into the pocket of his dirty hoodie and pulled his phone out. He swiped his thumb over the screen, smiling like a dope when he saw a text from Ian.

ian: hey mick. hope ur day was good. i'm over at fiona's right now. wanna hang out?

Mickey's smile grew as he stared at his phone. It looks like he's not the only one who is craving
contact. It's stupid, really. It's not like they don't see each other all the time. But the more time goes by, the longer they are happy together, the more the need increases. Whenever they are apart, they text constantly.

Mickey is well and truly whipped, but he can't bring himself to care.

Ian's not any better, though. He initiates these little text marathons more than Mickey does. But Mickey happy to oblige him.

Mickey was about to shoot off his reply when his sister sat down on the couch next to him, leaning over his shoulder, spying without shame.

"That your man? Tell him I said hi, and I'll be home later." she said, still leaning over Mickey's shoulder.

"Mind your damn business, and get the fuck off of me." Mickey groused, elbowing his sister in the gut.

She doubled over, faking pain. Mickey didn't even hit her that hard. Fucking drama queen.

Mickey drew his attention back to his phone, shooting off a reply quickly before his sister could irritate him anymore.

me: hey. don't know when i'm gonna b done with this fucking family meeting. got a weird vibe over here right now. u just wanna swing by when ur done?

The reply came almost instantly.

ian: sounds good. ttyl xoxo

Mickey smiled in spite of himself before shooting off one last reply and pocketing his phone.

me: fuck off w that xoxo shit. so gay.

He looked up after he put his phone away, leaning forward to grab his beer back of the coffee table. He took a sip, instantly relaxing as the bubbly liquid flowed down his throat and into his stomach. Nothing helped wash away a long day at work like a beer.

"So, what's the deal, Igg?" Mandy asked, sipping her own beer. "Why are we here in the middle of the week?"

"Well," Iggy said, looking over at Tess, who had a stunning smile on her face. She nodded, gripping his hand tightly and twisting her free hand in her hair.
Something was up. Mickey could tell the moment he walked into the house, the feeling increasing the longer he sat there, staring at his brother as he struggled to speak.

"Well." Iggy repeated, fidgeting. He flexed his free hand around his beer bottle, bringing it up to his lips and downing half the bottle in one go. "Tess is pregnant." he blurted.

Mickey's eyes went comically wide. He almost dropped his full beer on Tess's brand new carpet. His voice caught in his throat, unable to form a single damn word.

His sister, on the other hand, was having no problem voicing her opinion.

"No way! No fucking way!" Mandy yelped, jumping off the couch. She spilled beer all down the front of her shirt, but if she noticed, she didn't say anything. She crossed the room to where Iggy and Tessa were sitting on the love seat and jumped in between the two, pulling them into a three way hug, spilling more beer down Iggy's back in her excitement.

"Hey! Watch it." Iggy said, pulling away. "You got beer all over me, Mands."

Mandy giggled, pulling back so Iggy could get up and change. She took his spot on the love seat, pulling Tessa back to her. She wrapped her arms around the other girl, squeezing her tight.

"I'm gonna be an auntie again." she said, sounding overjoyed at the prospect.

"I'm so excited, Mandy." Tessa said, pulling away just enough to put her hand on her stomach. "I don't even care that I'm gonna get fat or have stretch marks." she laughed. "I'm just so fucking happy."

Mickey hopped up off the couch, drinking his beer as he walked down the hall. He could do without the female pregnancy happy hour going on in the living room. Ever since Svetlana first showed up in his life, pregnant women gave him massive anxiety. It just brought back too many bad memories for him. He's hoping he can put that shit aside, now that he's going to be an uncle.

If Mickey's being honest with himself, he always thought Mandy would be the one to make him an uncle first. He never in a million years thought Iggy would get serious with any girl, never mind stay with one he got pregnant. Looks like he hasn't been giving his brother enough credit.

He finds Iggy in his bedroom, pulling the soiled shirt off and tossing it on the floor, like the slob he's always been. He grabs another from a drawer and pulls it over his head. He turns around once he's done, and jumps when he sees Mickey standing there, hand flying up to cover his heart.

"Fucking Christ, Mick. Don't sneak up on me like that. Fucker." Iggy says, settling down once it's clear there is no immediate threat.

"Sorry." Mickey laughed. "So, how are you feeling about all this?" Mickey asked, getting right to the point.

Iggy gives him a wide, genuine smile. "I'm fucking pumped, man. Tessa is perfect, and I fucking love her. How I ever got that lucky, I'll never know. But she's gonna be a great mom. And I, well, I'm gonna try." Iggy's smile falters and he looks away, stepping around Mickey to get to the door.

"Fucking Christ, Mick. Don't sneak up on me like that. Fucker." Iggy says, settling down once it's clear there is no immediate threat.

"Sorry." Mickey laughed. "So, how are you feeling about all this?" Mickey asked, getting right to the point.

Iggy gives him a wide, genuine smile. "I'm fucking pumped, man. Tessa is perfect, and I fucking love her. How I ever got that lucky, I'll never know. But she's gonna be a great mom. And I, well, I'm gonna try." Iggy's smile falters and he looks away, stepping around Mickey to get to the door.

He doesn't get very far, when Mickey grips his bicep and turns him back around.

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?" Mickey asks, searching his brother's face.

Iggy sighs, pulling his arm out of Mickey's grasp and running a hand over his mouth, a classic
"Just, fuck." he says, frustrated. "I know we had a shit childhood or whatever. With Ma and the drugs, then her going and fucking dying. Then Terry. I mean, Christ, how am I supposed to raise a kid and not have it turn out like us? I mean, we're kinda doing okay now, but I don't want my baby to be kind of okay. I don't wanna pass that shit down. I mean, what if I can't fucking hack it? What if I end up beating on it, or screaming at it? What if I'm just like him?" Iggy's voice was climbing and he was now pacing the room. Crossing from one side to another, not even looking at his brother anymore.

"Hey." Mickey said, trying to get his attention. "Hey." he repeated, grabbing his brother by the arm again and swinging him around to face him. "Fuck off with that shit."

Iggy looked confused, then irritated. "No, man. I'm fucking serious. What if I can't do this? What if I'm a dirt bag like Terry, and the kid ends up fucked up like me?"

"Dude, Igg. Stop. You are nothing like Terry. I mean, look at you. You got a legit job. Haven't been locked up once since I came back from Mexico. You treat your girl like gold. Never cheat, don't ever raise a hand to her. You're a good dude. And you're gonna be a great dad." Mickey smiled, meaning every word of it.

"You think?" Iggy asked, rubbing the back of his neck, another nervous tic.

"Hell yeah, dude. You've left all that Milkovich baggage on the side of the road. A whole new man over here." he laughed, ruffling Iggy's shaggy hair, earning a playful glare from his brother.

Iggy smiled, shrugging. "You too, man."

Mickey scoffed, backing up. He rubbed his top lip with his thumb, a tell of his own.

"Nah, dude. You can dish it out, you better be able to take it." Iggy smiled slyly. gearing up for a little speech of his own. "When I first found out you were gay, I thought you'd live in the closet forever. With fucking Terry around, I didn't blame ya. But you didn't do that shit. When that horror show with Svetlana went down, I thought you'd bolt. But you didn't do that shit either. Yev fucking loves you. I know it ain't ideal right now, but you're as good a dad as you can be, with the way shit is. And when you went and fucking escaped to Mexico, I thought I'd never see you again. But here you are. All legit, living a homo romcom. You did good, Mick. Proud ya." Iggy said, punching his baby brother in the shoulder.

"Fuck off with that shit. When did this become about me?" Mickey grunted, rubbing his sore shoulder. Iggy may be scrawny, but he could fucking throw a punch.

Dickhead.

"Alright, alright. Lets get back to the girls, I'm sure Tessa wants to talk about this fucking baby shower."

Mickey groaned, following his brother out of his room and back into Baby Bedlam.
Ian made his way down the dark street, following a path he could walk in his sleep. The distance between Ian's childhood home and Mickey's wasn't that far, but in the bitter January cold, it took a lot out of him.

He climbed the steps and knocked on the door, stuffing his hands in his pockets while he waited, rocking back on his heels a bit.

The door flew open a moment later, and he was greeted by a beaming Mandy, wearing what looked like an ancient Lynard Skynard t shirt. It was faded and torn, and certainly not Mandy's.

"Mands, what are you doing here?" Ian asked, confused.

"Big things are happening, Ian, get the hell inside." Mandy said cryptically, grabbing Ian's wrist and pulling him into the house.

Ian stepped into the living room, taking in the scene around him. The coffee table was littered with beers and a open baggie of what looked like high test weed. Also, someone had made nachos. It looked like a mini Milkovich party, and Ian was at a loss as to what the could be celebrating on a Tuesday night.

Mandy had bounded away from him the moment the door was closed, jumping over the back of the couch, landing next to Tessa with a bounce. The two girls immediately started whispering conspiratorially, giggling like teenagers. Ian wondered absently if they were drunk as he watched Tessa stuff her face with cheesy chips, salsa dripping down her chin.

Ladylike.

He took off his coat and hung it on the hook before kicking off his sneakers and walking around to sit in the chair.

"What's good, guys?" he asked, crossing his legs out in front of him.

"All kinds of shit. So fucking good." Mandy crowed, confusing Ian even more.

Before he could ask her to clarify, Mickey and Iggy came out of one of the back bedrooms. They were smiling so wide and laughing so loud, Ian was taken aback. Happy Milkovichs weren't exactly a rare commodity these days, but this was a bit much.

"Ian, hey." Mickey smiled, making his way over and sitting on the arm of the chair. He grabbed Ian by the chin and tipped his head up to plant a smacking kiss on his mouth. "Missed ya." he whispered against Ian's lips.

"Ian, man, good to see you." Iggy said, clapping a hand down hard on Ian's shoulder.

"What's going on?" Ian asked warily. "Why the hell is everyone so damn jolly?"

"Who says 'jolly'?" Mandy laughed, working on a new beer.

Ian shook his head, smiling. "Seriously, though." he says, looking around the room again. "Something's up."

"Tessa's preggo." Mickey said, broad smile stretched across his face. He brought his beer bottle up to his mouth, taking a large gulp, using the bottle to hide most of his grin. "Gonna be an uncle."

"No fucking way." Ian said, his own smile blooming on his face.
"That's what I said." Mandy grinned. "So great, right?"

"Hell yeah. That kid's gonna be so spoiled. I haven't bought for a baby in so long." Ian said, his arm wrapping around Mickey's hips, pulling him closer.

"You don't have to do that, man." Iggy said, taking up his seat next to Tessa again.

"Like hell I don't." Ian replied easily. "That kid is practically my family."

Those words did something to Mickey, made him feel all warm and fucking fuzzy. He's gone so soft for Gallagher, that's goes without saying these days. But just the idea that Ian would consider this baby part of his family made what they were doing seem all the more permanent. And Mickey wanted that, more than anything. Forever with Ian.

"Wait, does that mean you guys need me to move out?" Mickey asked out of the blue, the thought just dawning on him.

"Well, we hadn't really talked about it," Tessa began, her palm curling around her stomach again. You couldn't see anything yet, but Tessa did it anyway. Ian wondered if she could feel anything yet. Must be so weird, something growing inside you like that.

"I don't know how you'll feel about being in the house with another infant, Mick. I remember you didn't like it so much when Yev was a baby." Iggy commented, them grimaced when he realized what he'd said.

"That was different." Mickey bit out, not angry. Not really.

"But they have a point Mick." Ian said, running a hand up and down Mickey's back, trying to sooth his irritation. "Babies are like constant noise and you gotta be super quiet and careful. Can't leave shit out where they can reach it. Not to mention the mess they make."

"Doesn't sound ideal." Mickey conceded, shrugging. "I'll start looking around. You gotta give me some time, though. I don't got any dough saved."

"Actually, Mick." Mandy said from her spot across the room. She was fidgety all of the sudden. Mickey's interest was peaked again. How many more bombs were gonna get dropped on him today?

"I was thinking about taking up Mace on her offer to move in with her." she wasn't looking at anyone, her eyes trained on the plush carpet at her feet.

"Huh?" Ian asked, his hand stilling on Mickey's back.

This was news to him.

"Yeah, I was gonna talk to you about it some time this week, but this kinda seems like kismet, right?" Mandy said, eyes pleading. "Macy wants me to move in with her, and we all find out tonight that Igg and Tess are having a baby, so Mick's gonna wanna move..." she trailed off, sipping her beer and staring at the floor again.

"Are you, are you suggesting that Mickey move into the apartment?" Ian asked, confused as all fuck. He and Mickey hadn't spoken about anything like this. Not at all. "Did you know about this?" Ian turned and looked up at Mickey, who looked like a deer in the headlights.
"Fuck no I didn't know. I had no idea those two had a bun in the oven," he pointed to his brother and Tess. "and I sure as shit didn't know she was serious about that moving shit. I thought that was dropped. Didn't you?"

Ian was about to agree when Mandy interrupted. "I'm sitting right here. Don't talk about me like I'm not." she downed the rest of her beer, dropping it on the coffee table with a clatter before crossing her arms over her chest. "Just because I don't talk to you assholes about every single thing in my life doesn't mean it isn't happening. Macy wants me to move in with her, and I wanna. So fuck you, I'm gonna do it."

Mickey's eyes went wide, but before he could snap out a sarcastic retort, Ian threw his hands up, trying to placate his friend.

"No one said anything, Mands. But I mean, are you sure? You've only been together a short while, and you didn't get divorced that long ago...."

"Man, fuck Jeff. And fuck you for bringing it up." Mandy barked, pointing an accusing finger at Ian.

"Jesus, Mands, I'm sorry. I didn't mean anything by it." Ian said, clearly hurt.

"Hey, I'm sorry." Mandy sighed. "I'm a little drunk, and emotional with all this baby talk. I'm not mad, promise. I just think it would be nice, to live with Macy. She makes me happy." she had a wistful look on her face, and Ian felt any anger he had over being yelled at melt away. She just wanted to be happy. And she deserved that.

"Then you should do it. Don't worry about me." he looked over at Mickey. Who knows how he felt about all this. But the idea that Mandy just assumed Mickey would take her place in the apartment seemed a bit absurd.

Was it too soon? Ian didn't know. He wanted to live with Mickey. But he didn't want to fuck it up by moving too fast. That's what he did with Brian.

And even though Mickey was nothing like Brian, Ian was still Ian. And the last thing he wanted to do was ruin his chances with Mickey for a second time in his life by plowing head first into serious commitment territory.

Although, they were already seriously committed, right? It felt that way to Ian, anyway.

Fuck, why was everything so complicated?

Mickey for his part, was having a hard time keeping up with the fluctuating mood in the room. The emotions ping ponging around the space was giving him fucking whiplash. First the pregnancy shit, then the talk with Iggy, then the moving shit with Mandy. Then a suggestion that he should just move back in with Ian like it was nothing.

Mickey was not drunk enough for this shit.

He lurched up and made a beeline for the kitchen. He opened the fridge and poked his head inside, his hand just resting on one of the bottles while he let the cool air calm him a bit. He drew in a deep breath of artificially cold air before grabbing a beer and slamming the fridge shut.

He walked back into the room, dropped back down on the arm of the chair, resting an open palm on Ian's shoulder in what he hoped was a soothing gesture.
He took a sip of his beer, letting the crisp liquid calm him more before he chose to speak. He looked
over at his brother, eyebrows raised.

"Alright. I'll move out. But like I said you gotta give me some time." he looked over at his sister
before his eyes drifted up to Ian. "I'll talk to Ian about it, right?" to which Ian gave him a nod, his
eyes wide. "And if that's not an option right now, I'm sure Matty can get me some leads on places
around here I can afford."

Iggy's face visibly relaxed, and in that moment Ian was sure that Tess wanted Mickey out, even if no
one had said that. He gets it. She wants to have a home for her little family. Ian knows she liked
Mickey, but sharing a place with anyone was stressful, never mind while you're pregnant and
cranky. She probably just wants Iggy and the baby. Understandable.

"Really, Mick? Thanks man. You know I'd never kick you out but..." Iggy said, only to be waved
off by his brother.

"Don't worry about it, man. Fucking happy for you guys. Besides, it's about time I got out of this
place. Start something of my own."

Iggy smiled, clearly happy and relieved.

"So, tell me about this baby shit? You know which room you're gonna wanna set up for the little
critter? I can probably come by and paint that shit, if you want."

Ian was blown away. It never ceased to amaze him how much Mickey had grown in the past few
years. He took everything in stride these days, rarely let anything get to him. Only serious shit got
under his skin anymore. Ian supposes that comes from living a life full of anguish and chaos. When
you are so used to shit falling apart, it doesn't really phase you anymore when it all goes sideways.

The thought fills Ian with sadness.

Mickey's whole life has been one upheaval after another, so much so that he doesn't even bat an eye
anymore when a curve ball gets thrown his way.

Mickey squeezes his shoulder, giving him a meaningful look.

'Get out of your head.'

Ian nods, sipping his beer. Mickey knows him too well.

They talk about the baby for another hour or so. Mandy moving doesn't come up again, and Ian's
glad for it.

He hadn't really thought about Mandy moving since New Years. He'd thought it was a half baked
plan concocted in drug addled brains. He hadn't considered it being a real option, filing it away with
all the other shit they talked about doing that night. Like skydiving naked and taking a road trip to
California.

Looks like he was wrong.

He's not really sure how he feels about it.

He's happier living with Mandy than he has been in any other living situation in a long time. Looking
back, he was happy living at home when he was a kid. Embroiled in constant Gallagher chaos,
always struggling to survive, it had always seemed so hard. But he was loved and supported. Even
when he felt mostly alone, he never felt abandoned or tossed aside. It was them against the world. He had been content.

The short time he lived with Mickey before his diagnosis was also a highlight in Ian's life. When he and Mickey had been young and in love, it had been beautiful in a dark, scarred way. Then, after Mickey got sent away, he had bounced between boyfriends and apartments, going between them and his childhood home like an endless game of musical chairs. But he had never put down any roots. None of that shit had ever felt permanent.

But, now that he's thinking about it, living with Mandy never felt permanent either. He had just left Brian, and she had just left Jeff. They were both desperate to find themselves again, and found comfort in the easy familiarity of their friendship. But it was always just a stepping stone. Ian had known that going in.

He just didn't expect Mandy to be stepping off so soon.

It really hadn't been that long since they'd moved in. Even less since she started seeing Macy. But Mandy's an adult, and she's allowed to do what makes her happy.

Even if Ian's gonna miss her.

And she will always have a home with him, if shit doesn't work out. He knows she knows that.

It's just all happening so fast. Iggy and Tess pregnant, Mandy moving out, and now Mickey's moving too? When it rains it pours, Ian supposes.

The clock gets closer and closer to eight pm, and Ian has to go. He's got work tomorrow at six in the morning, and his night time meds knock him out. He needs to take them early so he can get up in the morning. He can't afford to sleep through his alarm, like he did just before Christmas. Rita had been understanding, but Ian didn't want to be that guy that got a free pass because he was mentally ill. So he had to keep his schedule.

He stoop up, causing everyone in the room to look at him. They had been deep into a conversation about Ukrainian baby names when Ian had moved.

"Gotta go."

"Alright, grandpa. Let me get my coat. I'll go with you." Mandy says, moving to stand too. "You gonna come, Mick?" she looks over at her brother, not seeming to care one way or another.

Mickey looks at Ian. He knows they have to discuss this moving shit. The sooner the better, really. Iggy is itching to get working on the nursery, even though they have months, and Mickey has no desire to live in a house that is going be enduring a thorough scrub down and baby proofing.

Ian looks back, a small smile on his face. He nods, pulling his coat on and turning to put his shoes on.

Mickey doesn't need to be told twice. He stands from the couch and follows suit, putting his coat and shoes on quickly. So much for taking a shower....

They all exchange goodbyes, Ian and Mickey shaking Iggy's hand while Mandy and Tessa hug for a long time.

"I'll call you and we'll talk shower, okay? I've got some really cool ideas." Mandy says, a wide,
bright smile on her face as she rubs Tessa's belly again.

"Definitely." Tessa says, pulling her in for another quick hug.

They leave the house and jump into Mickey's work truck. He takes it home almost every day now. He kinda still feels like an ass about it, but any time he tries to say no, Matt gives him shit. So he just tries to be grateful. He's not sure if he'll ever get used to the easy way Matt gives and gives. He just hopes his boss knows how much it means to him, since Mickey is shit at expressing that kind of thing.

He leads them through the Chicago streets on his way to Boystown from the south side. It's not that long a drive, but the icy streets make it slower going than he'd like. Mandy had taken shotgun, much to Mickey's chagrin. He wishes Ian wasn't such a chivalrous asshole all the time.

She fucks around with the radio while scrolling on her phone. They argue about music the whole way back to the apartment.

Mickey's grateful for a distraction from the elephant in the truck.

Moving.

Shit.

He kinda wishes he hadn't been blindsided back at the house. He knew what everyone wanted from him.

Iggy and Tess wanted him out of the house so they could have their baby on their own.

Mandy wanted him to take her place in the apartment, so she wouldn't be leaving Ian in the lurch while she chased after her girlfriend.

And Ian, well Ian wanted what he always wanted. Domestic Mickey Milkovich. Which, granted, Mickey was pretty willing to give him.

He just didn't like feeling like he had no choice. Like it had all been decided without him, and he just had to go along for the ride. He'd felt like that his whole life.

With Terry, playing the part of the Milkovich son. Taking orders and towing the line. Nothing else.

Then when he had to marry Svetlana. Doing what she said, afraid she'd sell him out to his old man, signing his death warrant.

Then when he was in and out of jail. Always obey, never resist. He had been doing it so long, it took him a really long time to get out of that mindset. To start doing shit that HE wanted to do, for himself.

Did he want to move in with Ian?

He hasn't really thought about it recently.

Things were good the way they were. He always thought they'd get back there some day, but he wanted to be a hundred percent sure when they did it. No fuck ups, no regrets. He wanted to make sure they had enough money so fiancés wouldn't be a problem. He wanted to be able to take care of Ian like he deserved.

And he's not sure he's there just yet.
But now his hand is being forced. And he knows he'll do it, because it will make everyone happy. He just hopes he's not setting himself up for failure. He doesn't want to let anyone down. Ian or himself.

The pull up in front of Ian and Mandy's building, and Mickey parks the truck. They pile out and make their way upstairs without speaking.

Mandy lets them all in and they start stripping off their layers in the small hallway.

"Mands?" Macy's voice floats out from the living room.

"Yeah." Mandy calls back, leaving the men in the hallway to go to her girl.

Ian and Mickey finish hanging up their coats and split up after that. Mickey follows his sister to the living room while Ian goes to the kitchen.

Mickey finds his sister sitting in the chair, in her girlfriend's lap. That's her usual seat whenever Mickey visits them. She sits sideways, her legs hanging over the arm of the chair, her head on Macy's shoulder. Macy runs a hand up and down Mandy's thigh.

"Hey Mickey." Macy says, smiling at him.

"Mace." Mickey nods. He turns his head when Ian taps his shoulder, and takes the offered beer with a quick thanks. Ian hands another beer to Mandy and sits down on the couch next to Mickey. Their thighs touch, but they're not all over each other like the girls are.

Macy takes a sip of a drink she must have mixed herself while she was alone at the apartment. If Mickey knows her like he thinks he does, it's a vodka sprite. It's one of the only things she'll drink.

"How was the family meeting?" she asks, genuinely curious.

"Fucking eventful." Mickey mutters, earning a chuckle from Ian.

"Why?" Macy sits up a little straighter, jostling Mandy a little. She wraps and arm around her waist to steady her, but keeps her eyes on Mickey. The girl loves gossip and drama.

"Tessa's fucking pregnant. Gotta move out." Mickey says. That's not really what they said, but he can read between the lines.

Macy shoots Mandy a look that Mickey does not miss.

"Really?" she asks innocently. "Where you gonna go? Got any leads?"

"Fuck right off. I know." Mickey says, trying to suppress a smile. "I know you got my sister pussy whipped. I know she's planning on ditching her besty here." he patted Ian on the head like a dog.

"And I know you cooked up some crazy plan to get me to take over her half of the lease. So quit with the doe-eyed innocent act." Mickey punctuates his words with a sharp eyebrow and a tip of his beer bottle. "This baby is just too perfect for your little plan. Now that I'm getting kicked out, it makes it easier to suggest I just move on over here, huh?"

Macy busts out laughing, burying her face in Mandy's chest while she completely loses it. "Jesus, Mickey. Tell me how you really feel."

"I feel like I got no god damn say." Mickey said, unthinking. He felt Ian stiffen next to him and turned just in time to see Ian wipe the stricken look off his face, covering for himself by taking a long
sip off his beer.

"Hey, c'mon. I didn't mean it like that." he said, running a hand up and down Ian's thigh.

"Mick, you know no one's making you do anything. It was just an idea." Mandy says sincerely. "I won't go 'til you decide. Or 'til Ian finds another roommate, if need be."

The idea of Ian living with some random stranger off Craigslist makes Mickey a little sick.

"I didn't say I didn't wanna. We just need to talk about it. How long 'til you wanna move?" he asks, still stroking Ian's thigh. He feels his boyfriend relaxing under his touch, and a little of his own anxiety recedes.

"I can go whenever. I talked to the landlord already, and as long as the rent continues to get paid, it doesn't matter much to him who's living here."


Mickey wonders how much of this shit Ian knew about ahead of time.

------------------------------------------

Ian's freaking out. He's doing pretty good, keeping a calm facade, but inside he's going absolutely insane.

He had no idea any of this shit was gonna go down. Although he almost positive Mickey thinks he's part of some big conspiracy. He hadn't talked to Mandy about moving since New Years. And god knows he was just as blindsided by Tessa's news as the rest of them.

He's a little nervous that this development is going to have a negative effect on his relationship with Mickey. He doesn't want his boyfriend to feel backed into a corner. He knows that is one of Mickey's greatest fears, being unable to control his own life. He loves Mickey so much, and of course he wants to live with him, but he wants Mickey to want it too. To do it on his terms, and in his own time.

Ian has been pressuring and pushing Mickey to do things throughout their relationship. Ian likes to think that he did all those things for Mickey's benefit, for his well being. But sometimes Ian has to admit that he's just selfish. The kissing, the intimacy. Those were all things Ian pushed for when they were younger. Not to mention a public declaration of their love. That was a big one.

Sure, it was a good thing for Mickey to come out, and now that it's done, he says he doesn't regret it. But no one should be given an ultimatum like that. It's just not fair.

So with this moving in shit, Ian wants it to be Mickey's decision, fully and absolutely.

He just hopes Mickey wants the same thing he wants.

"Well, enough of this heavy shit for now." Mandy says, clapping her hands together before jumping off Macy's lap. "We're gonna watch a movie, and smoke some weed. Anyone need another beer?" she asked, wandering toward the kitchen while her girlfriend went about packing a bowl.
Mickey raised his hand, but Ian had had enough to drink, he wanted to be lucid when they had this conversation later, and he can't put the booze away like he used to.

Mandy brings back beers and Macy sparked the bowl. Ian queued up the 'Dawn of the Dead' remake. It was one of Mickey and Mandy's favorite, and he always played it when he wanted the siblings in a good mood.

He'd take all the help he could get.

The movie started and Macy started passing the bowl. By the time the bowl was cashed, the zombie apocalypse was well underway, and Mickey had that soft, clinging thing going that Ian loved so much. They were leaning against each other on the couch, Ian's arm slung over Mickey's shoulder, their legs intertwined on top of the coffee table. Mandy and Macy were still seated in the arm chair, mirroring the boys' posture unconsciously. Mandy was snuggled under Macy's arm, their legs twisted up together.

Ian's eyes shifted from the TV screen to take them in. He wonders to himself in that moment, if all Milkovich kids are the little spoon in their relationships. He has the odd image of Tessa holding Iggy this way, and chuckles to himself.

"What's so funny?" Mickey asks, curling further into Ian's embrace. He's always been super cuddly when he's high, but it's still new to Ian that Mickey's open to letting other people see this side of him. When they were kids, getting Mickey alone and high was Ian's favorite thing. It was the one time he could hold him like this without risking a limb. And getting this kind of affection when others were present was an impossibility.

Even now that it's a regular occurrence, Ian still doesn't take it for granted. He doesn't think he ever could.

"Nothing." he whispers, kissing Mickey's head. He gets an irritated grunt in response.

Good to know not everything has changed.

The movie ends and the two couples separate. Macy tows a sleepy Mandy toward her bedroom, while Ian makes his way to his room. Mickey stops by the kitchen to grab a Gatorade before heading down the hall himself.

He closes the door behind him, twisting to put the drink on the nightstand. He turns just in time to see Ian pulling his t-shirt over his head. The muscles in his back flex as he lifts his arms, and Mickey's mouth waters.

"Take your pills?" Mickey asks, because it's so ingrained in him now, he doesn't even realize he's doing it.

"Need a drink." Ian says, back still turned. He pulls his jeans down and tosses them on the floor with his shirt.

"On the table, dumbass." Mickey chuckles, stripping off his clothes much quicker than Ian. By the time Ian is down to his underwear and throwing his pills back with some of the drink Mickey
brought him, Mickey is laying on his back on the bed, one hand running up and down his naked chest.

"Wanna fool around?" Mickey asks, waggling his eyebrows.

"Of course I do." Ian says, dropping to his knees on the bed and crawling over Mickey. "But we gotta talk first, remember?"

Mickey groaned, throwing a hand over his face. "Thought you forgot about that." Mickey mutters into his fingers. "And we're sooo stoned right now."

"Let's compromise," Ian says, trailing a hand up and down Mickey's side, delighted as goosebumps pop up all along Mickey's torso. "We talk this shit out, then we can blow each other and go to bed."

Mickey mulled it over for a minute. He didn't really wanna talk about it, but he knew they had to. He knew what he wanted, but he honestly had no idea how Ian felt about the moving shit. And although he'd love to get thoroughly fucked, he was so fucking high, he could barely keep his eyes open. If they're not gonna fuck like they mean it, it's not worth the effort.

A lazy blowjob and some serious sleep sound like just what the doctor ordered.

"Okay, Red, shoot." Mickey said, pulling his hand away from his face to see Ian hovering over him, one hand on either side of his head.

Ian smiled down at him softly, tipping his head down to brush his lips against Mickey's. It was over as soon as it began, as Ian flopped down on the mattress next to Mickey on his back. Mickey bounced with the force of it, having to reach out to steady himself so he didn't land on the damn floor.

"Watch it, asshole." Mickey muttered, slapping Ian across his bare chest with the back of his hand.

"I want you to live with me, Mick." Ian says, his eyes on the ceiling. He can't look at Mickey as he says it, too afraid of what he'll see in his eyes.

Fear.

Rejection.

Resistance.

"Ian..." Mickey sighs.

"No, Mick, just listen." Ian insists, reaching out blindly to thread their fingers together, eyes still glued to the ceiling. "I know it hasn't really been that long. You've only been home for six months or so, and we weren't even together in the beginning. I know it's been messy, but when is it not for us? I don't wanna wait any more. I want to be with you, always. I think this shit with Mandy and the baby and everything is a sign." Ian finished his sentence, still scared to look over at his boyfriend. He took a deep breath, closing his eyes, and waited.

Mickey sighed again, squeezing Ian's fingers. "You really don't think we are doing this too soon?" he asked.

"What? No." Ian replied, turning his head finally to look at Mickey. Mickey was staring back at him, nervously chewing his lip. "Do you?"
"I don't know, Ian." Mickey groaned. "I mean, of course I want to live with you. It was kinda nice, back in the day. Minus the bitch wife and my asshole siblings." Mickey chuckles, shuddering as Ian turns on his side to run his free hand up and down his stomach. "But we're not kids anymore, Gallagher. If shit goes south, it's gonna be a lot messier. I can't go back to my house, with the baby coming, and I know you don't wanna go back to the Gallagher homestead. If we do this, we gotta go in with open eyes, and be in it for the long haul. My kid's involved, even if he's not around all the time. He's older, and he's smart. He already knows you, loves you for sure. But I don't wanna be bringing this shit into his life, only to have to explain to him later why Uncle Ian doesn't come around anymore."

"Mick, why are you putting an expiration date on us already? I thought we agreed, we're in this." Ian sounds hurt, but Mickey needs to be absolutely certain. It's not just his own shit on the line. (although the state of his bruised heart is certainly of concern to him) It's his family's shit, as well as Ian's. Mickey doesn't even want to think about how spectacularly Ian could fall apart if Mickey fucked this up somehow.

And that's what this is really all about, isn't it? Mickey's ingrained certainty that he will somehow ruin all this. He's been a fuck up his whole life. Sure, these past few years he's been doing his fucking damnedest to not be the same old mess he's always been. He has let a lot of his old insecurities go, most of them dying down to a whisper in the back of his mind now that his father is rotting in the ground. But that doesn't mean that he's whole or sane all of the sudden. It just means the dark shit sits deeper inside him now, and it takes a lot more to trigger a melt down than it used to.

But if anything can bring those old demons roaring back to life, it's his relationship with Ian. Mickey knows that sounds bad, even in his own head, but nothing can drag out the monsters in his mind like Ian can.

Their history is so mottled with conflicting emotions, it kind of gives Mickey a headache if he thinks about it too long. How one person can conjure utterly opposite emotions in Mickey is a mind fuck in itself. When he thinks about his past with Ian, he's concurrently filled with elation and despair, unbridled lust and unending panic. Pure, beautiful love, and white hot anger. When he was with Ian back in the day, he was simultaneously higher than he'd ever been, and closer to ending it all than he'd ever admit out loud.

Things feel calmer this time, so far. But he knows that just like Ian can't predict when his illness will flare up, Mickey can't predict when his ghosts will make a guest appearance. He's sure it's only a matter of time before he does something monumentally stupid, and pushes Ian away. It's not like he tries to do this shit, it just seems to be the way his fucked up brain works.

And he's not sure he'll survive another failed attempt at love with Ian. He never tried with anyone else, after they feel apart. Sure, he had Jack, and Javier back in Mexico, but those were friendships with awesome sex as a side order. He'd never been in love with either of them. Although, he thinks he might have been able to get there, if he'd given himself time (or permission), but that was neither here nor there.

He's never felt that way about anyone ever again. And he thinks it's fair that he's nervous to take this giant step with Ian again. When they were younger, they had kind of fallen into living together, nothing was ever formalized. It was like a long, drawn out sleep over, and the way it ended left a lot to be desired.

But this is a whole other thing entirely.

This is shared leases, and legal address changes. This is making a room for his son, explaining to him that he and Ian are together, that Ian will be in his life from here on out. This is Mickey, once again,
turning his life upside down, forming his life around Ian and what he needs. This is Mickey giving himself to Ian, one more time, in every single way possible.

And if it doesn't work out this time, Mickey won't be able to stay in Chicago. He won't be able to walk down these streets, every corner haunted by the ghost of Ian, and what they had that Mickey couldn't hold on to, no matter how tight his grasp.

He's spiraling. He knows this while it's happening. And Ian can see it too, if the stricken look in his face when Mickey snaps his eyes back to him is any indication.

"Mick, are you okay? You've been spaced for a while." Ian propped himself up on an elbow and ran a hand down Mickey's face. "You must be high." he smiles down at him fondly.

"Just thinking." Mickey replies, his face curling into Ian's palm.

"About us?" Ian asks, albeit redundantly.

"Yeah." Mickey says, eyes searching Ian's face. "It's just, fuck." Mickey sighs, closing his eyes for a moment, letting himself get lost in the feeling of Ian's hand on his face. "I can't come back from this if it doesn't work out, Ian. I won't stay here, in Chicago, if we don't make it this time. I know it's a pussy move, but if I'm being honest, I've never been as brave as I wanna be. I won't stick around and watch you go on with your life. And I don't wanna leave my kid and my family again cuz I'm too much of a coward to stand by and watch you marry some prick in a sweater vest named Chuck or Devon. I'd like to say I'm stronger than that, but I'm really not."

Ian's faced morphed into stunned anguish, shocked again at how deeply he had scarred the man he loves. He's not sure he'll ever know the true amount of pain he's caused Mickey, but he's sure the well runs fucking deep. And he's the only one to blame.

Instead of saying any of that shit, though, his expression softens again, and he can feel tears prickle in the corner of his eyes.

"I'm not gonna do that shit again, Mick. I promise. We're not those people anymore, right? You've changed a lot, but so have I. I'm healthy, and I'm doing what I have to to stay that way. I'm not saying I won't have slips, but I can guarantee you I'll listen when you say I need help."

" It's not just you, Ian. It's me too. I'm so scared I'm gonna fuck it up, let you down. But if you are serious, and wanna try, I do too. I'm gonna be better for you this time. Do all that shit I couldn't, or wouldn't before." he sighed, his eyes locked with Ian's. Then he smiled. "And I promise not to ride your damn ass like your sister does." Mickey replies, bringing his own hand up to run through Ian's hair.

Ian chuckles at that. Fiona has always been a sore spot for Ian and Mickey alike, although for very different reasons.

"So, are we gonna do this? Me and you? For real this time?" Ian asks, cautiously hopeful.

"Yeah, fuck it. Who am I kidding, anyway? Like I could ever say no to you." Mickey smiled, gently tugging at Ian's hair. Ian winces, but smiles. "But I'm warning you, Gallagher, you fuck me over, and that's it. I put your gangly ass in the hospital, then you never see me. Ever again." Mickey's got a teasing tone to his voice, but his eyes are painfully serious.

Ian nods, tears welling up in his eyes. He's not sure if they're sad or happy tears, probably a mixture of both. "Ditto, you prick." he laughs wetly. Mickey laughs with him, but they quiet quickly. They are left staring intently at each other, the gravity of the situation settling down on them.
"We're doing this." Ian whispers. He surges up and crawls onto Mickey's lap, straddling him. He pins his wrists to the mattress above his head, kissing him fiercely. Mickey chuckles, kissing back through his smile.

"We're fucking doing this." Mickey agrees. "No matter what, Ian, we work it out, okay." Mickey says, pulling back slightly so he can look into Ian's eyes. "I'm serious, I can't..." but Ian cuts him off mid-sentence with another bruising kiss.

"I promise." he says against his lips.

Mickey nods slightly, pulling Ian in again with a hand on the back of his head. "Good. Now what were you saying about blowjobs?"

Ian laughs, knocking his forehead against Mickey's. "Back to the important shit, huh Mick?" Ian smirks.

"Damn straight. This serious talk is usually a total boner killer, but I have to admit, the idea of having your ass around 24/7 kinda gets me hard, so what?" Mickey gives him that cocky smirk that turns Ian on so much.

It's as close as Mickey will get to admitting he's excited to live with Ian as he's gonna get tonight, and Ian's face breaks out in a shit eating grin. "I can dig that." Ian says. He leans back a little, gripping the waistband of Mickey's boxers and pulling them down. Mickey lets out a stuttering sigh as the cool apartment air hits his junk. He's not hard quite yet, but the predatory look in Ian's eyes is gonna get him there real fast.

Once Ian strips Mickey naked, he leans back on one hand to pull his own boxers down and off, throwing them over his shoulder. He leans down, attaching his lips to Mickey's neck and sucking. Mickey moans, tilting his head back as Ian's teeth graze his collar bone. Ian smiles against his skin, running a hand down his side, gripping his hip. Mickey bucks up into the sensation, desperate for friction of any kind. His dick is fully hard now, throbbing against his stomach. Ian's hand continues to run over his hot skin, barely a brush of fingertips. Mickey sighs, closing his eyes. He waits, letting Ian do whatever he wants.

It's nice, letting Ian just take control like this.

Ian grips Mickey's hip hard, rutting against him lightly. Their cocks knock together and Ian draws in a sharp breath. His mouth finds Mickey's again, and they kiss. Harsh and passionate, their teeth clacking as their tongues push against each other.

"Wanna do something a little different tonight." Ian says, running his tongue along Mickey's bottom lip.

"Really now? Getting kinky on me Gallagher?" Mickey's eyebrows lift, his eyes dancing with mischief. "I could be into that."

"Not kinky." Ian shrugs, "Just something we haven't done in a long time."

"Told you, man. I'm too stoned and tired to bang tonight." Mickey said apologetically. He wanted to fuck, but his body was just too worn out.

"I know." Ian smiled, thrusting down against Mickey, tipping his head down to lick along his shoulder, biting into the meat of his neck gently. "Remember that time at the abandoned building, right after my ROTC ceremony?" Ian asked, still absently rutting against Mickey, almost subconsciously. "I was so pissed at you, cuz you didn't show. But I found you there and you were all
busted up. Your dad had beat you senseless for some stupid fucking reason. I don't even remember why." Ian's voice was sad, but his lips never stopped their exploration. He licked up his neck before sucking right behind his ear.

"He was pissed I didn't collect some meth money." Mickey said, pawing at Ian's back, his other hand trailing up to tangle in Ian's hair. "Dude skipped town. Nothing I coulda done. Terry didn't fucking care."

"And all my anger at you just melted away. I felt like such a selfish prick, never thinking about what you were going through." Ian grimaced, his motion stilling until Mickey's hand tightened in his hair. He smiled, his lips ghosting along Mickey's chest. He drew a nipple into his mouth, biting gently. Mickey groaned, back arching. "You wanted to fuck that night, but I wouldn't do it, cuz you were so fucking hurt. So we did something else instead."

"You wanna fucking sixty-nine?" Mickey laughed, the memory of that long ago night filling his mind.

"Yeah. Is that cool?" Ian asked, pulling away to search Mickey's eyes. Mickey looked up at him, a mixture of anticipation and gleeful lust in his deep blue eyes.

"Fuck yeah, that's cool. Get your cock up here, Gallagher, let me get my mouth on it."

Ian laughed, jostling them around on the mattress until he was straddling Mickey's face. His own face was hovering over Mickey's dick, and his cock was laying heavy away from his body, dangling over Mickey's open mouth.

"Don't be a tease, Ian, get that shit down here." Mickey gripped the back of Ian's thighs, pulling him down to his salivating mouth.

Ian grunts, feeling Mickey pawing at his ass like that sets a fire in his belly, and he's just not in the mood to tease tonight. Mickey's not the only one that's stoned, and Ian's feeling woozy and horny as fuck. He tips his hips down just as he closes his mouth around the head of Mickey's dick.

Sixy-nining is hot as all fuck, but Mickey always feels a little overwhelmed when he does it. He can't focus on either the sensation on his cock or the work he's supposed to be doing. He tries his best to swirl his tongue around the head of Ian's cock as he pulls his hips back. He tries to suction his lips when Ian thrusts down. But the way Ian is bobbing his head on his dick and fondling his balls has Mickey's head spinning. So he thinks 'fuck it' and just lays there, letting Ian do the work while enjoying the glorious thing that is an Ian Gallagher blowjob.

It doesn't take long. It never does when Mickey's high. He lets Ian fuck his face, all the while totally lost in the feel of hot lips and tongue pulling him apart. He comes first, jerking up into the wet warmth while Ian swallows him down, face buried in the dark hair of his groin. Ian pulls off after that, knowing Mickey will be too sensitive for any more contact. Mickey tightens his grip on Ian's thighs, pulling him down harder into his open mouth.

Ian rests his face against Mickey's thigh, his hips still pumping as he chases his own release.

"Fuck, Mick. Take it so good, even with your mouth." Ian groans, feeling warmth pooling in his abdomen. "Gonna come. You gonna take it all?" Ian's voice is high and reedy, his hips stuttering.

Mickey can't reply, obviously, but he grips Ian's hips just that much harder. One of his hands travels up, a single fingertip adding just the slightest bit of pressure on Ian's hole. That seems to do the trick,
as Ian groans loud, thrusting his cock so deep down Mickey's throat that he'd gag if he had the space. He feels Ian let go in his mouth and he barely has to swallow at all, it just flows down his open throat.

Mickey feels a little like a porn star in that moment.

Ian pulls off and turns back around, collapsing next to Mickey in the bed. He pulls him close with an arm around his shoulder, using his free hand to hit the lights. They are plunged into darkness, the only light in the room coming from the streetlights out the window.

"We're really gonna do it." Ian whispers, his breath fanning over Mickey's face as he cuddles him close.

"Yeah, I guess we are." Mickey says, settling next to Ian. He can already feel sleep pulling him under.

"I won't let you down this time." Ian says. It's so low, Mickey barely hears him.

"I won't let you down either." Mickey replies, since that's what he's really worried about.

They fall asleep that night tangled up in each other, both dreaming about their future together, and both hoping desperately that they aren't the one to destroy everything this time.
The phone rings. And it rings. And it rings.

Mickey's frustrated. It's not normal for him to call this many times and not get an answer. He doesn't want to jump to conclusions, but it's hard not to given all the history.

"I'm sure he's fine, Mick. Can we finish this shit?" Mandy says, rolling her eyes as she grabs on of the last boxes and saunters over toward the door of the Milkovich home. Mandy had moved earlier in the week, not long after Mickey had given her the go-ahead.

It had only taken a few days for Mandy to get the shit going once Mickey was on board. Macy had money, her job at the office her and Mandy shared was a good one, much better than Mandy's entry level position.

She had called up a crew of movers that reminded Mickey of the porno moving guys from when Svet and Yev made their great escape.

Mickey clears his throat, trying not to think about Yev, and how he's yet another person he can't seem to get ahold of these days.

But he can't get wrapped up in that shit today. Not when he's got to finish moving. And not when he's got way more pressing matters to consider.

Like why he can't get this fucking asshole on the phone.

He walks out of the house and down the stairs, depositing his last box into the back of his work truck. Unlike his sister, or his ex-wife for that matter, he can't afford a crew of half dressed meat heads to move his shit. He's got to do it on his own.

Well, almost on his own.

"That it?" Ian asks, leaning up against the pick up with his phone in his hand. Mickey takes him in, looking hot as hell in his pea coat and winter boots. How he pulls that off is anyone's guess.
"Yeah, that's it." Mickey says, dropping the box into the bed of the truck just as his sister wanders out of the house, locking it up on her way out. Iggy is working, and Tessa is at some Mommy Class. Whatever the fuck that is.

"Did you get ahold of him?" Ian asks, pocketing his phone as Mandy drops her box in the bed and moves to get in the cab. It's cold as balls today and no one wants to be outside more than they have to.

"Fucker won't pick up my damn calls. Gonna drive down there and shove my boot up his prissy ass." Mickey grumbles, dodging Ian's hands as he makes his way to the truck.

If he notices the hurt look on Ian's face, he doesn't mention it.

The three of them make their way over to Boystown in tense silence. No one is stupid enough to try and talk to Mickey when he's in this kind of mood, and Mickey doesn't have shit to say. So the radio plays Guns n Roses, Patience. Mickey wonders idly if the truck is possessed, and only plays songs that are emotionally relevant in the moment.

Then he remembers the radio playing 'No son of Mine' by Genesis earlier in the week, and he's convinced.

He's got the Dodge version of a poltergeist on his hands.

He chuckles under his breath, but of course Ian hears him. Fucker hears everything.

"I'm sure he's fine, Mick." he says, trying to place a hand on Mickey's twitching leg, but it bounces right off with Mickey's jerky motions.

Ian doesn't try again.

He pulls his hand back and stares straight ahead.

Mickey knows he's hurting his feelings, but he only has room in his brain for one asshole at the moment.

And since Ian's sitting here, healthy, safe and sane at the moment, he draws the short straw.

No one says another word, the whole way to the apartment.

------------------------------------------

It's the first week of February, and everything is covered in a thin layer of ice. Ian makes a decision in that moment that he will never move anyone in the winter again, if he can help it.

They pull up in front of his building. The apartment he's going to share with Mickey from now on. This was supposed to be a happy moment. When they had made the decision to move in together those weeks ago, Ian had been filled with cautious optimism and overflowing elation. He didn't want to get too ahead of himself, given his shared history with Mickey. But things had been going surprisingly smooth for a while, so Ian let himself believe for a minute that this transition could be an easy one and they could maybe just move in together like a normal couple without the world crashing down around them.
But of course, that was a stupid fucking pipe dream. Because for every one good thing that happens to them, two bad things have to follow immediately after.

***

Two days ago

Mickey had gotten a call. It was an unknown number, and he ignored it. Ian had been sitting next to him on the couch in the apartment they were soon going to share. He raised his eyebrows at his boyfriend, but Mickey had just shrugged, laying his phone down on his lap and curling his hand back around Ian's thigh as they continued to watch the marathon of 'Ink Master' they'd been engrossed in since Ian had gotten home from work.

A few minutes later, Mickey's phone had gone off again. Mickey grumbled under his breath, checking the screen to see Matt's name flashing across it.

"Huh." Mickey said, curious. He'd just left Matt not that long ago, going their separate ways after fixing some frozen pipes that had burst over on the west side. Mickey wonders if the pipes had started leaking again, internally groaning at the idea of going back out after just getting home.

But he couldn't ignore Matt's call. He owes him too much to leave him hanging.

He swipes his thumb over the screen, his other hand still resting on Ian's thigh, his eyes still on the TV.

"Hey Matty. Pipes shit the bed again? I just took my pants off. Gonna be pissed if I have to get dressed again." Mickey jokes. When he doesn't hear the corresponding chuckles he's used to, he feels an ice cold chill run through his blood. "Matty? What's wrong?"

"It's Jack." Matt's voice is broken, like he's desperately trying not to break down.

"What?" Mickey can hear his voice. He knows he sounds hysterical. He can feel Ian's eyes on him, wide and scared, but he can't look over at him.

"He's gone, Mick." Matt says. Mickey's mind automatically goes 'worst case scenario.'

"Gone, like gone?" he whispers, his eyes stinging.

"No. Jesus. Fuck." Matt groans. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean it like that." Matt says, voice pained. "I mean he's run off. Left the halfway house. We can't fucking find him anywhere."

Mickey lets out a harsh breath he didn't know he'd been holding.

Jack's not dead. He's just gone.

He looks down at his hand when he feels Ian's palm close over it. The hand that had been gently caressing Ian's thigh when he had answered the phone was now clamped on Ian's leg in a fucking death grip. His knuckles white, pinching the meat of Ian's leg hard enough that he knows for a fact there will be a bruise there later.

"Mick, what's wrong?" Ian said, eyes wide.

"Fuck." was all Mickey could get out.

***
It doesn't take long to get all of Mickey's shit out of the boxes and mixed in with Ian's shit in the apartment. Mickey still doesn't have much in the way of earthly possessions. He's spent the past few years of his life keeping shit as simple as possible, always ready to pick up and run if he got even the slightest hint that he'd been found out. Always hyper aware that he was a fugitive on the run.

Since he's been home, he's been slowly reacquiring things here and there. An actual wardrobe. Some electronic trinkets. Blankets and towels and stupid shit like that. He's also got a small box of personal shit that he'd deny he owned til the day he died. Some pictures of his mother and Mandy. Pictures of Ian from their first go around (Ian doesn't know he has them, and Mickey sees no reason to tell him now.) Pictures of Yev, letters from prison, the few he ever got. Some shit Jack drew for him when they were inside. Little keepsakes from his time in Mexico.

It's about as sentimental as it gets for Mickey, and though he's a lot more open these days, something about that box of meaningless shit is super personal to him. He hides it in the hall closet on the topmost shelf in the back, after taking a long look at a picture Jack drew him one year for his birthday. It's just some gay caricature of the two of them in their prison uniforms, but it never fails to bring a smile to his face.

That fucker better be okay, or Mickey's going to kill him.

Once the unpacking is done, the three of them sit on the couch with some beers, the TV droning on in the background, unwatched.

Mickey's got a beer in one hand and his phone in the other. Ian and Mandy are talking about something, but Mickey doesn't hear them. He takes a sip of his beer, still staring at his phone. He'd just sent another message to Jack. He doesn't know what the fuck he's expecting. Two days, no fucking word.

But he keeps texting anyway.

Mickey had found out a little more about Jack's little disappearing act over the past couple days. He'd gone down to the halfway house to talk to Andy. Might as well go right to the source. Matt had told him what he knew, but Mickey had to make sure nothing was left out.

Andy had told him pretty much the same shit Matt had. That Jack and Rowan had taken off two days ago and never came back. As far as Andy could tell, they had each packed a bag, and broken into the med cabinet to take whatever they could get high off. Then they were in the wind. Neither of their phones were on. Probably bought burners when they hit the streets. That's what Mickey would have done.

He's so fucking mad at Jack right now. He's sure if he found him this second, he'd bust his face wide open. But he'd also hug the fucker so tight he'd bruise his ribs. It's a set of conflicting emotions he's accustomed to, thanks to Ian Fucking Gallagher, but he's not used to this tsunami of feelings being instigated by anyone else.

It's disconcerting.

They sit there on the couch for a long while. No one tries to engage Mickey in conversation. Ian brings him another beer when he drops his empty on the coffee table.

He can hear Mandy saying something. "Ian, don't." is all he hears, but he's so fixated on his phone, he doesn't catch the rest.
He's got bigger things to worry about right now.

A text comes through from Matt. He's been to all the hospitals and jails. No sign of Jack. Mickey is simultaneously relieved and pissed the fuck off.

Where is that asshole?

Matty: still no word. keep u updated. plz do the same if you hear anything.

Mickey stares at the phone, angry and scared and frustrated. He doesn't know what to do. Jack has been a constant in his life for years. He was the one person Mickey could really count on when they were locked up, and the one person he had when he was on the run, before he stumbled upon his Mexico family. Jack has been the best friend he's ever had, besides Ian. And as much as Mickey doesn't want to admit it, Jack has been there for Mickey a lot more than Ian has in the past few years.

Mickey's mind is a whirling mess of memories. Starting out with their first meeting, and ending with Jack OD'd in his arms as Mickey sobbed like a bitch.

Fuck.
He can't lose him.

He drops his phone on the coffee table and goes to stand for another beer. It's only then that he notices he's alone in the living room.

He forgoes the beer in order to find out where the fuck everyone has gone.

He wanders down the hall where he can hear Ian's voice. He pushes open the door to the bedroom (their bedroom, his mind supplies.) to find Ian pacing up and down the floor in front of the windows, phone pressed to his ear with his sister sitting on the bed, her hands in her lap.

"I told him not to get involved, Mick." she says, like he's supposed to know what the fuck that means. "I don't think it's a good idea for him to reach out to those people." she looks genuinely concerned, which spikes Mickey's already overwhelming anxiety.

"What..." he doesn't get to finish, Ian's voice breaks into his train of thought. "Cool, okay, Alex. Just keep an eye out, yeah? You got the picture I sent? Good, yeah. I appreciate it. Thanks, yeah. You too." Ian ended the call and looked up, seeing Mickey and Mandy staring at him.

He sighs, running a hand through his hair and down his neck, pulling at the skin. "What?" he asks, voice a little harsh.

"Who was that?" Mickey asks, crossing the room to get in Ian's space.

Ian shrugs. "Just Alex, a kid I used to work with at the Fairy Tale."

Mickey gives him a confused look. What the fuck?

Ian sighs again, and it's hard for Mickey to read him. Mickey hates it when he can't tell what Ian's thinking.

"Why'd you call him?" Mickey hears himself ask. He has no idea what's going on right now. And he hates it.
"It's just," Ian says, his eyes going soft. "I remember Rowan saying some shit about working. You know like hustling? And I know Alex fucks with that shit sometimes. Turning tricks or whatever. I used to...fuck, never mind. I just asked him to keep an eye out for Rowan and Jack. Sent him a picture from New Years. He'll get it out to all the dancers and tricks he knows. I thought it might be a good lead." Ian's eyes are scared, like he's overstepped somehow.

It makes Mickey feel like shit.

"That's a good idea, Ian. Thanks." he says, his hands reaching up to grip Ian's biceps.

Ian nods minutely, looking over at Mandy, who obviously doesn't agree.

"I don't think he should be talking to those types of people at all." Mandy says, like she can't help herself. "It's not our fault they took off. And it's not our responsibility to bring them back. It's not good for Ian to talk to those type of people anymore."

"Mandy, fuck!" Mickey yells, making her recoil. "He's a god damn adult, and he's trying to help, which is more than you're doing. So shut the fuck up."

Mandy blanches, cringing away like she's been slapped. "Fuck you, Mickey." she says softly. "I'm not the one you're mad at."

She gets up without another word and leaves the apartment.

Mickey feels like a dick the minute the door closes behind his sister. She's right, of course. He's not even really mad, just scared. But Mickey has a hard time distinguishing between his emotions. Fear and anger are so intertwined with him, it's almost like the same feeling most of the time.

"Fuck." he says, stepping away from Ian. "I'll call her later." he decides, walking around Ian to get to the bathroom.

Ian sits on the bed, resting his head in his hands.

This is not how he saw their first few days together in their new home going.

But when has anything worked out the way he wanted?

------------------------------------------------------------------

Another two agonizing days go by with no word from Jack. Ian and Mickey are over at Mandy's new place for game night, but the whole evening has a somber tone to it that Ian just doesn't like. It's just not as fun without the siblings bickering or Mickey teasing Ian mercilessly.

Mandy and Mickey had made up almost immediately after their little spat earlier in the week. Mickey is obviously on edge, and Mandy was just looking out for Ian's interests. (although Mickey was right, he's a grown man who can take care of himself. But it's nice that she cares.) They had begrudgingly apologized to each other, letting it go for the most part.

But Jack's still not back, and the longer he stays away, the more withdrawn Mickey gets. An irrational, jealous part of Ian is pissed that Mickey is so twisted up about Jack's Houdini act. The kid's a junkie. He was well before he met Mickey. Ian and Mickey have both seen this shit all their
lives. Why Mickey thinks Jack would be an exception to the addiction rule is beyond Ian.

Ian wonders if this is what Mickey was like all the times Ian ran away or disappeared. A dark part of Ian twists angrily that another man, any other man, can elicit this type of response from his boyfriend.

Ian wonders sometimes, about Mickey's relationship with Jack. They've talked about it, of course, but Ian's sure he doesn't have the whole story.

Ian wonders if Mickey loved Jack, before Ian came back into the picture. Ian wonders if Mickey and Jack would have ended up together in the real world if Ian had never come back around. He wonders if Jack pulls this stupid shit just to suck Mickey back into their old dynamic.

Ian remembers the day Jack OD'd with brutal clarity. He remembers finding out Mickey was there, doing fucking heroin with this guy. Almost throwing his whole life away for a kid he met in prison. Fucking him. Holding him while he slept.

Ian hated Jack at first. Then he tolerated him, for Mickey. Then, recently, and shockingly he ended up really liked him. Considered him a friend, not just some prick he can't shake for Mickey's sake.

Now, well, now Ian thinks he's back to hating him. He knows that's not good. He knows it's going to cause problems in his relationship. He knows he can't make Mickey choose.

He's afraid of what that ultimatum might result in.

"Hello, earth to Ian?" Macy's voice snaps him back to his body. How long had he been zoning out like that?

From the look on the faces around the table, a while.

Shit.

Ian picks up his beer, taking a sip while he rolls the cup of dice with the other hand. Fucking Yahtzee. Who's idea was this?

"Sorry," he says, but doesn't elaborate.

"Can we pause this shit, or whatever?" Mickey asks before Ian can even throw the dice. "I need a fucking smoke."

Macy doesn't allow smoking in her apartment, so Mickey stands and makes his way to the balcony without another word. Mandy shoots Macy a look, but it's gone before Ian can decipher it. She stands up and follows her brother onto the balcony, beer in hand.

Ian sighs, putting the cup full of dice back on the table and resting his head in his hand. He takes another pull off his beer, staring at the table.

"Shit still fucked up, then?" Macy asks, sipping her own drink.

"You could say that." Ian says, not bothering to look up. "I know he's upset, but how long is it going to be like this?" he doesn't expect an answer. He knows no one but Mickey can answer that question. And Ian's sure Mickey has no idea either.

"I'm sure he's just worried about Jack. They've been friends a long time." Macy says, reaching over to place a hand over Ian's on the table top.

"I know that." Ian sighs, "And I'm trying not to get worked up over it, like in a jealous way, but
Mick's never had a friend like this before. He never really had friends at all."

"What do you mean?" Macy asks, a confused expression contorting her face.

Ian sighs again, taking a long sip of his beer. "When we were all kids, Mandy and I were friends first. But she didn't really have any other friends either. The Milkovich kids stuck together, and stuck to themselves. It was kinda them against the world. I got in by accident." Ian laughs, making a point in his mind to tell Macy how he and Mandy became friends another time. "But it's not always easy with them, even after all these years. I still feel like sometimes I don't know the right thing to say, or the best way to help. They've got a lot of dark shit I'm not equipped to help with, just like I have my own stuff they struggle with. Shit, when I ran away to join the army..."

Macy cuts in before Ian can continue his monologue, "What, really? You're Army? I was in the National Guard!" she's so excited, Ian cringes. He kinda wishes he never brought it up now, because now that he started it, he feels obligated to finish the story.

"Didn't last." he mutters. "I had my first real bipolar episode while in basic training, shit went sideways. A lot of crazy stuff went down, and I ended up discharged before I ever even got out of the country."

How did he end up talking about this shit? Wasn't he just talking about Mickey? How the fuck does this always happen to him?

He's spiraling again. Fuck.

"Hey, hey." Macy says, again placing her hand over Ian's. Her fingers curl around his wrist, pulling his attention back to her. "Don't get all down on yourself, Ian. I didn't last all that long either." she smiled sadly. "I've got my own, um, issues." she said cryptically, tapping the side of her head. "I enlisted in the National Guard when I was eighteen. Remember how I said I went through a rebellious phase? With the tattoos and shit?" Ian nodded. "Well, joining up was the exact opposite of what my parents wanted for me. But only about a year and a half in, they found out I had depression and anxiety. I mean, I had never been medicated back then. I hid it really well, back when I was young. Thought everyone was like that. But you know how it is, you can't keep that shit buried forever. The longer I stayed away from home the worse it got. I ended up getting a medical discharge about a year and a half later. It was mortifying. I felt like such a failure. Crawled back home with my tail between my legs, went to college like my parents planned. That's how I got sucked back into their shit, actually. Felt like I couldn't take care of myself." she took her hand back to wipe at her eyes. "So, you know, you're not the only one who has a dark past. I'm sure Mickey and Mandy don't hold that shit against you. Mandy's told me some really fucked up shit, but I know there has to be more. Which is fucking heartbreaking. I know it's going to take a lot of time to really break down all those walls. But I do know this, they don't seem to be the kind of people to just give up on someone. Jack is Mickey's people. You know?"

"That's just it, Mace. Mickey and Mandy don't half ass anything. They do it or they fucking don't. Either it will never happen, or they are all in. I've seen them do it with me, and the way Mandy was with Lip back in the day." Macy makes a face at the mention of Ian's brother, but Ian continues regardless. "And that's how I know this shit with Jack isn't gonna pass. Mickey is one hundred percent loyal, dedicated as fuck, and he'll do anything for someone he loves. I mean anything, Macy." Ian's face is so serious, it leaves no room for interpretation. "Being loved by a Milkovich is an intense sensation, I've never really felt anything like it. It can be scary, but it's god damn beautiful. But there's no end to it, and there's not a single thing they won't do for someone in the circle." Ian sighs sadly, looking at Macy through his eyelashes. "So there are three ways this shit with Jack ends: Mickey goes hard, turning over every rock and shaking down every connection until we find Jack.
Then Mick'll beat his ass for scaring him so bad. Or, we never find Jack, and Mickey tears himself apart for failing his friend. He'll drink and start fights and I won't be able to get through to him, and he'll probably end up back in jail. Or, the worst option, Jack ends up dead, and Mickey blames himself. Even though it's not his fault and there's nothing he could have done to prevent it." Macy's shocked expression kind of surprises Ian, but then he remembers, she doesn't know the Milkovichs like he does.

Not yet.

"Macy, there is no in between with them. You are in or you are out. We're in, Jack's in. Mickey would die for us. He'd fucking kill for us. That's not hyperbole. If anything happens to Jack out there, Mickey will blame himself, and he'll implode. He's all in. It's just who he is."

Macy just stares at Ian, her eyes wide, as his words sink in. Ian's not sure if Macy really understands. She's heard the stories, but she hasn't lived it yet.

The silence drags on for a moment before Ian hears the patio door.

"You better be rolling those damn dice, Gallagher." Mickey's voice travels across the living room. Ian can tell he's aiming for his casual irritation, but it falls short. Ian's known him too long.

Ian picks up the cup and shakes it, tossing the dice out onto the table.

He'll play along for now.

--------------------------------------------------------------

"I don't know why we gotta hang out with those bitches again. We were just fucking here on Thursday." Mickey grumbles, moving around Ian's body to throw himself into the elevator. Ian steps in next to his boyfriend and presses the button to take the elevator to the sixth floor.

"Macy got a new waffle iron. You love waffles, Mick." Ian mumbles, even though it's mostly for show. It's early Saturday morning, and Ian is desperate to get Mickey out of the house, get his mind of his missing friend.

The past few days have been hell. After they had gone back to their apartment after game night, Mickey had been withdrawn and quiet. Ian had left him be, not pushing, not prodding. They haven't had sex in days. Ian's only ever seen Mickey like this once before, after his wedding. That fact is enough to cause him serious alarm.

The only person he's really even talking to is Matt. They are on the phone constantly, comparing notes and quietly supporting each other. Ian hears them all the time, but he doesn't engage. Mickey gets irritated and sad during and after these phone calls, since none of their conversations amount to anything. Jack is still missing.

"I could be still sleeping." Mickey snaps.

Matt had taken some time off from work to continue his searching full time. Apparently, even though Jack is a bottom of the barrel gutter junkie, he has never stopped talking to his parents. Even when he was at his worst, he was in constant contact with Matt at least. So this little extended leave has raised all the red flags.
With Matt not working, Mickey has been off too. Which has only made things worse. Mickey sits around the apartment all damn day, drinking and calling old contacts. Dealers he knows, pimps he used to work with, buddies from jail and his gun running days. It's like a 'who's who' of Chicago scum, and Ian fucking hates it. Mickey has come so far, and now he's throwing himself into the pit again.

Ian understands, he explained it himself to Macy a few days ago. Mickey cares, more than he'd ever let on. More than he'd ever have allowed himself to growing up. But now that the door is open, it seems like maybe Mickey can't draw the line. He's letting his love and worry for Jack consume his whole life. He doesn't know where to stop. He doesn't know a healthy way to deal with this kind of thing. He's overwhelmed, and in over his head.

But of course, Ian can't tell him any of that. He tried, and got nothing but the cold shoulder. That was just before he got the call from Mandy, inviting them over for brunch. Ian's not even sure how he got Mickey to agree. Maybe he needed a distraction too.

Ian knocks, and Macy lets them in a moment later. She looks nice, for a Saturday morning. She's wearing a little pair of lime green capris, with a white spaghetti strap top and a gray cardigan.

"Hey Mace, you look pretty." Ian says, pulling her into a hug. He feels Mickey walk around him and rolls his eyes when Macy gives him a questioning look.

"Thanks Ian, you look good too."

Ian laughs, because she's full of shit. He and Mickey are both wearing long sleeve thermals and jeans. He knows he looks tired, deep purple shadows under his eyes. Mickey hasn't been sleeping, which effects Ian's schedule.

"Hey Ian." Mandy says, meeting him in the living room after he and Mickey hang up their coats in the hall closet. "How are you?"

Ian pulls her into a tight hug, some of his deeply held tension seeping out of him in the embrace.

"Not so great, Mands." Ian whispers.

Mandy pulls back and searches his eyes. "I'm sorry." she says, but doesn't elaborate. That's fine with Ian. There's really not much to say at this point.

The girls wander back to the kitchen to finish up brunch while the boys slink over to the living room to wait to be served. There is a tray of mimosas on the coffee table, and Ian and Mickey both help themselves.

Ian sits there for a while, just staring straight ahead. In his peripheral vision, he sees Mickey taking out his phone again, most likely texting yet another dirtbag who will have no new information.

After who knows how long, Mandy calls them into the dining room, food's ready. Ian lifts himself from the couch without bothering to wait for Mickey, taking a sip of his mimosa as he walks into the dining room.

"Looks good, Mace." he says with a forced smile. It does look delicious, he's just doesn't have it in him to be happy about much right now, nevermind breakfast food.

The waffles are whole grain and they have fresh raspberries sprinkled on top with honey instead of syrup.

Mickey finally joins them, scoffing when he gets to the table. "What the fuck is this hippie bullshit?
Don't tell me I schlepped my ass all the way over here for god damn berries and fucking honey on my motherfucking waffles?" It's such a 'Mickey' thing to say, but there is none of that dry humor in his tone. He just sounds pissed.

"Uh, there's butter and syrup in the kitchen, let me grab it." Mandy mutters, her chair scraping against the tile floor as she jumps up and heads toward the kitchen.

Macy and Ian just stare at each other while Mickey keeps his eyes on the table. The awkward silence is interrupted by Mickey's phone going off. The shrill ringing breaks Mickey’s fugue state, his eyes going wide as he scrambles to answer it before he misses the call.

Ian and Macy continue to eat, knowing full well how these calls usually go by now. Mandy returns the dining room, coffee pot in hand just as Mickey answers the phone.

He doesn't even look at the screen, just swipes his finger against it and puts the phone to his ear.

"Hello?" he says, desperation bleeding into his voice.

Ian grips his head in his hands, staring at the table. Whoever it is, Ian's sure it is not good.

"Mikhailo. Is good you answer." Svetlana's voice travels over the line.

"Shit, Svet." Mickey sighs, all his muscles relaxing at once. "I thought you were someone else."

"Your wayward lover?" she says cooly.

"Ian's right here." Mickey says, looking over at his boyfriend. Ian raises his eyebrows, but Mickey waves him off.

"No, the other one, skinny one who has affinity for needles." Svetlana bit out.

Mickey's blood boiled. "Shut your fucking mouth." he growled, causing the other three people in the room to shoot him worried looks. He waved them off again. "What do you know about Jack?" he asked, confused.

"Only that he is missing. That he ran away with some new piece of ass, and that you miss him terribly." Svetlana said, irritated. "Your sister told me." she added on as an afterthought.

"Fuck. You. What the fuck are you calling me for anyway? I'm busy." Mickey's eyes shifted to his sister, who was suddenly very busy with her faggy waffles.

He'll deal with her later.

"You are too busy for your son?" Svetlana asks pointedly.

"Why?" Mickey sits up straight, his whole body going cold.

"Is nothing. He fell, broke his arm. Has nice cast. Is orange." Svetlana is speaking, but Mickey is no longer listening. He stands up, knocking his chair back. It hits the floor with a clatter. Everyone's head shoot up in comical synchronicity.
"Broke his fucking arm? How? Where?"

He's got three sets of eyes staring at him, and unlike earlier, he feels bad about not sharing. "It's Yev, he broke his arm."

"What?" Mandy asks, jumping up to stand by her brother. She stands up the flipped chair, and as soon as it's upright again, Mickey falls into hard. He feels dizzy.

Ian looks up, his face pale, waiting.

"Is fine." Svetlana repeats, bringing Mickey's attention back to her. "He fell out of tree fort. Clean break. I told him not to go up there in winter. Ice everywhere. Does whatever he wishes, just like his father." she chuckled. "He is too much like you. Never listens. Now he must deal with consequences."

"Svet, please." Mickey groans, blinking back tears. "I'm in a really shitty place right now. Can you not fuck with me anymore?"

"I am not." she replies simply. "Our son had an accident. I called you, his father, to tell you. We are back from the hospital. He is sleeping, he's had much drugs. You can not talk right now, but I thought you would like to know from me, and not see it on Facebook. Yes?"

"Okay, yeah." Mickey sighs, dropping back into his chair. "You want me to come up there? It'll take a while, but I can get a truck from Matty..." he's cut off mid-sentence by his ex-wife.

"Is not necessary." she says, her voice kinder than before, no teasing tone evident. "I just wanted you to know. Is important to you, yes?"

"Yes. It is." Mickey replies, suddenly so fucking tired. "I've been trying to reach you guys for a while, how come you only call when there's an emergency?"

"My apologies. We are very busy." she says, sounding almost sincere. "We got your Christmas gifts, Yevgeny was very please with his presents. Very kind of you, generous."

"He's my kid, Svet. I wish I could have done more."

"Was more than enough." Svetlana sounds completely genuine now, and it throws Mickey a bit. "I am sorry we did not call earlier. I am also sorry you are having troubles at the moment, Mikhailio. I hope your little friend comes home, unhurt."

"Uh, thanks." Mickey says, utterly dumbfounded.

"I will tell your son I spoke to you. He will be pleased. I will call you when he is ready to talk. You will answer."

"Of course I will." Mickey says back, feeling a little calmer now. The kid is going to be okay. Mickey's broken bones before and survived. It's kind of like a Milkovich right of passage. If it has to happen, Mickey supposes it's better to have it be due to an accident, and not a drunken beating.

"Good." Svetlana says. "And Mikhailio, don't do anything stupid, searching for your missing friend. You have good things now, don't throw that away for someone who does not deserve your help."

Mickey wants to argue. He wants to tell her that she doesn't know what the fuck she's talking about. But he's afraid she actually does, so he just agrees.
"Okay, Svet." he sighs, feeling his eyes prickling with tears. "Tell him I love him."

"Yes. Goodbye." and she's gone before Mickey can reply.

"Mick, what's going on?" Ian is the first one to speak after Mickey takes the phone away from his ear.

Mickey doesn't say anything at first. He stands back up and looks at his boyfriend. "I'm going." he says quietly, moving to leave the table.

Ian shoots Mandy and Macy and apologetic look and follows Mickey out of the apartment without another word, having to run to keep up.

-------------------------------------------------

Ian follows Mickey all the way back to the apartment, keeping a good distance between them. He has no idea what's going through Mickey's head right now.

Ian gets on the L a few steps after Mickey, sitting across from him instead of next to him like usual. Mickey throws a foot up on an empty chair and stares out the window the whole way home.

Ian was shocked to hear Yev broke his arm, but only to a certain extent. He's a young boy, that kind of thing is bound to happen at some point.

What he's more thrown by is the fact that Svetlana called to tell him, and that Mickey didn't lose his shit on the spot.

With everything that's been going on, Ian expected the news of his son's accident to be the straw that broke the camel's back, but Mickey took the news scarily well, only managing to shut down even more.

Angry, screaming Mickey was scary. But silent, distant Mickey was fucking terrifying.

Ian's not dumb enough to try and engage him in public, so he keeps his mouth shut.

They make their way back to the apartment, and as Ian is unlocking the door, Mickey is standing behind him, impatiently tapping his foot while he scrolls through his messages again.

Ian lets them into the apartment and drops his keys on the table by the door. Mickey walks around him and makes his way to the living room, never looking up from his phone.

Ian had it in his mind that the moment they got home, he was going to talk to Mickey about all this shit.

But now that they are there, sitting next to each other on the couch, Ian feels frozen. He doesn't know what to say or where to start.

So he decides to buy himself some time, putting on one of the pirated action DVDs Carl let him borrow.

Mickey doesn't say anything either, just continues to stare at his phone while the apartment is filled with the sounds of gunfire and explosions.

Ian feels helpless, and so utterly unsure of himself.
He hopes by the time the movie is over, he'll know what to do.

---------------------------------------

Except he doesn't. He's still lost when he switches from an action movie to a horror movie. He's still lost when he orders pizza. He's still lost when the pizza arrives and they eat in silence, washing it down with too many beers.

He's silent and so is Mickey, until the phone rings a little before 9 pm.

Ian watches through squinty eyes as Mickey sits up straight and reaches for his phone, which is vibrating across the coffee table.

"Who is it?" Ian asks, eyes still on the TV. Some girl's getting decapitated. Looks real.

Mickey doesn't answer him, just swipes a thumb across the screen and puts it to his ear. "Yo." he says by way of greeting. "Hey Diaz."

Ian looks over then. Who the fuck is Diaz?


Ian's attention is certainly piqued now.

A bat? A knife? What the fuck?

Ian watches as Mickey walks out of the living room and heads for the bedroom they now share. The bedroom they have yet to fuck in since Mickey moved in.

And now it looks like that won't be happening tonight either.

Not that Ian's prospects were looking very good before the phone call either.

Ian grumbles some obscenities under his breath before heaving himself off the couch and following his boyfriend into the bedroom.

He finds him standing in front of the open closet, pulling a bat out of the back, and slipping a hunting knife off the top shelf and tucking it into his pocket.

"Mickey, what the fuck are you doing?" Ian asks, leaning up against the door jamb, arms crossed over his chest.

"Diaz saw Jack. Down at some crack house in Garfield Park. I'm gonna go get him. Don't have a gun, shit." he says the last part to himself, like he's actually distressed that he doesn't have a fucking firearm in the house.

"What did you just say?" Ian asks, pushing off the wall and taking a step closer.

"You heard me, Ian. I'm going down to Garfield Park, and I'm taking Jack the fuck outta there." Mickey says, grabbing some money out of a shoe box he keeps under the bed. Ian watches as Mickey stuffs a handful of twenties into his pocket before zipping up his hoodie and making his way
to the door and back into the hallway.

Ian follows him, mind reeling. He should have said something earlier. He should have done something sooner.

"Mick, stop." Ian says, grabbing Mickey's arm and spinning him around. They are in the living room now. "What the fuck is going on? Who's Diaz?"

Mickey huffs, irritated. "I don't have time for this shit, Ian. I gotta go, while he's still there."

"No. I'm here now, Mickey. Explain this shit to me. It's only fair. You've been pushing me away for days. What the fuck is going on?" Ian can hear himself talking. He can hear the fear and anger in his voice, mixed with confusion and hurt.

"God fucking damn it, Ian. I don't have time for your bullshit right now!" Mickey yells, throwing his hands up in the air. Ian's face falls. He can instantly feel his eyes burning. Shit.

Mickey's face softens the smallest amount. "Fine, fuck." he says, voice strained. "Diaz is a jail buddy. Sells dope. I called him earlier in the week, told him to keep his eye out for Jack. He knows him from inside, but he's also one of Jack's regular connection. He says he just went by a flop house down on West Monroe Street. Jack and fucking Rowan are down there right now. If I haul ass down there, I can get Jack. But I gotta go now." Mickey moved to go around Ian, but Ian took a step to the side, grabbing onto Mickey's shoulders with his hands.

"Mick, it's after nine, and West Monroe is a fucking dangerous place." Ian said, clearly worried.

"I'm fucking south side, Ian. I can handle myself." Mickey spat, trying to shake Ian. But Ian just held on tighter.

"Yeah, we are south side." Ian agreed. "Which means, by default, we are not west side. We don't know anyone down there. You can't go off half cocked into someone else's neighborhood looking to bust skulls and be a fucking hero! It's a suicide mission."

"Oh fuck you. What would you know about it? Diaz says I'm good. Besides, if Jack and Rowan's prissy asses are chillin down there, I think I'm good. Now get the fuck out of my way."

Mickey, you need to stop this shit." Ian says, never letting up on the grip he has on Mickey's arms. "Jack is a grown man. If he wants to ruin his life, you have to let him. You can't save him."

"Excuse me?" Mickey says, rubbing an eyebrow with his thumb, tongue darting out over his bottom lip.

"I know you mean well, Mick, but this shit isn't normal. You've been fucked up for days. Jack's not your problem, not like you're making him. You gotta let it go." Ian tries to be gentle as he says it, but his own irritation with the situation is bleeding into his words. "If he wanted to see you, he'd call. He obviously has other shit he's doing, so why don't you lay off for a while, huh?" he didn't mean for it to come out so harsh, but he's angry. This was supposed to be a happy time for them, and it's all gone to shit because of Jack and his precious fucking heroin.

It's not fair.

Mickey looks up at Ian, eyes wide, and rips his arms out of Ian's grasp. "God damn it!" he roars, shoving Ian with both hands. Ian stumbles back, shocked. "You don't fucking tell me what to do, and you don't get to tell me who I fucking care about. What is your fucking problem? It's okay for me to drag my ass all over Chicago in the dead of winter, a one man fucking search party, but only if
it's for your stupid ass? You forget that shit? When you were out there, fucking selling your ass and doing drugs? When you ran away and started grinding all over random dick for five dollar bills? You remember that shit? Cuz I sure as fuck do. And it was ME who brought you home! It was ME who carried your ass three fucking blocks. So tell me, are you the only person I'm allowed to do that for? Are you the only one worth the effort, Ian?"

Ian pales. He can actually feel the blood draining from his face and pooling in his feet.

"Mick." he whispers, "That was different, I was sick, and we were in love..."

"Oh!" Mickey yells, face red with anger, voice dripping with sarcasm. "That's right! Ian's the only one who's allowed to be sick. Ian's the only one I'm allowed to give a fuck about. The only person Mickey Milkovich is allowed to love. What the fuck was I thinking? Oh wait!" he says, his eyes hardened. "I know what I was thinking. I was thinking that Jack was the only person who had my back for years. Fucking years! I was thinking that Jack was the one who fucking talked me down when I wanted to fucking off myself. I was thinking Jack was the one I spent my birthday with, Christmas with, and all the days in between. I was thinking that Jack was the only person I could count on inside. Cuz you and everyone else out here fell off the face of the earth. I was thinking that when I was alone and in a foreign country, Jack was the only person who helped me out. Before L and Javi, he was the only person I talked to for months. Sent me money, even when he was strung out to the gills. " Mickey's voice was hoarse from all the screaming, and he had unshed tears in his eyes, but he wasn't done yet. "When we started all this shit back up, I told you how it was. Jack was there for me when you didn't give a fuck. When you fucking gave up on me and moved on. Jack never once fucking turned his back on me, no matter how SICK he was. He always answered my calls, was always there for me when I was so goddamn alone. You weren't. So if all you're gonna say to me is that I need to let it go, you can go fuck yourself." Mickey seethed, chest heaving. "What I'm doing right now for Jack is called being loyal. You should pay attention. You might fucking learn something," he shoved Ian hard, his back connecting harshly with the wall. "Now get the fuck out of my way." Mickey dodged Ian, taking the few steps it took to get to the door. He wrenched the door open, leaving it swinging as he strode down the hallway and into the night.

Ian stood there, shocked stupid, just watching Mickey until he was gone. Once the other man was off the floor, Ian closed and locked the door. Alone in the apartment, he slid down the wall until he landed on the floor in a heap, cradling his head in his hands. Silent tears streamed down his face as he pulled his hair until his scalp stung, staring at the floor sightlessly.

What the fuck just happened?

What the fuck did he do?

Chapter End Notes

i know this shit can be dark at times. but it's all gonna be okay. (whatever 'okay' means....)

ps: i don't know shit about chicago. all i know about 'good' or 'bad' neighborhoods is from reading articles online as research. i use real street names, but i don't know if the area is actually bad or not. so my apologies to anyone who lives on west monroe street. i don't actually know if it's a shitty area or not. it's all made up in my head.
Weather the storm with me?

Chapter Summary

Relationships are tested. Relationships are solidified. Relationships are hard.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He knows he's fucked up. He knew he was going to fuck up before he even did it.

But that didn't stop it from happening. It never does.

He lolls his head to the side, eyes scanning the room, taking in the scene around him. He didn't think he'd be back here so soon. He's not exactly sure how it happened. He never is. One minute he's fine, and the next it's all gone to shit again.

He knows it's his own fault. He can blame genetics. He can blame shit luck. He can blame childhood trauma or the stress of being gay, or even his myriad of psychological disorders, but that's all bullshit.

The fact of the matter is he's an addict.

He fucking loves getting high. Even when it takes everything from him that really matters. The tricky part about heroin is, once you're hooked, nothing else matters as much as getting high. You can deal with the loss of your family, all your friends, everything you own, your freedom, even your own health, as long as you can keep getting high.

When he's on a good run, getting high all day, every day, he barely has time to think of anything else. The only thing that takes up space in your head is getting high and staying that way. It makes shit so much easier, not caring.

But once the drugs run out (they always do), everything that you forgot about while you were running comes crashing back down around you, and it's always a million times worse when you come out of it.

But that never stops him, not even once. Fuck, he almost died last time, and here he is again.

Shit.

He sits up on the ratty couch, elbows on his knees. It's dark in the room, Jack's not even sure the lights work in this place.

He's in a shitty apartment on the second floor of a duplex somewhere on the west side. His boy Diaz just stopped by with a half a finger of dope, which was not that much to split between Jack and Rowan, but he got a fairly good deal on it, and it will keep them going for at least the night and half of tomorrow.

He hates this part, rationing out the drugs to make sure no one gets sick (or sober, for that matter), but he'd rather be the one in charge of this shit. It's not that he doesn't trust Rowan, it's that he doesn't trust anyone, not concerning this shit. So he hides it, and fixes them both a shot when he deems fit.
Rowan is a decent running partner, as far as Jack can tell so far. It's only been a few days, but the kid doesn't hound him for an extra fix, he pulls his own weight, and he's a okay fuck. What else is there, really?

He's liked Rowan since the moment he met him. Kid's funny as hell, nice, and most importantly, he's real. Jack can be himself around him, never having to worry that he's too rough around the edges, or too much of a dirt bag. Rowan accepts the junkie in Jack, just as much as he accepts the faggot, or the asshole in Jack.

Not many people do.

Mickey does.

Fuck.

Mickey.

He's gonna be so pissed.

Nope. Jack's not gonna think about that shit right now.

He can hear noises still coming from the bedroom, but from the way the banging against the wall is increasing, Jack's fairly certain it will be over soon. He leans forward on the couch, stuffing his hand under the cushion and pulling out small black cosmetic bag. He unzips the bag and pulls out his kit. Rowan's gonna want a fix after he's done.

By the time Jack has the two shots set up and he's pulling his belt out of his jeans, Rowan is coming out of the bedroom, random John trailing behind him. The John doesn't make eye contact with Jack as he slips Rowan some crumpled bills and makes his way out of the apartment. Good, Jack doesn't want that creepy prick looking at him.

Rowan shows the guy out, closing the door after he's left and locking it. "Lucky for us Traci is letting us stay here while she's in the hospital. We're gonna have to take care of her once she gets home, though." Rowan says, flopping down on the couch next to Jack and putting his hand out for one of the full needles.

"Who is Traci again, and how do you know her?" Jack asks, passing the needle over and rolling his sleeve up.

"She's a girl I know from one of my times in fancy rehab. Back when my pimp was still trying to keep me pretty. Good times. Anyway, her gramma left her this place when she died. But Traci hasn't been around for a few weeks, got a really bad abscess from a dirty needle. Had to check herself into the hospital, get it lanced. The fucking thing was the size of a softball!" Rowan chuckled darkly. "But, uh, she can't pay the bills while she's indisposed, so no lights."

"Fuck it." Jack replies, unphased by the macabre tale Rowan just spun. He's seen way worse in his past. An abscessed arm is child's play. "We got candles, as long as I can see to hit a vein, we're golden." he says, pulling his belt tight around his arm and placing it between his teeth. He felt around on his forearm for a vein, and once one popped, he stuck the needle in, depressing the plunger.

Once he was done, he capped the needle and threw it on the table. Rowan did the same with his and they just sat in silence, letting their highs wash over them.

And there it was. That blissful emptiness. In that moment, not a god damn thing mattered. He had no thoughts. He had no feelings. He was a blank slate, and empty shell.
Fucking beautiful.

Jack looked over at Rowan. He was a mess. He was still shirtless from his last trick, wearing dirty sweats and nothing else. His bare feet propped up on the coffee table as he tilted his head back and closed his eyes, hands folded over his bare stomach. He had a small smile on his face, lost in his own head.

"You got a plan for cash tomorrow?" Rowan asked after a moment, not bothering to open his eyes.

Sure, Jack had a plan. Not that he was too excited to implement it.

"Thought I'd head down to the park, steal some purses." Jack muttered, closing his own eyes. He didn't want to think about that shit right now. He just wanted to enjoy his high while it lasted. He didn't wanna start thinking about the next hustle just yet. He just wanted to breathe.

Before Rowan could respond, there was a loud bang on the locked front door. The sound of a fist connecting with the wood shattered Jack's buzz as his heart jumped into his throat. His eyes flew open and he looked over at Rowan, who looked just as terrified as he felt.

"What the fuck?" Jack whispered, eyes on the door. "I thought you said we were cool here!"

"We are!" Rowan said back, voice hushed. "Traci promised. No one knows were here."

The banging came again, louder and more violent, this time accompanied by a voice. "Open the fucking door, you junkie prick, or Imma break it down!"

Mickey.

Fuck.

Jack jumped up from the couch, wobbling a little under the weight of the drugs. He took a step toward the door cautiously.

"Jack, what are you doing?" Rowan ground out, still whispering for some stupid reason.

"It's Mickey." Jack said, as if that explained everything.

"Don't let him in!" Rowan insisted, pushing himself further into the couch.

"He's not joking, Rowan, he'll break down the damn door. You have no idea." Jack said, taking another step, but jumping back a moment later as another series of wall-shaking banging vibrated the door.

"How the fuck did he even find us?" Rowan groaned, running a hand through his dirty hair nervously.

Jack didn't bother to answer, finally making his way to the door and opening it hesitantly.

When he pulled the door back, there was Mickey, bat in one hand, his other fist poised in the air, ready to assault the door once more.

Jack's eyes widened as he took in the furious face of the man standing across from him. Jack's lips curled into a slow smile, totally involuntary.

He found him. Of course he did.
"You motherfucker." Mickey growled, stepping over the threshold and laying Jack out with a brutal punch to the jaw.

Jack didn't even stumble, he crumpled. His knees gave out as his head snapped back. He landed on the dirty carpet, moaning in pain.

Mickey stepped over his body and closed the door behind him, leaning the baseball bat against the wall.

Oh shit.

"So this is it, huh? This is how you wanna live your life? After everything everyone did for you? After my boyfriend saved your miserable life? After you promised your fucking dad no more bullshit? This is what's important to you?" Mickey took in the room around him. There were used needles on the coffee table, as well as an empty dope bag and a used spoon. There was a belt on the couch and empty liquor bottles all over the floor. There were half a dozen condoms strewn all over the table top. Mickey grimaced. Wonderful.

Jack was still writhing on the ground, but Mickey could tell he was dirty. He had dried blood on his arms, fresh, nasty looking tracks running along the veins there. His skin was pale, making the blood seeping out from between his lips look menacing. Mickey had hit him harder than he meant to, but he was just so fucking pissed.

"Hello to you too, Mick." Jack laughed, the asshole. He sat up on his hands and crab-walked backwards to lean his back against the wall by the door. A hand came up and brushed against mouth, coming back bloody.

"Fuck you." Mickey yelled, throwing a pointed finger in Jack's direction.

Rowan flinched, curling in on himself further on the couch. Mickey had always scared him, just a little bit. Reminding him of the pimps he would see beating tricks on the streets, only to pull them close moments later whispering 'I don't wanna hit you, but you gotta stay in line, baby.' Mickey had that same volatility, that same voracity, the same charismatic affection that draws you in.

But Mickey wasn't Jack's pimp. He was just a friend.

So how DID he find them?

Jack turned over onto his hands and knees, spit some blood on the dirty carpet, before lifting himself gingerly from the floor and dropping back down onto the sofa. He could hear Mickey's heavy breathing, but he just closed his eyes again.

He just wanted a few more moments of empty silence, was that too much to ask?
Mickey was fucking seething. He kicked a mostly empty bottle of vodka that was resting on the carpet, sending it skidding across the floor.

"You fucking asshole." he said, staring down his friend. Jack was just sitting there, head thrown back with his eyes closed, one hand rubbing harshly over his busted lip.

Asshole probably can't feel a thing.

"Mickey, I'm sorry." Jack said, voice hoarse.

Sorry. This prick was fucking sorry. Well, that fixes everything, doesn't it?

"How did you find us?" Rowan squeaked. He was paler than usual, and Mickey could see he was dirtier than Jack. Mickey wondered if this shit hole even had running water. There was obviously no electricity, because not even these gutter junkies needed a dozen candles to cook heroin.

Rowan was shirtless, and covered in hickies and bruises. If Mickey had to guess, he'd say the kid had gone back to hooking. Although that was shitty, he wasn't here for that dude.

He was here for Jack.

"Fucking Diaz told me." Mickey spat, running a shaky hand over his mouth. "I've been calling every dirt bag I could think of to find your stupid ass." he pointed at Jack, "Dealers, gangbangs, pimps, fucking arms dealers." ticking his fingers off spastically as he spoke.

Jack's eyes widened, and he opened his mouth to speak, but Mickey cut him off. "You think I want to talk to those fucking people? I'm trying to separate myself from this shit, Jack. I'm still on fucking parole." Mickey stalked over to the couch, getting back into Jack's face. "You pull me into this shit? After you promised you were done. Last time, remember? When you almost fucking died! You told me that you were done. And I told you I couldn't keep doing this? I told you I had to walk away? So, this right here, does this mean that you don't give a shit? You wanna hang out in places like this? I'm guessing you've gone back to robbing people, while you let your friend there sell his body to strangers? Sound about right?" Jack grimaced, looking over at Rowan, who was crying openly now.

"Mick." Jack said, but didn't continue.

"I guess I'm just an asshole, cuz here I am, chasing you like a fucking idiot. When you've obviously already made your choice." Mickey nodded to himself, running a hand through his hair. "Fuck you, Jack. I don't even know what I'm doing here." Mickey looked into his friend's stricken face, nodded once more and turned toward the door.

"Mickey, wait." Jack whispered, tears in his own eyes.

Mickey spun around, ready to unleash some more on his friend, but the beaten look on his face stopped him.

"Please, don't go like this. I'm sorry." he said, standing up off the couch and walking over toward Mickey. He reached his hands out for him, frowning hard when Mickey stepped out of reach. "I don't know why I did this. I'm not even enjoying it. I wish I could take it all back."

Rowan looked up at that, betrayal written all over his face.

Mickey, on the other hand, looked relieved. "Shit, really?"

Jack nodded, not an ounce of hesitation. He took a careful step forward. "Yeah, I mean, it was
getting old already, and it's only been a few days. I really don't wanna go out and throw old ladies on the ground so I can steal their purses. This was a mistake. But what the fuck am I supposed to do now?"

Mickey eyed Jack, uncertain. He didn't know what he expected to hear when he finally found Jack, but the kid admitting his wrong and wanting to fix it was not on the list. Mickey had thought he'd kick Jack's ass and probably end up leaving alone. This was certainly an unexpected development. "Andy said you can't go back to Victory House, cuz of the way you left, but there's a bed at a sober living house on the south side. You can fix this, if you want to, Jack. Come with me, right now. Let me help you."

"You mean it?" Jack whispered, wringing his hands. A million thoughts were going through his head. All the things he'd been thinking about before Hurricane Mickey blew through the apartment were swirling in his brain. All the trepidation and regret he'd been feeling in the hours leading up to this confrontation was swelling in his heart and bubbling through his brain.

This was a mistake.

This was a fuck up of epic proportions.

He's lucky Mickey's even here right now, giving him an out. He knows for a fact, if Mickey hadn't shown up, he'd ride this train til it went off the rails, leaving him broken again. Or dead.

All that blissful emptiness he's been chasing is a fucking lie. This right here is the truth. Someone he loves, hurting and angry because of him. Again. He can't even think of what his dad is feeling right now.

This is what heroin brings him over and over. Catastrophe.

Mickey opened his mouth to speak, but was cut off Rowan. "So that's it? Mickey rolls in here like a fucking one man swat team, and everything just stops?" Rowan looked more annoyed than hurt, arms crossed over his bare chest, eyebrows raised. "We left the house together. We are supposed to be helping each other out."

"Rowan, I'm sorry." Jack said, stepping away from Mickey to pull Rowan into his arms. Rowan stiffened in the embrace, hands curled into fists at his side. "Come with me. Andy could help us both, I'm sure."

"No, Jack." Rowan said, pulling back and crossing his arms over his chest again. "You may have something to go back to, but I don't. I don't have a 'Mickey', or any of the shit that goes along with that. I don't have a father looking for me all over the city. I don't have friends. Nobody's gonna break down any doors to rescue me from myself."

"Rowan, come on." Jack whispered, stepping close again, but Rowan moved back once more.

"No, Jack. I don't want to go back. This is me. This is what I am." he spread his arms out to his sides, highlighting the drugs and condoms strewn about the room. "It was fun, yeah, but I don't want to put any more energy into something that's clearly over."

Mickey's not sure if he means his attempt at getting clean, or the shit he had going with Jack, but it didn't really matter. His point was clear regardless.

"Okay." Jack whispered, finally stepping away from Rowan. Mickey stood by the door as Jack went around collecting what little belonging he had with him. A phone started ringing on the coffee table and Rowan crossed the room to answer it.
"Hello. Yeah, it me. Sure, sounds good. I'll meet you at the hotel. Same price, yeah. Cool. Thanks, see you." Rowan pocketed the phone and looked up at Jack, who had paused, hand poised over his backpack. "I gotta go. It was nice knowing you, Jack, take care of yourself."

"Rowan...." Jack said, but the other man just shook his head. Mickey watched as he threw on a t shirt and a ratty old winter coat. He stuffed his pockets with condoms, some of the heroin that was still sitting on the table, and two needles.

He shouldered his way past Jack, not even bothering to look at Mickey. He strode to the door with purpose, leaving it open as he slipped out into the hall and out of Jack's life.

Mickey didn't speak as Jack finished packing his meager possessions. Jack had unshed tears in his eyes when he looked up at Mickey.

"Let's get the fuck out of here."

Mickey nodded, following Jack out of the apartment, bat in hand. This really was a shit part of town.

They climbed into Mickey's work truck, and Mickey pulled out into the street. Neither of them said a word.

Mickey knew he did the right thing. He did what he had hoped he would be able to do. He got what he wanted. He won.

Then how come he felt so fucking shitty?

-----------------------------------------

"I don't even know why I'm here. I'm sorry to bother you." Ian says, fidgeting on the couch as Tessa flitters around the kitchen. Iggy is seated on the other side of the living room, beer in hand, eyes fixed on the TV.

"It's fine, Ian." Tessa says, coming back into the living room, handing Ian a beer and setting a bowl of chips on the coffee table.

Quite the hostess, even at half past midnight.

"What are you doing here, though?" Iggy asks, not bothering to look over. "Mick's not here. You can see that."

"I know." Ian concedes. "I already called Mandy, she hasn't seen him or heard from him. He got that one call and took off. Who knows if Jack's even there now. Mick's probably tearing the city apart looking for him, and I figured he'd go old school, y'know? Like, call old contacts, maybe try to play junior detective. Did he call you?" Ian's desperate. Mickey's been gone for hours, won't answer his calls. Ian's petrified that Mickey's going to do something crazy. Get himself arrested or beat someone unconscious.

"So what if he did? You his wife now?" Iggy asked sarcastically. "He's a grown ass man. He's looking out for a buddy. Kid needs help, Mick's gonna help him. You should know all about that, Gallagher."
Ian's struck by how much Iggy's words mirror Mickey's own to him hours earlier.

"Or are you jealous?" Iggy laughed, finally looking over at Ian with his eyebrows raised. "You think Mickey's got a soft spot for the kid. You think after all the shit Mick's done for you, he's gonna pick this moment, and that fucking kid to finally cut you loose? You're a lot more insecure than you're cocky attitude suggests, dude."

"That's not..... that's not why I'm upset." Ian says, casting his eyes to Tess. She'll understand. "I'm worried about him. He's got so much to lose. He is probably out there cracking skulls, trying to pry information out of people who don't fucking snitch. I just don't understand. Everything's been going so well. Why would he risk that for someone who doesn't want help?"

Tessa sat down next to Ian on the couch, setting a soothing hand on his leg. Iggy on the other hand, just scoffed into his beer bottle.

"Seriously, Gallagher? That's what you're thinking? You know Mickey just as well as I do. The shit that he did for you, over and fucking over again. And you have the balls to come into my house whining about him trying to help someone. Because you, of all people, don't think the dude is worth the effort? You know, I told Mickey something like that once. I said 'Mick, bro, this kid's a mess. He obviously doesn't give a shit about getting better, or you. He's gonna do whatever he wants. Let it go, man. There are plenty of dicks to bounce on in the world.' - and that's a direct quote. You know who I was talking about? Your stupid ass. Iggy gave Ian a pointed look. It took all of Ian's willpower not to wilt under his gaze. "So, yeah, maybe it's fucking stupid, and maybe he'll regret it. But it's his fucking choice. Just like it was his choice to chase your ass all those years ago. Who knows, maybe Jack'll be like you, and this shit will turn him off so bad, you'll never see him again."

Ian bristled at Iggy's implications, but the other man continued undeterred. "But it's Mickey's call. If you love him like you are always saying you do, you gotta trust him, let him do what he thinks is best."

"And what if it's not?" Ian snaps, unsure how he became the bad guy again. Him and Iggy had been friendly over the past few months, the anger Iggy held toward Ian over Mickey had faded. But the way Iggy was talking to him right now, it seemed like the past was not as forgotten as Ian would have hoped.

"If it's not, it's not. But it's not up to you. Besides, jealousy is not a good look on you, you ginger fuck." Iggy laughed again, downing the rest of his beer and heaving himself off the couch and into the kitchen.

"I'm not jealous." Ian sighs, looking over at Tess, who has an unconvinced smirk on her face. "I'm not!" he insists.

"Ian, baby." Tessa says, voice soft and gentle, like she's talking to a toddler. "You are so jealous. It's okay, though. I get it. From what Iggy says, you were the center of Mickey's universe for years. Must be quite the heady power trip. But now he's got all these other little moons orbiting his planet, and the big red sun gets eclipsed sometimes. " she giggled, clearly pleased with her little analogy. "But the sun's always at the center, Ian, don't get it twisted. she patted his face fondly with a gentle hand. "But as far as the logistics of this shit with Jack is concerned, I'm gonna have to back my man on this one. If Iggy ever told me what I could or couldn't do for one of my ride or die girls, he'd get a stiletto up his ass."

Ian groaned, tilting his head back against the couch cushions. "That's not what this is about." he insisted. "I just don't want him to get hurt. Yev broke his arm, and now this shit. Mickey has enough going on with his actual family. He doesn't need to be a twisted up in this shit with his jail buddy."
"But Jack's more than that, isn't he, Ian?" Tessa asked, giving Ian a knowing look. "He's Mickey's family too. Just like us. Just like Yev. Once you start seeing it that way, it will make more sense." she patted his leg again, then placed her palm on her swelling stomach. "You trust him?" she asked after a moment of silence.

"Yeah." Ian answered without hesitation. "Yeah, I do."

"Then let him do his thing." Iggy said, coming back into the living room with two new beers and a sparkling water for Tess. "And quit bitching, it makes you even gayer than normal."

Ian laughed in spite of himself.

He never thought this day would come, but Iggy might actually be right. Imagine that.

---------------------------------

This must be the place. Andy had texted him the address after Mickey told him he had found Jack. Mickey needs to buy Andy a beer or something. Dude's a saint, as far as he's concerned.

Mickey pulled up in front of a well maintained building on West 16th Street. It was a two story building, like most of the surrounding houses, with a tall metal fence around the small yard. It looked like any other house, no indication of what kind of people lived inside. But Mickey supposes it would be weird to have a neon sign blinking "JUNKIES" in the front yard. He had the same feeling all those months ago when he first stepped into Victory House.

Victory House. Mickey can't help but feel like Jack blew a golden opportunity to get clean at that place. All the work he'd been doing, all the shit he'd accomplished, down the fucking toilet. Mickey is so fucking mad at him, but he tries to temper his anger as he puts the truck in park and opens the door, Jack following suit.

The walk up the stone path through the gate and up to the front door. Jack trails behind Mickey, his dirty backpack slung over his shoulder. He eyes the building with disdain. He really doesn't want to be here.

Mickey's surprised this place does intakes in the middle of the damn night, but from what Andy had told him, places like this don't keep regular hours, sensitive to the precarious situation these addicts were in. Andy told him there was always at least one guy around to do intakes in emergency situations. Mickey's pretty damn grateful for that, in this moment.

Mickey knocks on the door, oblivious to Jack's distress. They stand there, a few feet apart, and wait.

A few minutes later, Mickey can hear someone bounding toward the front door. He glances over at Jack, who's got a look of utter despair on his face. But Mickey has not one iota of sympathy for this prick. Not at the moment.

The door swings open and a man is standing there, eyebrows raised. He's not too much older than Mickey, early thirties if he had to guess. He had long blond hair swept off his face, and grey eyes. He was wearing a brown sweater and corduroys. Who the fuck wears corduroys?

"Can I help you?" he asked, crossing his arms over his chest.
"Um, Andy sent us over?" Mickey replied, unsure.

The guys eyes lit up, and he nodded. "Ah, yeah. I've been waiting. Okay. Which one of you is Jack?" he asked, motioning between the two of them with a pointed finger.

Jack raised his hand, but said nothing.

"And you must be the friend?" the guy asked Mickey, who nodded, also remaining mute.

"Okay, then. C'mon in." he said, standing back and letting the two men over the threshold.

Mickey followed the guy into a small living room. "Have a seat." the guy said, so they did. The guy left and came back a moment later with some papers. Mickey and Jack sat on the couch while the guy sat across from them in a chair. "I'm Sam." the guy said, extending his hand for the men to shake, which they did.

"I'm obviously Jack, and this is my friend Mickey."

Sam nodded, going over the papers in his hands. "Okay, Jack. This is pretty simple. This is a sober house. It's not like Victory House, as in we don't do house meetings or groups or therapy or any of that shit. It's easy. You live here, do whatever the hell you want. Once a week, you piss for us, if it's clean, you stay. If it's not, you fuck off. It's a hundred bucks a week, cuz this ain't a charity. Doesn't matter how you get the money, cuz like I said, this isn't a halfway house. There's no work requirement. Do whatever. Just, if you're gonna stay out all night, you gotta call. Two missed days in a row, and you lose your bed. Believe it or not, this shithole has a waiting list. So just do what you gotta do, and we'll be cool."

Jack nodded, his fingers twisting in his lap.

"You high now? Just heroin?" Sam asked. When Jack nodded, Sam handed him a one of the papers. "Sign this. It just states that you give your word that you won't use from this point on, you'll be ready for your first drug test in three days. That should be enough time to get the shit outta your system. How long you been on this run? Do you need detox first?"

"No." Jack shook his head. "It's only been a few days. I mean, I'll be sick, but I don't need to go in anywhere. I've detoxed worse on my own."

"Haven't we all?" Sam chuckled. "Okay then, good."

Mickey listened to Sam giving Jack some basic ground rules, a little disheartened by how lax the house seemed to be. He can't help but think Jack needs more structure than this house will provide him.

But he fucked up his chances at real help, and Mickey knows he has to take what he can get at this point.

Jack signs some more papers and Sam showed them around the house. It was pretty basic. Living room and kitchen downstairs, small breakfast nook and a half bath by the back door. Up stairs was four bedrooms and a full bath. One single with a queen bed, while two of the bedrooms looked like doubles, with two twin beds at opposite ends of the room. The last room was the biggest. It had a twin bed against the far wall and a set of bunk beds near a circular window. "This is you." Sam said, leading them into the largest room, with the three beds in it. "You take the bottom bunk. Top's taken." he motioned toward the bed.

"The one at the end of the hall is a single, and it's mine." Sam says. "I've been here the longest, and
I'm pretty much in charge. Martin, the dude that actually owns and runs the place, only comes by on Fridays, for the piss tests and to collect his money. So if you have any questions, I'm your guy. My cell number is on the fridge, put it in your phone, if you have one. I always answer." Sam said, giving them a small smile and walking around Mickey, leaving them standing alone in the room Jack would call home for the foreseeable future. "Alright, I'm beat. Going back to bed. Welcome to Hell. Or maybe more like Purgatory? " Sam chuckled, like he made a hilarious joke, and strode down the hall.

Jack looked around the room, not really feeling anything. He knows this has to be stressful for Mickey, but Jack's been doing this so long, it's pretty routine. Just another day at the office.

"I should probably call my dad." Jack says, dropping his bag on the only bed without sheets. "And make plans to get my shit from Victory House." he said sadly, dropping down onto the bed next to his bag. He eyed Mickey, who was pacing at the other end of the room. "What?" Jack asked, preparing himself for part two of his ass-chewing.

Mickey stopped pacing, turned to Jack and leveled him with a glare.

"I have never been so pissed off at you in my entire life." Mickey said, although his voice was lacking any heat. He sounded defeated.

Jack felt tears prickling his eyes. Shit. He never cried when he was high. Nothing got through the haze, not anymore. That's why he loved it so much. No pain. No stress. No anger.

But no happiness either. No friends, no family. Just a wave of endless nothingness, leaving emptiness in it's wake.

But looking at Mickey right now, he felt it all. Everything he'd been trying to kill came roaring back to life, stealing his breath and shattering his heart.

"Fuck, Mick." Jack gasped, tears flowing freely down his face.

"Hey, come on." Mickey said, his anger evaporating as he strode across the room to wrap his friend in his arms. He sat down on the edge of the mattress, pulling Jack flush against his chest. "You fucked up, but you're here now, that's all that matters." he whispered, running a hand through Jack's knotted hair. "You're good. I gotcha. I'm not gonna leave you to do this on your own."

Jack let himself be comforted, laying down on the mattress and pulling Mickey down with him. Only Mickey could do this for him. Calm him like this. He didn't know why. He didn't feel this safe with anyone else.

He always felt compelled to put on a front. Build a hard shell around his soft center, keep everyone from seeing how broken he really was.

But he never felt the need to do that with Mickey. He willingly laid all his shit out on the table, secure in the fact that Mickey would never hold any of it against him. They did that shit for each other. When either of them broke apart, the other was there to sweep up the shattered remnants and glue it all back together.

"Hey, was this shit my fault?" Mickey whispered, staring at the wall while he spoke. He couldn't bear to see Jack's face as he asked this burning question.

"Was what your fault?" Jack asked, trying to sit up to look at Mickey, but the other man held him fast, unwilling to face him.
"The relapse." Mickey choked out. "Was it cuz of New Years? Cuz of what we all did together?"

"Mick, no." Jack whispered, curling further into Mickey. "It was a dumb idea, sure, but I relapsed because I wanted to. No one can make me do anything. Besides, I brought the drugs to the party. I was gonna do it with or without you. Don't put my shit on you. Please."

Mickey nodded, not sure if he believed him or not. He couldn't stop the nagging voice in his head that was saying he could have prevented this. If he had told Jack to cut the shit, and flushed that garbage down the toilet. He thought he got lucky when the drugs didn't fuck up Ian's bipolar. But he'd be wrong. There was nothing lucky about where Jack was right now, except the fact that Mickey found him before he ended up dead.

Small victories, he supposed sadly.

They held each other for a long time, until the feeling of Mickey's phone vibrating in his pocket had him pulling away. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone, seeing yet another missed call from Ian.

Jack pulled back, sitting up on an elbow, looking down at Mickey, laying on his back and frowning at his phone.

"Did I get you into trouble?" Jack asked, running his hand through Mickey's hair fondly.

"No, you asshole." Mickey muttered lowly, pulling on Jack's arm and causing him to go crashing back down next to him with a huff. He wrapped his arm tighter around Jack, the other man resting his head on his chest. "He just doesn't get it." Mickey wasn't going to bring up the fight he had with Ian. Not now.

"Get what? Our bizarro friendship? We talked about this before, Mick. I think he gets it. I actually feel really fucking bad about pulling you into my shit again. Wasn't this supposed to be a huge deal for you two? Moving in together. And here I go, pulling the 'junkbox bestie' card and fucking it all up."

"You really did, though." Mickey laughed, squeezing Jack a little tighter. "We haven't even fucked in days. No christening the new place, too wrapped up in your bullshit. Ian's probably not even mad, just thinks he is cuz it's the first time in his life he's got blue balls."

It was a lie. They both knew it. But if it lightened the mood even the slightest bit, Mickey would take it.

Jack smacked Mickey on the stomach, a small giggle bubbling up from his chest.

"Just stay a little longer? Then I'll release you back to your keeper, okay?" Jack whispered, the hint of teasing doing very little to cover the vulnerability he was feeling at the moment.

"Sure thing, Caldwell." Mickey said, settling better on the bed. "Not going anywhere."

-------------------------------------------

Ian lets himself into the dark apartment. It's well after 1 am, and he's fucking tired. He'd stayed at the Milkovich house with Iggy and Tess for the evening, not wanting to go home to an empty house.
Tess had been gracious, cooking him a snack and Ian had been so grateful for her kindness, well aware that Tess was trying to distract him from his troubles. After they ate, Ian and her had sat down and talked babies for a while, while Iggy watched a movie about zombie sharks and drank himself stupid.

Ian knew a lot about babies, having raised his siblings and Yevgeny so long ago. The conversation was a good way to occupy his mind. Although he still found himself calling Mickey more often than he should have.

It didn't matter in the end. His boyfriend ignored all his calls. Ian stopped leaving messages after the first two. And he'd stopped calling by the time he made his way home. Obviously Mickey didn't want to hear from him.

Ian only hoped that he was okay. God only knows what he'd gotten himself into on his quest to rescue Jack. The fact that Mickey hadn't called him from the police station yet was the only thing saving Ian's sanity at the moment.

He made his way through the apartment. It was still a mess, moving boxes and loose clothing everywhere. He and Mickey hadn't even had a chance to unpack his shit yet. It had all gone terribly off the rails, and Ian blamed the whole mess on Jack.

Ian didn't hate Jack. Although, at this point he thinks he would be well within his right to hate him. But he couldn't. Jack may be selfish, and he may do shit without thinking, but under all the bullshit he's a good person. Ian himself has made some really fucked up decisions, so how could he hate Jack for what he is, without hating himself?

Of course Mickey's drawn to Jack. He's a clusterfuck of issues wrapped adorable puppy fur. That's Mickey's type.

Ian chuckled darkly at his own thoughts. God, he's fucked up.

He undressed without bothering to take a shower. It's not like he had anyone to impress. He shot off a text to Mandy, telling her what he knew (nothing) and then did something risky. He texted Svetlana, sending Yevgeny his 'get well' wishes. He didn't bother to mention anything about Mickey being gone or Jack still being missing, it wasn't his story to tell. About twenty minutes later, he got a message back. A cropped photo of Yevgeny's tiny arm in a bright orange cast, with the caption 'he loves orange. like father like son, no?'

Fucking Svetlana.

Ian smiled at the photo despite himself, saving it to the device before plugging in his phone and laying on the nightstand.

He took two pills out of a couple bottles he keeps by the bed and threw them back with a bottle of water left over from the night before.

He looked around his empty bedroom, letting the sadness wash over him.

Mickey would come back.
He just had to wait him out.
Ian needed to believe that shit.

He shut off the light and laid down. He had no interest in waiting up. He's a lot of things, but a bitch isn't one of them.
Mickey fucked up. What else is new?

He had fallen asleep with Jack at the fucking sober house. Exhausted in every way possible, once he’d laid down on that grody mattress with the familiar warmth of Jack's body against his, he was unconscious before he knew what hit him.

He startled awake a little after 3 am. The room is dark, save for a nightlight by the door. The beds are mostly full, sleeping men with the covers pulled over their heads. He wonders idly if it's commonplace around this house for two dudes to be cuddled up together like he and Jack just were. No one had said a word, no one had bothered to wake them.

He took out his phone to check the time, noticing all his unchecked voicemails and texts.

Shit. Ian.

What the hell has he done?

Now that he know Jack is alive and out of harm's way, all he can think about is Ian.

What he said to Ian. How he left Ian.

How he's been ignoring Ian's calls for hours on end. Left him hanging without a word.

It reminds Mickey too much of when Ian first got sick. When Mickey would call and call, leave endless messages, throwing himself out into the void on the off chance that he'd get something back.

He remembers the dark, sinking feeling he had when he realized Ian wasn't going to call. That he'd been left to worry and wonder with no end in sight. It was the worst kind of pain. Not knowing.

And he had gone and done the same thing to Ian. To the man he's loved since he was just a kid.

What the fuck is wrong with him?

He stands up from the bed, looking down on Jack's still unconscious form. He looks so much like a kid like this, curled up on his side, hand tucked under his head. He looks peaceful, like nothing haunts him.

What a lie that is.

Mickey decides not to wake him. He takes a post it note of someone's bureau and scrawls quickly on it with a pen he finds on the floor. He walks over to the nightlight and crouches down, using the limited light to write his message.

be good. call me later.
M
He takes one last look at his friend in the dim light, thanking a god he doesn't believe in that he found him in time.

He runs a hand along Jack's head and down his neck, resting on his shoulder for a moment before turning and leaving the room.

He's got to get home. He's got to get to Ian.

---------------------------------------------------

Ian wasn't sleeping. He should be. His meds are fucking him up pretty bad, the weight of his nighttime pill pinning him to the bed like a straight jacket. But he's fighting it. He's fighting it with everything he has.

An hour ago, he'd been so mad still. He'd stripped his clothes and downed his pills. Fuck Mickey. He could keep his junkie sidepiece, Ian was fucking done.

But as he laid there, listening to the stupid clock in the kitchen ticking closer and closer to dawn, all his anger was replaced with sadness and fear.

Was he wrong? Did he push Mickey too far? Did he draw the line between himself and Jack too severely?

He knows one thing. He underestimated Mickey's love for Jack. Ian foolishly thought Mickey loved him the most, and that he would always come first, especially over some asshole Mickey met courtesy of the state of Illinois.

Ian can't help but feel like this is all somehow his fault. If he'd never ran away to join the army, if he'd never tried to hot-wire that helicopter. If he'd never gotten fucking SICK, Mickey would never have been in jail at all. He'd never have met Jack, and none of this shit would be happening right now.

Fuck. What is he even thinking right now?

He groans, using whatever energy he has left to roll over on his side and cover his head with the comforter.

Fuck this shit.

He doesn't know if he sleeps or not. He's in that odd head-space between slumber and consciousness, hovering inside himself, but never really succumbing. His body is heavy, and he can feel himself slip under, only to reemerge moments later.

He doesn't hear the door, but he does stir when the bed dips beside him.

He wants to talk, he wants to yell and scream and make Mickey UNDERSTAND.

But the moment he feels his boyfriend slip under the sheets, the words die on his tongue. The anger and pain is still there, but it recedes a bit as Mickey's arms snake around his middle, pulling him flush against his body. Mickey is cold. The touch of his fingers along his stomach sends a chill down his spine, but he leans into it anyway. His skin may be chilly, but he can't help but feel warm in his core.
Mickey came back to him. He told himself he wasn't scared, that this was just a blip on the radar of their larger, better relationship. But that small part of him was unsure. The part that was still a scared kid, afraid that loving Mickey would be his undoing. He tried to let that shit go, but nights light tonight make it hard.

Mickey pulls him impossibly closer, laying a tender kiss on the back of his neck, right by his ear.

Ian doesn't let on that he's awake, he keeps his breathing even, doing his best not to move. He wants to hold onto this quiet moment for now. They can deal with whatever happened in the morning.

"I love you." Mickey whispers in the dark.

And Ian believes him.

---------------------------------------------

Mickey stirs, the sunlight streaming through the windows alerting him to the fact that he slept well past noon.

Fuck it. It's Sunday anyway. He should get some rest before the week starts. Now that Jack's not missing anymore, Mickey can go back to work.

Shit, Matt. Mickey never even bothered to call Jack's father when he found him. He was so distracted by his own relief and fluctuating emotions that he'd left his boss (his friend) hanging. Mickey felt like a fucking asshole. He leaned over and grabbed his phone off the nightstand, realizing at that moment that he was alone in the bedroom. Where was Ian?

One thing at a time, damn it. He shot off a quick text to Matt, giving him Jack's new location and a scant amount of details of how he found him. If he wanted the naked truth, he could get it from his wayward son.

After he sent the message, he sat up in bed, his feet finding the floor. He ran a hand through his dirty hair, then down his greasy face. He needs a fucking shower.

He made his way out of the bedroom, his eyes scanning the apartment for Ian. He found him in the bathroom. He was standing in front of the bathtub in just his boxers, getting ready for a shower.

Great minds think alike, it seems.

"Hey." Mickey said, leaning up against the bathroom wall.

Ian jumped, hands flying up to his chest as he spun around.

"Motherfucker." he sighed, his body relaxing when he saw it was Mickey standing there. "Jesus, Mick, you scared me."

"Sorry," Mickey muttered, unsure of how to start this conversation. "Listen, Ian." but Ian cut him off.

"I'm gonna get in the shower." he said, turning his back to Mickey once more.

Mickey sighed. So this is how it's going to be?
"Wanna join me?" Ian asked, back still turned. Mickey could hear the trepidation in his voice.

Huh. So Ian was nervous, not pissed. Interesting development.

"You want me to?" Mickey asked, equally reticent.

Ian finally turned around, a tiny smile on his face, though it did not reach his eyes. "Of course I do." he took a small step forward, reaching a hand out. Mickey pushed off the wall and walked over to him, taking his hand. He felt all the tension leave his body as soon as their fingers intertwined.

Ian smiled again, and this time it was genuine, if not a little sad. He stripped his boxers and tossed them on the floor before going for Mickey's. His hands were gentle as he slipped his fingers under the waistband of Mickey's underwear, sliding them down for Mickey to kick off. Ian's eyes darkened, traveling over Mickey's naked body. Mickey felt his skin flush hot as his dick twitched.

Shit.

It had been way too long since they fucked.

He pulled the shower curtain back and stepped into the tub, dragging Mickey along with him.

The hot water washed over them, instantly relaxing Mickey's tense muscles. He turned his back the the spray, Ian stepping to him carefully, wrapping his arms around him and sharing the water with him.

"I'm sorry." Mickey said, tilting his head up to look at his boyfriend. The water ran into his eyes, making them sting, but he didn't look away.

"Me too." Ian nodded, running a gentle hand along his neck and through his wet hair. He rested their foreheads together, his eyes running over his face.

"You didn't do anything wrong." Mickey insisted, but Ian just shook his head.

"I was cold." Ian said. "Indifferent to what you were going through with Jack. I was angry and jealous. Selfish."

"There's nothing to be jealous of, Ian. You know that." Mickey said, his hands coming up to cup Ian's face.

"It's just still so surreal to me, you having such a close friendship with someone." Ian replied.

"You mean someone who isn't you?" Mickey hazarded a tease. It worked, Ian gave him an amused smirk.

"Asshole." he laughed.

"I'm not sorry I went out and found him, Ian. I would have done the same thing for you, or Mandy. He needed my help, I couldn't leave him alone out there." Mickey said. His eyes stayed locked with Ian's, needing him to understand.

"I get that." Ian replied, wanting to keep the conversation simple for the moment. "Did everything go okay? You scared me. I thought you were gonna get hemmed up, or fucking hurt." Ian's face was twisted in a painful grimace, the thoughts that had been assaulting him all night back at the forefront of his mind.

"Yeah, it went alright. Got him to that sober house Andy told me about. Rowan wouldn't go, he's
still out there. Probably sucking cock for twenty bucks as we speak."

"Jesus." Ian said. "That's really fucking sad."

Mickey nodded, because it was. He didn't fight when Ian squeeze some shampoo into his hand and started massaging it into his scalp. Felt good.

"Yeah, him and Jack had this real emotional goodbye. It was fucked up. But I got Jack out, and that's all I had room to care about. Rowan's not family."

"But Jack is." Ian surmised.

Mickey tipped his head back, closing his eyes as he rinsed the shampoo from his hair. When he opened them again, Ian was washing his own hair. Mickey stepped around him so Ian could get under the spray. He grabbed the soap and started lathering up his body, eager to get the scum of that flop house off his skin. He'd felt dirty since he dragged Jack out of that hell hole.

"I just hope it sticks this time. Can't do it again." Mickey said, running the bar of soap over his stomach.

"That's what you said last time." Ian reminded him, taking the soap when Mickey offered it.

"Yeah, well..." Mickey said, but didn't elaborate.

"Is that where you were last night?" Ian asked. "You didn't come home."

Mickey felt a little flip in his stomach at Ian's words. Home. His home was with Ian. He hadn't really had a chance to absorb that fact yet, with everything else going on. Sounded good. Felt right.

"After I got Jack to the sober house, I was beat. I passed out there, on accident."

Ian's face went hard, but only for a moment. He wiped the look off his face and smiled again, but this one looked completely forced.

"You couldn't call? Answer my texts?" Ian asked, dipping his body under the rushing water one last time before pulling the curtain back and stepping onto the tile floor. He grabbed a towel and wrapped it around his waist.

"I just said I fell asleep." Mickey said, shutting the water off and following Ian out of the shower. He took the towel Ian offered and they made their way back to the bedroom. Mickey ran the towel over his body quickly before running it through his hair roughly. Ian turned when he heard Mickey behind him. Giving him another half smile, Ian took his towel and Mickey's and tossed them on the floor before grabbing his boyfriend's hands and dragging him to the bed, where they fell down facing each other. They laid their, naked, hands intertwined, while Ian tried to control his emotions.

He failed.

"Mickey, I was fucking worried. I thought you got arrested, or fucking shot. It's not fair to run off on your rescue mission and leave me in the fucking dark. We're supposed to be a team. Then you don't come home, don't call. Can't even take the time to fucking text me. And then you tell me you spent the night with the dick that caused the whole fucking problem in the first place." Ian sounded tired. Beat down. Dejected.

Mickey's heart broke just that much more.
"I'm sorry Ian. I don't know how to do any of this shit." Mickey muttered. He closed the minuscule distance between them, pulling Ian's body against his.

"Don't know how to do what?" Ian asked, melting into the embrace despite his lingering anger.

"Relationships." Mickey answered, his hands gripping Ian tight, like he was afraid he was going to run, naked or not. "Not just the boyfriend thing either. I mean, yeah, that's hard as fuck. But I mean all of it. My kid, my brothers and Mandy, Jack, fuck, even L and Javi. I don't know how to do it right at all. I'm either cold and fucking distant, or too attached. This shit with Jack is a perfect example. I just couldn't let it go. I had to get involved. And now shit with you and me is fucked up. That's the last thing I want, Ian. You have to know that."

"Don't be so hard on yourself." Ian admonished. "You know, I was talking to Iggy yesterday, and he said something that really got me thinking."

"Iggy? My brother, Iggy, said something that got you thinking?" Mickey laughed.

"I know right?" Ian chuckled. "But seriously, he said that this thing you were doing for Jack was a lot like what you did for me all those years ago. He said I should have seen it coming, because I was just like Jack back then. Fucked up and running from my shit. And you saved me. Just like you saved Jack."

Mickey's eyes went wide, but Ian just nodded again. "He also said I should stop being a jealous little bitch."

"Jealous? You're not jealous of Jack, are you? I thought we squashed that shit ages ago." Mickey said. Ian inched closer to him on the bed, running a hand down his side to rest on his hip.

"I didn't think I was, but this shit has me reevaluating." Ian admitted. "I mean, Tess and me were talking about it, and she put it into perspective for me."

"So you're telling me that my idiot brother and his airhead baby mama gave you this sage advice that has altered your world view? That's what you're saying to me right now?" Mickey asked, confused.

"Yeah, Mick. Tessa said that I'm used to being the center of your universe, and I am all fucked up over Jack cuz I'm not used to taking a back seat to anyone. I was always number one to you, and now that I may not be all the time, I got pissed and projected that shit onto this thing with Jack."

"Tessa said that?" Mickey asked skeptically.

"Not in so many words, but the meaning was clear." Ian smiled.

"You've been seeing that shrink of yours for too long." Mickey laughed.

"Fucker." Ian smiled, tickling Mickey's sides til he was squirming.

"Alright, alright, uncle." Mickey laughed, attempting to wriggle out of Ian's grasp.

Ian relented, going back to gently stroking Mickey's side with his fingertips.

"I don't need to be the center of your life, Mick." Ian said. "I'm sorry I wasn't more understanding. I've been in Jack's position before, and I was fucking lucky when you found me. I'll try my best not to let my own insecurities cloud my judgement. He's lucky to have you."

"I'm sorry too. About that shit I said last night. It was low of me to bring that shit up. Y'know, about
you not being there for me and whatever. I'm still working on how to talk my shit out when I'm pissed." Mickey leaned over and knocked his forehead against Ian's. "I don't think you're disloyal, Ian. You did what you thought you had to, back then. It was shitty of me to say that to you."

Ian smiled, placing a hand on the side of Mickey's face. "It's not anything I didn't know already, Mick. It's not like you were lying. I let you down. Jack was there for you when I wasn't. I think that may be part of the reason I get jealous of him sometimes. He did something for you I didn't. I'll never forgive myself for that. But I need to let it go, cuz obviously Jack's not going anywhere."

"I hope not." Mickey blurts out, eyes darting up to Ian's.

"You got him to the sober house, Mickey. He's still trying. That's more than a lot of people in his position would do."

Mickey thought of Rowan, out there somewhere at this moment, probably taking a dick to work off his next bag of dope. He shuddered at the thought.

"You did good, Mickey. I'm proud of you." Ian said, pulling Mickey toward him with a hand on the back of his head. He pressed his lips to Mickey's, tentative at first.

It felt like they hadn't kissed it ages.

Way too long.

Mickey's hand flew up and into Ian's hair, pulling him closer as he opened his mouth for Ian's tongue.

"You're a good friend." Ian whispered into his mouth. "And an even better boyfriend. I love you."

Mickey groaned at the words. Hearing Ian say that shit would never get old.

"I love you too. Sorry I scared you." Mickey said, throwing one of his legs over Ian's hip as they continued to lick into each others mouths.

"You're here now. That's all I care about. We're gonna have some troubles, between us as well as with people we love, but we gotta stick together. Weather the storm with me, Mick?" Ian said, grinding his growing erection against Mickey's hip. It was an awkward angle, so Mickey took his leg back and went straight to the source. He flattened his hand against Ian's dick, feeling it swell under his palm.

"Yeah, Ian. Me and you. No matter what." Mickey sighed, thrusting lightly against Ian's hip as he continued to palm Ian's dick.

"Fuck, Mick." Ian sighed, kissing him harder as Mickey increased the pressure, circling his hand around the shaft. It was a heady experience, so much emotion paired with so much pleasure.

Ian followed suit, moving his hand from where it had been tangled in Mickey's hair and wrapping it around his hardening cock.

Mickey wanted to fuck. But he needed to take this edge off right now. He and Ian hadn't fucked in days, and this would be over before it even got fun. He just needed to release this pent up anxiety. Now.

Ian attached his lips to Mickey' neck, sucking harshly while they jerked each other off. Mickey's hand worked harder, fist sliding up the shaft to thumb at the tip. Ian was leaking badly all over his
"God, I missed this." Ian groaned, thrusting into Mickey's grip. "Only been a few days, but fuck it was hell."

"I know. We're fucking stupid." Mickey laughed, which morphed into a moan as Ian gripped him harder, twisting his wrist just the way Mickey loved.

"God, Mickey." Ian groaned, hips jerking as he teetered on the edge. "Never again. Okay?"

"Yeah, yeah." Mickey agreed, tilting his face back down for another kiss. Ian obliged, his tongue pushing against Mickey's, his teeth sinking into Mickey's bottom lip.

Mickey moaned at that, coming hard all over Ian's hand.

"Shit." he sighed, his hand working faster to get Ian there. Ian pulled out of the kiss, tucking his face into Mickey's neck as he pumped his hips into Mickey's tight fist. He was close, Mickey could tell. He circled his thumb around the tip once more, squeezing hard as he worked him faster.

"Mickey." Ian moaned, his teeth sinking into Mickey's shoulder as he shot his load all over Mickey's hand and stomach.

They laid there, breathing into each other's mouths. Ian gave Mickey a satisfied smile. "That was good."

Mickey laughed, rolling away and standing off the bed. "As far as mutual jerk offs go, I'd give it a seven." he wandered into the bathroom, returning with a small hand towel. He wiped off his hand and junk before tossing the towel to Ian. Ian cleaned himself off before tossing the towel off the side of the bed.

Mickey crawled across the bed, dropping down into Ian's open arms. Ian pulled him close and wrapped his arms around him, kissing the crown of his head. "I hate fighting." Ian murmured against Mickey's hair.

"Me too. Although the make up sex is always hot." Mickey chuckled, burrowing as close as he could get. He never felt safer than he did in Ian's arms. "And don't you dare think I was talking about this quick handy session. You still owe me a brutal fucking, Freckles."

Ian laughed, feeling more at ease than he had in days. They still had a lot to work out, but Ian knows that this is just how it's always going to be for them. Battle after battle.

But from here on out, he wants them to fight them together.

"I don't want to do a damn thing today." Mickey said against Ian's bare chest.

"Let's not, then." Ian said, a gentle hand running through Mickey's damp hair, pulling slightly. "We'll spend the day in bed, talking about our plans for Valentine's Day."

"Oh, come the fuck on." Mickey groaned, but he was smiling.

He could think of worse problems than a needy boyfriend with romantic ideations, after all...
i know this fic deals with a lot of dark themes, addiction being just one of the many things i touch on. i know it's easy to hate jack, but to me he's just a good kid who has a problem that he's struggling to handle. i try to keep it as realistic and true to life as i can, which is why it comes off so sad and infuriating.

thanks for sticking with me. it will all work out in the end, you just gotta get there with me.
I love you, and all that gay shit.

Chapter Summary

Ian and Mickey spend their first ever Valentine's Day together.

Chapter Notes

believe it or not, i actually wrote this chapter in february. i'm a few months behind with my updates, since i miss a week here & there. but late lovin' is better than no lovin', amiright?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"You're a fucking saint, Gallagher. I'd have stabbed that prick in the dick by now. How do you do it?" Sue asked, her words garbled as she chomped on her turkey bacon club.

"It's complicated." Ian said, picking at his Greek salad with a plastic fork. "We've talked about it a million times, but sometimes it's still hard for me to understand." he huffs, throwing the fork down and wiping his mouth with a flimsy paper napkin. "I've never had a friendship like that. One that starts out like best friends with benefits, then just reverts back to best friends, like the fucking never happened. I can't stay friendly with someone I used to fuck. I didn't think it was possible."

"I don't think it is." Sue said matter-of-factly.

Ian pins her with a cold glare, which she answers with a shrug. "I mean, I guess anything's possible, but it's never been my experience. I don't make a habit of hanging out with old boyfriends. Do you?" she asked, taking another enormous bite of her sandwich, dressing dribbling down her chin.

"He's not an old boyfriend. Do you ever listen?"

"Ian, even if they were never official, that's what it sounds like to me." Sue replied. "I only know what you tell me, but it seems like you're going to have to learn to live with the fact that this kid's not going anywhere. And I know you don't like to share."

"Are you calling me selfish?" Ian balked.

"I'm calling you possessive, which is fine to a degree. But this shit with the junkie kid is tearing you apart. I've been listening to this spiel nonstop since Mickey came back into your life. I can't even imagine what your poor shrink goes through."

"Caroline is understanding and supportive." Ian says back, stirring his iced tea before taking a long sip. It's cold as fuck outside, but he can't drink anything hot with a meal.

"She's those things because it's her job to be those things. It's my job to give you a real world opinion, not some psychobabble 'your feelings are valid' bullshit. If it were me, I'd cut that asshole. Bottom line."
Ian sighed, running a hand through his hair before crossing his arms over his chest. He shouldn’t have even brought this up with Sue. Her approach to relationships has always been a tad bit on the psychotic side.

"I don't want to cut him. I like Jack. He's a good guy, and he's a good friend to Mickey. I'm not afraid he's going to steal him away, and I'm not afraid Mickey's going to cheat. I'm trying to figure out a way to accept their friendship. It's powerful, and they are very close. I know I get jealous, and I don't want to. Mickey deserves good friends in his life."

"So do you." Sue replied simply. "Where's your super hot best friend who used to suck you dick? Oh, you don't have one? Strange."

Ian sighed again, throwing his hand up to get the attention of their server. When he got a confirming nod that she'd bring the check over, Ian threw his napkin down over his plate and took one last sip of his drink.

"So, what are your plans for Valentine's Day then?" Sue asked innocently, dropping some bills down as the server laid the bill on the table. "The three of you gonna have a nice romantic dinner? Do a big gay gang-bang?"

"Oh, fuck you." Ian spat, smiling despite himself.

"Just saying. Might be hot." Sue laughed as they left the restaurant together.

---------------------------------------------

"So, Lexi is still so pissed at me, I don't think this super expensive Valentine's Day plan is going to work." Matt sighed, throwing his hand out for Mickey to drop a wrench into it. He grabbed it and went back to twisting the nut on the pipe, grunting when he sliced his knuckle.

"She's still mad?" Mickey asked, taking the wrench back and handing Matt the next tool without waiting for instruction. They've done this so many times by now, it's second nature.

"Of course she's still mad, Mickey. This fight never really ends, because nothing ever really changes. Sometimes I wonder if this will break our marriage." Matt sounds so dejected, Mickey's heart breaks a little for him. He thinks of his fight with Ian, wondering if this shit with Jack will tear them apart like it seems to be doing to Matt and Lexi.

"Okay, I think that's good." Matt says, taking a look at the piping he's just finished installing. "I think I just made that dishwasher my bitch."

"Took ya long enough." Mickey smiled, getting a dirty rag in the face for his snark.

"Why aren't you putting those tools away?" Matt asked, eyebrows raised.

"Wanted to talk to you." Mickey said, rubbing his top lip with two fingers.

"Okay, kid. Shoot." Matt said, walking over to the sink to wash his hands. "But clean up while you're doing it. Time is money, and we gotta get over to the other place and rip out that carpet before I let you go home."
"Ah, fuck. I hate carpet." Mickey groaned, kneeling down to throw all the tools in the tool box.

"Everyone hates carpet, Mick. That's why we are tearing it up." Matt chuckled.

Mickey rolled his eyes, but continued his thought. He felt like he really needed Matt's advice, as hard as it was to ask for it.

"Well, I got this surprise planned for fucking Valentine's Day for Ian, but I'm kinda in the same predicament you are." Mickey says, throwing a hacksaw in along with the wrenches and pipe tape. "Ian and I had a pretty serious fight last week when I went out and found Jack. We both said some fucked up shit. I thought that it was over or whatever, you know? But after what you just said about you and Lex, I'm kinda worried that it's not really cool. Like, what am I supposed to do if Jack needs me again, and Ian gets all pissy? I feel like I'm being ripped in half a lot of the time." Mickey didn't dare look up at his boss, feeling way too exposed to meet his gaze.

"Oh, Mick." Matt says, the sound of him flopping down in one of the kitchen chairs reverberates around the room. "You're a good guy, but you've got to learn where to draw the line."

Mickey does look up at that. Matt has an odd look on his face, a mixture of sadness and affection.

"What do you mean?" Mickey asks, closing the tool box and sitting on the floor next to it, legs crossed in front of him.

"I mean, shit." Matt sighs, running a hand over his mouth before looking back at Mickey. "Jack's my son, and Lexi's son. Our issues with him run deep, just as deep as our love for him. I'll never give up on him, he's my blood. But the way I enable him is not healthy. Do you know what that means? Enabling him?"

Mickey nods minutely. "Means that you let him get away with shit."

"Yeah, Mick. It means that no matter how much he fucks up, I'm always there to pick up his messes, even when I should leave him to wallow in the shit til he figures his own way out. I think you are kinda like me in that aspect."

"What? No." Mickey shakes his head violently. "It's not like that. He needed my fucking help."

"I'm not disputing that, Mickey. But did it ever occur to you that maybe Jack didn't think too much about the consequences of running again, because he knew deep down that you would be there to save him?"

"No. Hell no." Mickey says, eyes wide.

"Mickey, I've been doing this a long time, with Jack. And looking at you right now is like looking at myself years ago, when he first started fucking up. I was always there, chasing him down, bailing him out. Still do, obviously. But not like I used to, not nearly as much. Now that he knows I won't cosign that bullshit anymore, he looks to you to rescue him. I know he doesn't do it on purpose, but he does it. He's a user, Mickey. That's what addicts do."

"No. He's getting better." Mickey says, unable to temper the anger rising in his voice.

"He is." Matt agrees, his voice even. "And that makes me very happy. But maybe, if there's a next time for him to fuck up, think about yourself before you drop everything and go to him. You have a life of your own, kid. And even though I'm infinitely grateful Jack has you, I don't want to see you fuck up your own life for my son's bullshit. I don't want you and Ian to suffer for this shit."
"It's not that serious, Matty." Mickey dismisses. It's kinda rich, Matt saying this shit after he was just as wound up over Jack disappearing as Mickey was. But whatever. "Ian understands."

"I'm sure he does. But who are you trying to build a future with? What's your end game? What if Jack doesn't get better, and this shit happens over and over? How long is Ian going to be understanding? What if next time Jack ends up in fucking Kentucky at a meth lab? Or he goes in for a ten year bid?"

Mickey bristles at Matt's words, remembering when Ian ran away with fucking Monica. The parallels between Ian and Jack have never been quite so clear to him.

"I'm not saying you should give up on Jack. I sure as fuck hope you don't. I never will. But let me tell you this one thing. Lexi and I have been married for a long time. We love each other very much. Jack is our son, and either of us would die for him. All that being said, his addiction has torn us apart so much, I'm not sure how or if we are going to be able to save our marriage. We are dangerously close to a separation."

Mickey's eyes widened at that statement, utterly blown away. Matt nodded. "I'm trying to tell you, Mickey. If this shit with Jack could do that to his mother and I, what do you think it could do to your relationship with Ian?"

Mickey paled, pulling his knees up to his chest, holding himself tight.

"I'm not trying to scare you, Mickey." Matt said, finally standing. "I just want you to think about what's important to you. I don't want you to be another casualty of Jack's addiction. Just be careful, okay? Because trust me on this: romantic gestures mean fuck all when your partner doesn't trust you to put them first."

Mickey nodded, unable to speak. He grabbed the tool box and followed Matt out of the house and to the work truck.

Matt drove them toward their next destination. Neither of the said another word.

____________________________________

"Mandy, come the fuck on. Help me out here." Ian whined, much to the amusement of Mandy and her girlfriend.

"No can do, Ian. I promised my brother I'd keep my lips sealed. You are just gonna have to tough it out for a few more hours." Mandy laughed, throwing more clothes onto the bed for her and Macy to pick through.

"This isn't fair!" Ian whined, throwing himself down on the pile of clothes, earning himself a smack on the stomach from his best friend.

Ian yelped, covering his stomach with both hands and rolling onto his side, messing up the clothes even more.

"Get the hell up, Ian. You're wrinkling all the clothes."

Ian groaned, but rolled further onto the side, pulling himself up by the head of the bed. "What did he
say? How did he sound? Do you know where we're going?"

"One question at a time, douche." Mandy said, not even bothering to look at him. She was eyeing a forest green button up shirt, nodding to herself once before tossing it into the suitcase. "He said to have you pack for two days. He sounded tired. And no, I haven't the slightest clue where you are going." Mandy threw some socks toward the suitcase, "You know, you're losing some serious 'best friend' points here, you haven't even asked us what we are doing for Valentines, you selfish bitch."

Ian had the decency to look apologetic. "I'm sorry, Mands." he said, scooting closer so he could help her fold some of the shit she'd picked out for his mystery getaway. "What are you guys doing for Valentine's Day?" he asked Mandy, but it was Macy who answered. She was coming out of the bathroom, her hands full of both Ian and Mickey's toiletries.

"Oh! Ian, it's gonna be epic! We got a suite at the JW Marriot! The spa there is to die for. And the lounge has delicious food. We're gonna get plastered, then get pedicures. Then the couples massage. It's gonna be awesome."

Ian smiled, happiness filling him. These girls deserved the world. "Looks like I got you guys hooked on those massages, huh?" he laughed.

"Oh, best Christmas gift ever." Macy swooned, twirling on the spot like child. "Totally got us sprung on that sweet shiatsu." she said, grinning like a madman.

"Good, I'm glad. You guys deserve it. I hope your Valentine's Day is super romantic." Ian said genuinely. "I've never done anything like this for Valentine's Day." he adds on as an afterthought. "No one's ever brought me anywhere, or taken me out at all, now that I think about it." he grabbed some track pants and threw them in along with the toiletries Macy handed him.

"Well, maybe it was meant to be that way?" Macy says, dragging up Mickey's duffel bag for the three of them to start filling.

"What do you mean, Mace?" Mandy asks, shivering when she accidentally touches Mickey's boxer briefs. "Eh, gross. Mick's fucking undies. Ian, take this." she threw the offending clothing in Ian's general direction, fake gagging.

"I mean, I think it's gotta be some kinda sign, that Ian has never done a single romantic thing for Valentine's Day in any of his other relationships, it's like fate was waiting for him to get back with Mickey!"

"Oh, get real." Mandy laughed, but Ian was listening intently.

"No, come on babe!" Macy said excitedly. "Think about it. Ian," she turned to Ian, throwing a toothbrush in the open duffel. "You had boyfriends after Mick left, right?" Ian nodded, confused. "And they were super sappy, hyper gay dudes, right? Like, dinners at four star restaurants and nights at the theater, art installations, all that jazz?" to which Ian nodded again. "So it would make perfect sense that said super sappy, hyper gay dudes would want to do something over the top for Valentine's Day. So how come it never happened?" Macy stared at him, awaiting his answer.

Ian thought for a moment before shrugging, moving to zip up the duffel and drop it next to the suitcase. "Well, I guess the timing was never right? Caleb and I broke up before Valentine's Day. Shit with Trevor was all fucked up when we were together then, we never really got past me leaving with Mick, honestly. And Brian, well, we had plans one year, but he ended up standing me up. I got drunk on pink champagne by myself that night, ate a whole box of chocolate covered strawberries too. I guess it just never worked out." Ian concluded, dropping on the bed between the two girls.
"Or...." Macy said, swinging her tattooed arm around Ian's broad shoulders, pulling him close. "The universe was holding out on you til the right guy came back around. Think about it, all those near misses, all those years you could have popped your Valentine's cherry with some prick that didn't matter, but fate held out until Mr. Right came back around to sweep you off your feet, do it right." she had a dreamy quality to her voice, and damn if it didn't pull Ian in.

"Oh god, Mace." Mandy laughed, popping the romantic little bubble her girlfriend had blown up in Ian's chest. "Don't get his hopes up, this is my brother we're talking about. I highly doubt he's going to blow Ian's mind with his amorous endeavors." she scooted close to Ian, so he could wrap his arm around her too.

"Don't sell him short, Mands." Macy said from under Ian's other arm. She leaned back hard, pulling the other two down with her until they fell over backwards and landed on the bed in a tangle of limbs, laughing. The three of them laid there on the bed, surrounded by clothes, Ian in the middle, an arm around either girl. "I wouldn't put a limit on what Mickey would do for Ian, would you?"

Mickey takes a deep breath before he opens the door to the apartment he now shares with Ian. Things have been slowly getting back to normal after their latest Jack-related argument. But Mickey can't help but fear that shit's not kosher enough yet for this little getaway he's planned.

The thing is, Mickey's been planning this shit since Matt had told him about the place months ago. Mickey had made the reservations well before Christmas. The place had a long wait list for Valentine's Day, and the shit was not cheap.

He's just hoping desperately that things are not awkward while they are away. Mickey dropped a shit ton of money on this little trip, and if Ian's pissy or sad the whole time, it will all have been a colossal waste.

Mickey thinks of what Matt had said to him at the work site. 'Romantic gestures mean fuck all if your partner doesn't trust you to put them first.'

Mickey has to put Ian first. He thought he was, but now he's not so sure. If he's not sure, he can't help but wonder how Ian feels.

Mickey's got to make him believe it. Because it's true. Ian will always come first. It's a complex situation with Jack, but Mickey knows Matt was right. Mickey has to draw the line somewhere.

He just hopes he can fix this shit. This Valentine's weekend was planned well before this fight, but Mickey can't help but think the timing is a little bit perfect.

He opens the door and steps inside, kicking off his work boots as he strips his winter gear. Hat, fucking gloves, scarf, coat. All that shit goes in the hall closet then he makes his way to the kitchen. One beer is fine, he can drive with way more booze than that in his system.

He pops the cap and saunters into the living room. He finds Ian there, flanked by his sister and her lesbo lover. They are watching some stupid fucking chick flick, if nasty hetero sex going on on the screen is anything to go by.

"God, what the fuck is this gross shit?" Mickey asks, causing everyone in the room to jump.
"Shit! Mick, when did you get here?" Ian asked, standing from the couch and stalking toward him.

"A few minutes ago. Maybe you guys woulda heard me if you weren't sitting here watching straight porn. What the fuck is that shit, Ian?"

"It's not porn, asshat. It's 50 shades of Gray." Mandy snipped, her arm curling around Macy and pulling her closer now that Ian's not between them anymore. "God, do you live under a rock?"

"If it looks like porn and it sounds like porn, it's fucking porn. Dude's got that bitch strapped to a bed for fuck's sake."

"It's based on a book." Macy says over her shoulder. "But as far as BDSM goes, it's a poor representation of the culture."

"It's like she's speaking fucking Greek." Mickey mutters as Ian takes him into his arms. He goes without a fight, tipping his head back for the kiss he knows is coming.

Ian doesn't disappoint, pressing his lips to Mickey's tenderly. They may have a hard time talking shit out sometimes, but they can always communicate like this. Mickey slips his tongue into Ian's mouth, beer dangling forgotten between his fingers.

"Hello." Ian says against his lips. "How was work?"

Mickey kisses him once more quickly before pulling away completely. He throws himself down on the chair, motioning for Ian to join him. He does, perching his long body on the arm of the chair. Mickey lays a hand on his thigh, sipping his beer. "Work was work. Now I'm done. You got all your shit packed?"

"Yep." Ian says, running a hand through Mickey's hair. Mickey curls into the touch like a fucking cat. Jesus, he's such a bitch for Ian these days. "So, Mandy won't tell me where we're going. You gonna give me a clue, Mick?" Ian asks, long fingers massaging the back of his neck.

Mickey may be a bitch for Ian, but he's not gonna ruin his own damn surprise. "Nah. Got your meds packed? Don't wanna come all the way back here just for your downers, man."

Ian pushes Mickey's head away roughly. "Fucker. Yeah, I got my meds. I also got the weed and beer like you asked, as well as a cooler full of food. But I have to ask, Mick, what kind of hotel doesn't have room service?"

"Who said anything about a hotel?" Mickey smiled around his beer bottle. "You making some serious assumptions, Gallagher."

"Mick, what else could it be? It's not like we can go camping in the damn winter. Not that I could get your citified ass into a tent even if it were a damn heat wave."

"Did you just say 'citified'? Who are you, John Wayne?" Mickey laughed.

"Don't change the subject, Mick."

"Ian, you are the worst. A surprise is a surprise for a reason." Mickey muttered. "All you need to worry about is whether or not you packed all your shit."

"I did."

"Good then." Mickey can hear the testy tone Ian is shooting him. This is exactly what he's been
trying to avoid. These little snippy arguments that pop out of nowhere, over nothing.

They stayed to finish the movie. Shooting the shit and just generally picking on each other. Mickey glanced over at the clock, standing up. Ian stood with him, feeling his excitement over this surprise increasing.

"We gotta get going, you bitches watch your gross bondage porn on your own TV, okay?" Mickey said. He stood up and started making impatient shooing motions with both hands.

"Alright, dick. We're going." Mandy said, dramatically pushing her brother to get to Ian, who was now standing by their packed bags. "Have fun Ian. I'd say take lots of pictures, but I am quite sure I won't want to see a single thing you're going to do this weekend, you damn perverts." she pulled him into a tight hug before releasing him into Macy's waiting arms.

"Have fun guys." Macy said, hugging Ian quickly before turning to Mickey, arms open and eyebrows raised.

"I am not hugging you lesbo bitches. We're going away for the weekend, not shipping out. Jesus, the dramatics with you assholes." Mickey huffed, throwing the strap of his duffel across his chest and grabbing up Ian's suitcase.

"He's such a sweetie." Macy giggled, lacing her fingers with Mandy's as the left out the front door. "Bye guys! Do all kinds of nasty gay shit while you're away." Mandy called over he shoulder.

"You too!" Ian laughed. "Love you guys." he added, pulling the door closed behind them and reaching for his suitcase.

"I got it. Grab the cooler and the beer." Mickey said, leading the way out of the building. "You wanna drive, firecrotch? I've had two too many beers."

Ian smiled. Mickey was gonna let him drive the work truck. He's not sure why that always made him so happy, but it did.

Mickey threw their bags in the back seat and hopped up front. "The address is in the GPS on my phone, I'll direct you or whatever."

Ian dropped the cooler and the beer on the floorboard in the back before climbing up front. He dragged his seat belt across his lap then turned the key in the ignition, excitement bubbling under his skin. The implications of this trip was not lost on him.

Mickey was giving him some kind of super romantic weekend. Never in a million years did Ian anticipate this turn of events. When Ian had brought up maybe having dinner at The Capital Grille for Valentine's Day, he had thought Mickey would have jumped at the chance. The man loves a good steak, after all. But Mickey had just stared at him, wide eyed and panicked, before feigning nonchalance and saying 'I kinda already got something planned.'

Ian had been floored. Mickey had blushed, refusing to talk any more about it. Which left Ian curious and a little giddy.

He wasn't kidding when he told Mandy that no one's ever done anything like this for him before. Quick trysts in hotel suites and dinners in dim restaurants pretending to be someone's nephew did not scream 'romance'. And although he's still not sure whatever Mickey has planned will be textbook romantic, it's Mickey. So it's going to be amazing no matter what.

Mickey gives him sparse directions as they drive. They don't talk much, just listen to an old Alice in
Chains CD Mickey takes with him every time he has the truck.

Mickey directs him onto the highway. Ian gets on I-90N, heading out of the city. Ian is stumped as to where they could be going. But he doesn't ask. He's going to let Mickey have this little surprise, it seems to mean a lot to him.

Before he knows it they are all the way in Des Plaines on I-294N. Are they going to Wisconsin? What the fuck's in Wisconsin? He opens his mouth to ask, but Mickey knows him too well.

"Not a word, Gallagher. I'm not telling you shit." Mickey says, not looking up from the intense game of Bejeweled he's engrossed in.

Ian sighs, but says nothing. He tries to stay patient, but god, he's so curious.

The whole ride only takes about forty minutes. The finally pull to a long circular driveway and Ian's eyes bulge out of his skull when he sees the sign out front.

"Mick, you didn't!" he gasps.

"I sure as fuck did, firecrotch." Mickey smiles.

When Matt had told him about this place, Mickey's interest had been piqued. It sounded kinda cheesy, but the sexiness of it all outweighed any misgivings he may have had.

Sybaris Pool Suites was a place Mickey had never heard of, but once the seed had been planted, he googled that shit, and liked what he saw. He knew Ian well enough to know this kind of shit would get him hard as fuck. And that was the goal, was it not?

Ian put the truck in park and they got out. Mickey chanced a glance at his boyfriend, seeing a look of wonder mixed with blatant arousal. Bingo.

Mickey went ahead to the office while Ian started gathering their things out of the truck.

"Can I help you?" A petite blond in a red sweater greeted him from behind the counter.

"Uh, yeah." Mickey said, grabbing his ID and debit card out of his wallet. "I have reservations for two nights. Mickey Milkovich. Something called the Swimming Pool suite?"

"Oh yes." the woman said, eyeing him appraisingly. She leaned a little closer that necessary to take his cards, smiling broadly. "Your wife must be very pleased, that's our most popular suite."

Mickey cleared his throat but said nothing.

The woman went about clicking information into her computer, her head swinging up again when the door opened. "Hello sir, one moment and I'll be right with you." she said as her eyes fell on Ian.

"No need." Ian smiled, rocking back on his heels a few feet away. The woman looked confused for a moment before Mickey thought 'fuck it' and grabbed Ian by the front of his shirt and pulled him flush against him. He wrapped an arm around his waist, resting his palm on his narrow hip. The woman's eyes widened, but then her face split into a wide smile. "You gentlemen will enjoy the Pool
suite. If I may be so bold, may I suggest the Taiwan basket? It's in the front closet, you'll find direction for it's use in your room.” she gave Mickey an exaggerated wink, and he felt himself blushing.

"Taiwan basket?" Ian chuckled, clearly interested.

It was gonna be a good weekend.

If Ian was surprised when they pulled up in front of Sybaris, he was god damn floored when they opened the door to their suite.

"Mick, Jesus." Ian whispered, still standing in the doorway, bags dangling from his arms.

"Come in, dumbass. Close the door." Mickey chuckled, walking past Ian and dropping the case of beer on a table by the door.

Ian did as he was told, mouth still gaping, eyes bulging out of his head.

The first thing he saw when he walked in the door was a 8 foot pool in the floor, a two person jacuzzi attached to the side. There was set of stairs leading to a loft in the back, a small balcony running the length of the loft. He laughed when his eyes caught on a slide leading from the loft bedroom back down to the pool.

There were no windows. That was the second thing he noticed.

"Mick, there's no windows." Ian laughed, walking around the pool. His eyes took in the fake plants dotting around the pool, and the fountain dripping water from the ceiling into the pool below. The far wall on the first floor was all mirrors. That could be fun...

He was also mildly concerned that there was carpet everywhere. How odd. Unsanitary, maybe?

"No windows, no phones." Mickey said. "Which means we can walk around naked all weekend, and no one will disturb us." Mickey said, stripping his coat and draping it over a plastic adirondack chair by the pool.

"Naked, huh?" Ian smiled, closing the distance between them and pulling Mickey into his arms. "This is fucking wild, Mick. Can't believe you did all this."

"It's not too cheesy, right? I mean, this is kinda not really my thing." Mickey said, twisting his head up to stare into Ian's eyes.

"Mick, this is amazing." Ian said, sincerity dripping in his voice. "I've heard of this place, but I had no idea it was like this."

"You ain't seen nothing yet, kid." Mickey chuckled.

And he was right. The place was huge. there were framed murals all over the wall, making it look like the place was full of picture windows. Most of them were beach scenes, which was a little bittersweet for Ian. He and Mickey could have had that in real life, if Ian hadn't screwed him over so epically.
But he wasn't going to let himself think of that shit right now. He had his whole life to deal with those regrets. This weekend was about the present. Just him and Mickey, spending their first real Valentine's Day together.

"Let's see what else this place has to offer." Mickey said, placing a tender kiss on Ian's lips. He wrapped a hand around his wrist and started pulling him toward the small set of wooden stairs.

The second story had a small loft, which was almost like a little porch. There was a small bistro set by the railing, which overlooked the pool area below. Through a floor to ceiling glass wall he saw the bedroom. Along the far wall, by the slide was a tiny room, tiled from top to bottom, with two of the same plastic adirondack chairs sitting inside.

"Sauna?" Ian asked, pointing to the room.

"Looks like it." Mickey smiled. "Never been in one before."

"It's nice. You'll like it." Ian said, but his chest tightening at the the sadness that flashed in Mickey's eyes when Ian alluded to his previous experiences. The smile died on his lips.

Guess Ian's not the only one stuck in the regrets of the past sometimes.

"What other surprises you got up here?" Ian asked, eyes wandering over the space, eager to get back to the playful happiness of the previous moments.

"All that's left is the bedroom." Mickey said, slipping through the glass door and into the bedroom. Ian followed closely behind.

His eyes widened as he took in the final space.

The bedroom was much like the rest of the space. Dark wood, light carpets. There was a small island right in front of the door, which held a mini fridge and a coffee maker. A small flat screen TV adorned the wall by the fridge. Not that they would be watching any damn TV.

The bed was in the center of the room, on a small raised platform, dark wood all around the base. Ian tipped his head up, a cocky smirk twisting his lips when he saw the mirrored ceiling.

"Sexy." he laughed, pointing up. Mickey's eyes followed his fingers, and he smiled too.

"Yeah, I saw that shit on the website. Pretty hot, right?"

"Hell yeah." Ian agreed, just as his eyes landed on the far corner of the room. "Jesus, Mick, how many hot tubs does this room have?" Ian laughed, taking in the hot tub in the far right corner of the room. The wall surrounding the tub was also mirrored, making the room look three times bigger than it actually was. Across from the hot tub was a set of massage chairs.

It was kitschy, it was cheesy. But it was also really sweet, and pretty fucking sexy.

Ian was gonna fuck Mickey on every available surface of this whole suite.

It was going to be epic.

"This was the best idea you ever had." Ian sighed, tilting his head back, letting the hot water relax his
tense shoulders. He didn't realize how rigid his muscles were until the bubbling jets hit his body.

They were in the hot tub in the bedroom, one on either side of the tub, their legs tangled together in the middle. Mickey had a beer in one hand, the other passing through the bubbles idly.

"Yeah, it's not so bad, right?" Mickey asked, running his foot along Ian's thigh. "But I can think of a way to make it a little better." he dropped his beer down on the wooden ledge, eyeing Ian hungrily.

Ian smirked, watching with bright eyes as Mickey sat up and crawled over to him. The water sloshed around a little as Mickey settled his body on top of Ian's. He relaxed over him, a thigh on either side of his lap.

"You think we can do this? Fuck in the tub with no lube?" Ian wondered, his hands gripping Mickey's thick hips. His fingertips dug into his pale flesh as the water churned around them, their growing erections pressed together between their stomachs.

"I ain't no pussy, Ian. You know for a fact this ain't the first time we've fucked without lube. Now get to it. I fuckin' want you." Mickey growled, dipping his head down to capture his mouth.

Ian groaned, wrapping his arms around Mickey's back, pulling him impossibly closer. He kissed him back, licking and biting his lips. One of his hands traveled around, his fingers dipping into the crack of his ass, applying light pressure to his hole.

"Fuck yeah. Do it." Mickey moaned, grinding his hips down on Ian's fingers. His eyes shot open and he caught his reflection in the mirror next to the tub. Jesus, he looked so fucked out already. Hair a mess on his head, skin pink and splotchy, eyes blown out, mouth slack. He barely recognized himself.

Ian smiled, tucking his head into Mickey's neck as one of his fingers pushed past Mickey's rim. He heard Mickey suck in a swift breath as he tensed on top of him. He didn't ask if he was okay, sure that was the last thing Mickey wanted to hear. He just pushed and pulled, fingering him under the water as Mickey rocked on top of him.

"Ah, fuck." Mickey hissed, his head tipping back, both hands gripping Ian's shoulders, nails biting into his flesh. Ian's finger worked in and out of Mickey, his lips pressed to his shoulder, his teeth nipping the skin there. "More."

Ian pulled him closer, trying to get a better angle, twisting his wrist. His other hand came around to grab Mickey's ass cheek, pulling it to the side so he could thrust his finger easier. Mickey started to bounce in his lap, water splashing all around them. Ian added a second, and then a third, wanting to work him open enough so that it would hurt as little as possible.

"M'good. Do it." Mickey ground out after a few long minutes of prep he considered unnecessary.

Ian laughed breathlessly, always so turned on by Mickey insatiability. Mickey sat up on his knees as Ian grabbed his dick with one hand and cupped Mickey under the ass with the other. Mickey nodded mutely when Ian gave him a questioning look. Ian placed his dick at Mickey's entrance and watched, enthralled, as Mickey lowered himself back into the water and down on his achingly hard cock.

"Oh dear god." Ian moaned, throwing his head back in pleasure as Mickey sank down on his dick. Once he was fully seated, he wrapped his arms around Ian's neck, licking into his mouth hungrily. Mickey kissed Ian with everything he had. His fingers twisted up into his hair, pulling their mouths
together over and over. He started to move slowly, lifting and dropping his ass in the water.

"Jesus, Ian." Mickey sighed, picking up his pace as he went.

Ian was dying. He's positive this is how he's going to go, on his back in this hot tub, lost in a sea of ecstasy while his boyfriend writhes and bounces in his lap. He reached a hand up out of the bubbles and ran it over Mickey's exposed chest. At the feeling of Ian's hands on his skin, Mickey leaned back, supporting himself on the ledge of the tub and continued to grind down onto Ian's lap.

With his head thrown back and little pleasured gasps slipping from his lips, Ian is sure Mickey has never looked so fucking beautiful. He runs his hand along his wet chest, over his gorgeous tattoo, tweaking a nipple, eliciting a delicious groan from his boyfriend. So he does it again, pinching the nub between his forefinger and thumb. He gets the same reaction, grinning devilishly as he watches goosebumps erupt all over Mickey's skin. He leans forward, placing his hands on Mickey hips, helping to guide his movements.

"You close?" Ian gasps. "Cuz I'm fucking close."

Mickey nods, but doesn't speak, popping his ass harder and faster. He watched himself fucking Ian in the mirror, totally enraptured by the sight of himself riding Ian so hard. He's never actually witnessed them having sex with his own eyes. It's one of the hottest things he's ever seen.

"That's it, Mick. Fucking get it." Ian groans, wrapping an arm around Mickey's waist and pulling them together again. Mickey moans loudly at the change of angle, then cries out as Ian thrusts up from below, hitting his prostate.

"Holy hell." Mickey screams, his voice bouncing off the mirrored walls.

Ian thrusts up again, finally wrapping a fist around Mickey's cock, which had been bobbing in the water, untouched. Mickey reacts as if electrified, his whole body going taut for a moment before he resumes his blistering pace.

"Fuck. Fuck. Fuck." Mickey chants, his ass working feverishly as he drew them both closer to the edge.

"Holy fuck, Mick." Ian moaned. "You looks so good like this. Just bouncing on my cock. Take it so good." Ian dug the fingers of one hand into the meat of Mickey's ass, pulling it further apart, running a single long finger over the spot where they connected. His other hand continued to pump Mickey's dick. Ian was so close now, Mickey had to go first.

"Oh fuck yeah, Ian. Give it to me." Mickey threw his head back again, giving Ian room to latch onto his neck once more. He couldn't get enough of his taste. Delectable. They moved together in the bath, water splashing up and out of the tub, pooling on the tile below.

"Oh, oh. Fuck." Mickey cried out, his seed spilling onto Ian's hand and into the tub. Once he was spent, Ian took his hand back and gripped both of Mickey's hips again. He thrust up a few more times before his whole body caught fire and he came fucking hard. His vision blacked out, he swears. A shiver of white hot pleasure shot up his spine as he emptied into his lover.

Mickey collapsed on top of him, his head resting heavy on Ian's heaving shoulder.

"Holy shit." Ian sighed, running a hand up and down Mickey's wet back. "Hot tub sex is pretty fucking good."

"No kidding." Mickey chuckled, pressing his lips to Ian's neck tenderly.
"What are you doing?" Ian asked, treading water in the shallow pool in the center of the ground floor of their suite. "Come swim. You haven't been in the pool at all yet."

Mickey is splayed out in the attached hot tub, phone balanced precariously over the water, close to his face.

"Just checking in on some things." Mickey mumbles, fingers flying as he shoots off another text.

Mickey knows he probably shouldn't be doing this right now. Texting Jack. On his valentine's day holiday with Ian. But things were just so unstable when they had left, he has to make sure nothing has burned down while they have been away.

They've only been at the suites one day so far. Spending most of their time drinking and fucking and having food delivered from places in the area. (since for whatever reason, the suites don't do room service.)

He's been doing pretty good, not letting shit from home taint what he's trying to have with Ian this weekend, but as the second day draws to a close, he's itching to check in.

First, he had called Svetlana. After he and Ian had jerked each other off in the sauna, which had been both incredibly sexy, and ridiculously exhausting. Mickey had needed a nap after that shit, feeling worn out and sleepy the moment the cum had been washed off his stomach.

He called him as soon as he'd woken up. The phone pressed to his ear as he laid in the huge bed on his back, watching Ian's reflection sleeping beside him in that damn ceiling mirror, running a hand down to Ian's ass and up his back, over and over as he listen to his son babble about his awesome cast and all the candy his Mama got him for Valentine's Day.

The kid is doing okay, thank god. Yevgeney is definitely his son, no one else's kid would try to climb an icy ladder to sit in a frozen tree house in the middle of a midwestern winter. Little idiot, Mickey fucking loved him.

The next phone call he'd made after Ian and he had gorged themselves on chinese take out. It had been earlier in the day when he'd called just to check up on Mandy. She was enjoying her weekend getaway with her girlfriend, neck deep in seaweed wraps and chemical peels. She was also a bit chagrined that Mickey had the audacity to invade her sexy lesbian weekend away with his need to pseudo-parent her from afar.

"Lay off me, Mick. You know I'm not the one you're itching to check up on. Just fucking call him. I'm sure Ian won't mind." Mandy mused on the other end of the line.

"I dunno about that, Mands." Mickey sighed, watching Ian floating on his back in the pool as he sat in the attached hot tub a few feet away. A fresh beer was sitting on the tile nearby, so Mickey grabbed it up and drained half of it, burping loudly.

"Fucking A, Mick. Cut it out with that gross shit." Mandy groused. "And quit stalling. Leave me and your son alone. Call your wayward celly and make sure he ain't dead. You'll feel better once you're sure. But tell Ian what you're doing first, cuz you'll ruin your gay sex bonanza weekend if you try to hide that shit from him."
"Yeah, yeah." Mickey groaned, his eyes drifting to his gorgeous boyfriend again. Ian had his arms splayed out to the side, eyes closed, his red hair floating around his head like a halo. He'd been letting it grow out again, much to Mickey's ever-lasting pleasure. His cut, wet body floating in the pool, the overhead lights dancing across the water and his naked skin. Every once in a while he'd float under the waterfall, droplets of water splashing and spilling across his chest and abs. His dick, laying soft against his stomach. Damn.

What a gorgeous motherfucker.

"Mickey, are you listening to me?" Mandy barked, irritated.

Oops. How long had Mickey been spacing out on Ian's incredible body?

"Huh? What?" Mickey asked, his face flushing pink when Ian's eyes caught him staring. A predatory smile stretched across Ian's face as he flipped over onto his front and started swimming toward the edge of the pool.

"I said, if you're going to call Jack, fucking tell Ian first. Don't lie to him. You always do that shit, and no one likes being deceived. Don't be a dick. If you're going reach out to your side bitch, tell the wife first. Don't ruin your Valentine's Day by steppin' out on your man."

"Mandy-fuck. That's not what's going on." Mickey groaned, giving Ian a tight smile when he raised his eyebrows. Ian looked like he wanted to ask, but instead he just lifted himself out of the pool, water cascading down his body like a fucking 80's music video, and dropped into the chair next to Mickey. He pulled a towel off the back of his chair, draping it over his naked body as he tucked one hand behind his head and grabbed his beer with the other.

"I'm for real, Mick. Fucking tell him. Cuz I know you're gonna call that asshole the moment you hang up with me....."

Mickey took the phone away from his ear, his sister's bitching continuing while he swiped his thumb over the screen, ending the call without saying goodbye.

"Did you just hang up on your sister?" Ian chuckled, sipping his beer and eyeing Mickey curiously.

"Damn right I did." Mickey said, taking a long pull off her beer. "She needs to learn to mind her damn business."

"Why did you call her anyway?" Ian asked, although from the tone of his voice, he already had an idea.

"Just checking up on some shit back home." Mickey muttered unconvincingly.

"That why you called Yev earlier?" Ian asked, playing the game. "To make sure he was okay?"

"My kid fell out of a damn tree and broke his arm. Nobody bothered to tell me til hours later. Excuse me for wanting to make sure he's sort of in one piece."

"I didn't say anything was wrong with it, Mick." Ian said, looking away. Ian's not stupid, he knows what's coming next. He was hoping it wouldn't come up this weekend.

How fucking naive of him.

"I was thinking." Mickey says, eyes on the waterfall. Ian can hear the rest of the thought before it comes out of his boyfriend's mouth. "Since I'm calling home or whatever, I may as well check on
Jack, get it out of the way, then it can be just the two of us for the rest of the night..." Mickey trails off, still staring at the waterfall. He can't bring himself to look at Ian.

Ian, for his part, tries to remain calm. He tries to think of his next words very carefully. He doesn't want to ruin the special shit Mickey's trying to do for them. But he also doesn't want to be a fucking pushover.

This is supposed to be their trip, god damn it.

"Mick, it's just the two of us now. Why do you have this need to run shit back home when we are supposed to be getting away from all of it?"

"Cuz there is no getting away, Ian. Fuck." Mickey says, voice laced with anger. "I can't just turn this shit off. I'm not like you. I always fucking care."

Ian flinched, hurt.

Mickey groaned, pinching in between his eyes harshly. He's such a fucking asshole sometimes. He lifted himself out of the hot tub, wrapping a towel loosely around his waist and dropping into the chair next to Ian.

"Hey," Mickey says, reaching across the small space separating them. He wiggled his fingers expectantly until Ian relented, lacing their fingers together to dangle across the open space. "I'm sorry. I'm a dick. I didn't mean to be so fucking harsh with you." Ian nodded, his face still sad. "I'm just trying to say, we left when shit was so unsure, and I can't stop worrying. If I just call and hear it out of his stupid mouth, I can put all my attention back on you, where it belongs right now." he gave Ian what he hoped was a reassuring smile, squeezing his hand a little. "I wanna be here with you, Ian. But I can't help it that I worry about him. Just like I can't help it that I worry about Yev. Just like I can't help it that I worry about you. Just the way it is."

Ian gave him another small smile, this one more genuine. "Okay, Mick," he said, pulling his hand back and reaching for his beer. "But after you are done talking to him, I'm putting your ass in the basket."

Mickey's naked cock twitched against his stomach at Ian's words.

"Yeah, that sounds good." he said eagerly, reaching for his phone again.

The sooner he sets his mind at ease, the sooner he gets his ass in that sex swing.

---------------------------------------------

Mickey stood on the upper deck of the loft, leaning on his elbows over the railing with his phone wedged between his shoulder and his ear. Ian was behind him in the bedroom, setting up that fucking sex swing.

Mickey insisted Ian go over the whole thing with some clorox wipes they brought for just such an occasion. Mickey can hear him flitting around the room, going through their bags, gathering god-knows-what in preparation whatever kinky shit he's got planned for them.

The phone rings once. Then twice. Then three times. Mickey holds his breath, willing himself not to
freak the fuck out. It's a little after six pm, Jack could be eating dinner or watching TV. No need to lose his shit just yet.

Four rings.

Five.

Six.

"Motherfuck-"

"Hello? Mick?" Jack's voice comes to life across the line and Mickey lets out a deep, relieved breath.

"Hey Cauldwell." Mickey tries for nonchalance, but knows he's failed when Jack's exasperated chuckled floats over the line.

"Checking up on me, daddy?"

"Don't fucking call me that, you creepy prick." Mickey spits.

"Well, I mean, the only other person who calls me when he's off on romantic holiday is my dad, so I guess that makes you daddy now."

"I'm serious, Jack, cut the shit." Mickey barks. The tone of his voice has Ian's head swiveling in his direction. He waves him off.

Once Ian's back is to him again, he turns back to the pool, watching the fountain spill droplets into the water below. "Just wanted to see what's up."

"Mickey." Jack sighs. "You really need to calm down. Poor Ian must be so pissed right now. I'm trying really hard to keep him not hating me, and I'm sure as fuck this shit isn't helping any."

"Why does everyone keep saying that?" Mickey asks. "He's not some jealous bitch. We talked about, then we talked about it, then we just talked about it some more. I'm getting shit from all angles today, I don't need it from your stupid ass too. So just tell me you're doing what you're supposed to be doing, so I can get back to all the kinky sex I'm paying to have in this place."

"You guys doing some kind of gigolo role playing this weekend?" Jack taunted playfully.

"Fuck off!" Mickey groans. "I'm paying for the room, not the sex, you idiot."

"I know that, Mick." Jack giggles. "I'm just teasing you."

"Well, stop teasing and start talking. Ian's waiting." Mickey said, looking over his shoulder to see Ian standing on the bed, the sex swing dangling from the ceiling by one hook. His dick twitched again at the sight. "Make it snappy."

Jack sighed again, this time with genuine irritation. "I'm fine, Mickey. I can live on my own for two days without your supervision. I did it for years before I met your ass, and I'll do it again when you're married to that asshole, walking dogs and playing Scattagories with your sister."

"You can't seriously think I'm ever gonna go to a single game night ever again without dragging your princess ass with me." Mickey says.

Jack has to know by now, Mickey's not going to give up on him.
"Yeah, Mick. Okay." Jack says, and Mickey can hear the smile in his voice. That alone is enough to calm him immensely. "I'm doing fine. The house is okay. The dudes are mostly not assholes. None of them are gay, so it's going to take a lot of effort on my part to get one of them to suck my dick, but you know I love a challenge."

"Jack..." Mickey warned.

"Oh, come on! I'm joking. Mostly. There's this one guy, though."

"Jack!"

"Okay, okay. No dick sucking. Got it." he sighed. "But seriously, it's not so bad. I can go out during the day. Dad says he can get me work for some commercial painting company he works with sometimes, when I'm ready or whatever. I tried to get him to give me a spot on your crew, but he doesn't think us working together would be a good idea."

"I can't imagine why." Mickey drawls sarcastically.

"I know, right?" Jack laughs. "But anyway, I mostly just hang out here for now. Watch Netflix. One of my roommates lets me use his tablet. I've started reading gay fan-fiction. Do you know what that is? It's like porn, but with characters from books or TV or whatever. Like, did you know Sherlock fucking Watson is a thing? Shit's hotter than you would think. I haven't had to look at porn all week to jerk off."

"I have no idea what the fuck you are talking about right now, Jack. You lost me at gay fandiction."

"FAN FICTION, Mick."

"Still don't give a shit. Are you okay? That's all I need to know. Tell me your okay, and I can go make some real life gay shit happen. It's fucking Valentine's day, dude. My guy is in the other room setting up a sex swing, and I'm out here on the phone with you talking about internet word porn. What the fuck?"

Jack laughed. His actual, genuine, free, happy laugh. The sound twisted Mickey's gut, and he found himself smiling.

"Yeah, Mick. I'm doing real good. You don't have to worry about me. But I appreciate it. Always."

"Always gonna worry. I got your back, Cauldwell."

"I know that. Thanks. Now go get your man. And take pictures, yeah? This 'porn without plot' shit can only get me so far."

"Still have no clue what you're talking about, and like hell you'll ever see those pictures."

"OH! So you're saying there are pictures??" Jack asked eagerly.

"Fuck off, Jack." Mickey chuckled.

"Love you too, Mick. Give Ian a good, hard, throbbing kiss for me, yeah?"

Mickey barked out a laugh and disconnected the call, Jack's cackling still flowing from the phone when he swiped the phone closed.

"Fucker's nuts." Mickey said to no one in particular, dropping his phone on the table and making his way to the bedroom.
Ian was waiting for him.

"I'm not sure how I feel about this." Mickey muttered, embarrassment flooding his system like a toxin as he dangled from the ceiling like a fly caught in a spiderweb.

Which was fitting, actually, since Ian was standing a few feet away staring him down like he was about to devour him whole.

"You look so hot, baby. Gonna fucking wreck you." Ian purred, taking two steps forward, but not touching him, not yet.

Mickey was hard as a rock already, which was a bit ridiculous, see as Ian hadn't even laid a finger on him yet, except to haul his ass up into this contraption.

The swing itself was simple enough. It was shaped almost like as if hammock and one of those gynecology chairs had a baby. There was a strip of fabric to rest his head on, a larger one further down for his ass, and two stirrup like things for his feet. It looked a little like a medieval torture device, but he was turned the fuck on regardless.

Now here he was, laying in the thing, his head titled toward Ian, his ass resting in the sling, and his feet curled into the stirrups, hands twisted around the top straps. His breathing came in short pants, his hard cock twitching on his stomach. He waited.

"Fuck, Mick. You look so god damn good. We gotta get one of these." Ian breathed, still standing too far away for Mickey's liking. He looks fucking hot, standing naked across the room, eye-fucking Mickey with lustblown eyes, stroking his engorged dick absentmindedly.

"We ain't buying shit 'til we see what it can do, Gallagher. And so far all it's done is make me feel like a dumbass." Mickey ground out, extending his legs in the stirrups. The motion swung him a little and he started to spin in a circle. "See what I'm talking about? Dumbass." Mickey muttered, embarrassed. He felt a full body blush break out on his skin and felt even stupider.

"No, Mick. You look fucking hot." Ian said, finally stepping over to him. He ran a hand down Mickey's side, over his chest, pulling the strap of the chair out, watching it snap back against Mickey's skin with a slap. The other hand shot underneath him, fingers caressing his ass gently. "Just hanging here, open and vulnerable. Waiting for me. So sexy."

Mickey preened inwardly at the praise, trying to tuck his face into his chest so Ian couldn't see him blush further. It was a lost cause, obviously. There was nowhere to hide in this thing.

Ian grabbed his knees as spread his legs wide. Mickey's back arched on it's own accord and the give of the swing had his whole ass in the air before he knew what he was doing.

"Hey there, Mick. Be careful. I don't want you falling out of this thing." Ian cooed, his hands pulling him back down and squeezing the meat of his inner thighs. "Wanna keep you in here bit longer, k?"

Mickey nodded wildly, unsure if he could even form words right now.

"Good. That's good." Ian said. He grabbed a bottle of lube that was sitting on the bed and popped
the cap. "Now I'm gonna prep you, Mick. But I'm gonna go at my own pace. I'm gonna fuck you when I'm good and ready. You're not gonna rush me. Are we clear?" Ian brought up one lubed up finger and circled it around Mickey's rim.

Mickey's body jerked in the swing, legs shooting out. Ian held him still with a hand on his stomach so he didn't start spinning again. He circled that one finger a few more times before pushing it past his tight ring of muscles.

"Uhn." Mickey grunted. Ian has fingered him a million times by this point in their relationship, but something about the angle of this chair made the sensation so different. Ian found his prostate without even looking. "Fuck." Mickey choked out.

"Oh shit." Ian said lowly, watching with wide eyes as his boyfriend fell apart under his touch. He pumped one finger out slowly, watching it disappear into Mickey's body. His hands roamed like they had a mind of their own. Running up and down Mickey's chest, gripping his neck tight before dragging it down his side and running it along his inner thigh, pulling and massaging the muscle.

That fucking body, jesus. Ian knelt down on the floor to get a better view, adding a second finger when he felt a little give.

"Oh fuck, oh shit." Mickey moaned, his head pushing back into the headrest.

"What lube is this?" Ian asked, still mesmerized by the show he was putting on.

"Uh, um." Mickey searched his lust-addled brain for the answer to Ian's question. It took longer than it should have, Ian's fingers still thrusting and spreading him open. "Fucking cherry?" Mickey moaned. "I think."

"Good." Ian growled, withdrawing his finger without warning and falling face first into Mickey's ass.

"Oh holy fucking god." Mickey moaned, his body quivering as Ian's tongue flattened against his hole.

Ian settles better on his knees. The carpet is cheap, chafes his kneecaps, but he's got his hands curled around Mickey's hips and his tongue buried in his ass, so all else falls away. The swing sways back and forth as Ian pushes and pulls Mickey's body to his mouth. Over and over. The freedom the swing affords him is glorious. He twirls his tongue around Mickey's opening, pointing the muscle to get even deeper. "Taste so fucking good, Mickey. Love eatin' your ass." Ian huffed, his breath ghosting over Mickey's opening, causing a new crop of goosebumps to bloom all over his body. Ian lapped and sucked at Mickey's hole, feeling the muscle loosen under his ministrations. He bit the cleft of his ass hard enough to earn a high pitched moan from his boyfriend. That sound went straight to Ian's dick. He didn't touch himself, though. Getting all he needs in the moment by just pleasuring Mickey. He closes his lips over his hole and sucks hard before going back to licking long stripes from his perineum to his ball sack. Mickey cries out, his body jerking in the swing. Ian runs a hand along his hip, feeling the straps of the swing cutting into his flesh. He pulls back, breathing heavy, and jabs two fingers in without warning.

"Ian! God, Ian, please." Mickey begs, but says nothing else. Ian goes back to lapping and sucking at his hole, working in tandem with his fingers now. His mouth and chin are sloppy with spit and cherry flavored lube. It's fucking perfect. Mickey tastes perfect, his body feels perfect under Ian's trembling hands. Ian moans, inhaling deeply. He runs his tongue up Mickey's hole and sucks one of his balls into his mouth.
Mickey whines, his body spasming as Ian pulls him apart with his mouth and fingers.

"You ready for me?" Ian asks, standing up again. He wipes his sticky mouth with the back of his hand while gripping the strap of the swing with the other. He pulls the swing a little, and Mickey sways again, but he doesn't complain this time. All embarrassment or tentativeness has been obliterated by his blatant want.

"Yes. So fucking ready." Mickey moans, stretching his legs out wide again, exposing his ass. The swing sways, his legs shake with the effort of holding them wide open. His cock is weeping against his stomach, but he doesn't touch it.

He waits for Ian.

"Okay, okay." Ian says, almost to himself. He's so lost in Mickey, he's hardly aware of the words leaving his mouth. He takes one step closer, hand gripping his cock tight with one hand, steadies the swing with the other. He places the head of his cock at Mickey's opening, swirling it around the rim a few times, watching Mickey's hole twitch in anticipation. Ian's breath shudders, he can't take it anymore, he tilts his hips forward, pushing in while pulling Mickey toward him by the straps of the swing.

Mickey yelps as Ian slides all the way in. There is no resistance at this angle, just heat and tightness, fucking tingling.

"Mother of God." Ian groans. His hand clamps down on Mickey's hip as he starts thrusting. The swing rocks with every pump of his hips. Mickey's head is back, his chest heaving as he just goes along for the ride.

Ian fucks him hard. Probably harder than he ever has. The freedom of movement he's afforded with this device makes him crazed. He slams his hips forward while he jerks Mickey's body toward him by the straps. Mickey's head shoots up on a particularly hard jab, his hands flying to the top set of straps. He starts moving his hips in concert with Ian and the swing actually makes a noise of protest.

They're going to break this thing.

"Fuck. Jesus." Mickey cries out, wriggling his hips as Ian continues fucking into him, relentless. His body goes tight, legs out straight like fucking arrows, an inhuman whine slips out of his lips and Ian knows he's hit his prostate.

Mickey is close. His ass is clenching around Ian so hard it would be painful if Ian wasn't so fucking turned on. Mickey spasms again as Ian hits his spot. That whine. Again. Ian can't take it anymore. He unclamps his hand from Mickey hip, pleased with the red welts formed there, and wraps his hand around Mickey's cock. He only has to pump him twice before Mickey's body bows out of the swing again, come shooting all over his chest, some of it even hitting his chin.

The sight alone is enough to do Ian in. He releases Mickey's spent cock and grabs onto his hips again, fucking into him so hard he can see tears in Mickey's eyes. He comes so hard, he black out for a moment. If he hadn't been holding onto Mickey so tight, he's sure he would have fallen over.

He just stands there for a minute, still buried in Mickey's ass. His eyes are closed and he just listens to Mickey's ragged breaths and his own thundering heartbeat.

It could have been seconds, or it could have been hours later, Mickey's hoarse voice brings him back to himself.

"Yo, Ron Jeremy, you gonna relive the money shot all night, or you gonna get me the fuck outta this...
death trap?"

It had taken a while to get Mickey out of the swing, much to Ian's amusement, and Mickey's irritation. Once they are cleaned up, Ian wipes down the swing and puts it away. Mickey grabs a bottle of champagne Ian didn't know he had, and some expensive ass chocolates. They lay in the bed, drinking straight out of the bottle and gorging themselves on too many sweets.

It's probably the most romantic thing Ian's ever done.

And he's doing it with Mickey.

Ian's mind goes to his last Valentine's day. In the apartment alone, drinking alone. Chocolate covered strawberries and deep disappointment.

He can't believe how much has changed in the past twelve months.

He looks over at Mickey, laying on his back next to him, naked. He's got a truffle in one hand, and the champagne in the other. He looks over when he feels Ian's eyes on him.

"What?" he asks, eyebrows raised, smirk on his lips. He pops the chocolate into his mouth, waiting.

"This was amazing. You're amazing." Ian gushes, feeling stupid, but unable to stop himself. "You didn't have to do all this. I would have been happy to stay home. You know that, right?"

Mickey's brow furrows, and he drops the champagne down on the nightstand. He rolls onto his side and cups Ian's face with a hand.

"I did this for you cuz you deserve it." Mickey's face is serious when he says it. Like he really believes Ian deserves anything. After all he's done.

"Why?" Ian whispers, because he can't help but question all his good fortune.

Mickey sighs, his hand slipping up into Ian's hair, pulling. He brings Ian's face down to his. There is barely a breath between them. He kisses him tenderly. More gentle than he ever has. His eyes are sparkling when he replies. "Because Ian. I love you. And all that gay shit."

Chapter End Notes

this chapter was fun for me. i am still kinda in the 'learning phase' of writing smut, but i actually end up writing it more often than i intend to. (oops) but i think sex is a natural part of life, and i put it where it feels right, so....

also, i couldn't help myself: i turned jack into one of us. a fan fiction obsessive. because despite all his shortcomings, he's still a bad ass motherfucker who knows a good time when he sees one.
thanks for sticking with me, i’m having a blast.

Sybaris Pool Suites is a real place, I googled 'romantic shit to do in chicago and found it intriguing.


oh! and the Taiwan basket, of course:

Chapter Summary

After a fair amount of stability, Ian's disorder rears its ugly head. Mick & Ian have it out, and an unexpected person steps in to help.

Chapter Notes

just a heads up. i am not bipolar. i have my own array of mental issues, but as far as this particular disorder goes, i am a layman. i get most of my information from google, and reading articles. so if i misrepresent it in my fiction, i apologize. it's not my intent.

this is, after all, just a story from my head.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Mickey can't believe how good things are going. It makes him wary as fuck, and he doesn't like it. He doesn't like the fact that whenever shit is going well in his life, he can't enjoy it. He's always waiting for the other shoe to drop.

It makes him feel a little sick inside, that he can't just be happy. It's got to have something to do with how he grew up, always looking over his shoulder, always on high alert. Never really relaxing because the next awful thing was always only a breath away. And it always hurt ten times more when he didn't see it coming, so he had learned at a young age to expect the worst at all times, and to never get too comfortable. That way, when things inevitably fall to shit, he is at least mentally prepared to handle it.

So, he always feel most anxious when things are going too well.

It reminds him of his time in Mexico, actually. When he let his guard down and dared to hope he could leave his past in Chicago and start over. Look how that turned out.

Not that he regrets coming home, he's happier now than he's ever been.

And that's part of the problem.

He can't shake the feeling that it's all going to fall apart somehow.

A month has passed since Valentine's Day, and the Mid-March air was cool and crisp. Ian and Mickey had fallen into cohabitation with little issue. They'd done it before, after all.

It had been a little hard for Mickey to really make himself at home in Ian's north side apartment. It was nothing like his family home, or the Gallagher house for that matter. And it was certainly a world away from the beach house. It was all so clean and new, reminded him of all the houses he overhauled at work. Or Jack's old apartment. He didn't fit there, either. He stuck out like a sore thumb. A dirty, infected sore thumb.
But Ian had slowly chipped away at Mickey's insecurities, warming him to the idea that he too deserved nice things. Even if those nice things were stupidly expensive TVs and stainless steel appliances.

Once Mickey had kind of let go of the idea that he was a stowaway in Ian's new life, things settled and they were happy.

Yevgeny got his cast of earlier in the month. Mickey skyped him every chance he got, and the kid was doing much better, gaining strength back in his ridiculously skinny arm. It would take time, but there was no permanent damage. The kid was back out in the tree fort the moment he got clearance from the doctor. Yev was tough as nails.

Made Mickey proud.

Mandy and Iggy were kicking ass and taking names. Mickey never thought he'd see anyone in his family going legit or having a decent long term relationship, not with the way they grew up. But the three of them were beating the odds.

Mandy was happy with Macy. As far as Mickey knew, they hardly ever fought. They enjoyed each other's company, and were a regular fixture at his apartment. His boyfriend and those two girls were like the three musketeers. Thick as fucking thieves. Sometimes it got on Mickey's nerves, since he liked to have Ian to himself if he could help it. But he didn't have the heart to turn those bitches away.

He's getting soft in his old age.

Iggy and Tess are doing the best they can to get ready for their baby. They still don't know what they are having, but Iggy's convinced it's a boy. He keeps talking about all the shit he's going to do for the kid, with the kid. How he wants to break the Milkovich cycle of neglect and abuse. Mickey bristles a little whenever his brother says those things. Mickey's own son knows none of that life, but he understands what Iggy means. He's going to raise his child full time. Do all the things Mickey would love to do, but doesn't get the chance. It's bittersweet, but he's excited for Iggy, and looking forward to having another little Milkovich to fuck around with, one that he's not responsible for. So he can do all the 'fun uncle' shit without having to deal with the disciplining or the hard work.

And Jack. Fuck. Jack is doing better at the sober house than he did at the halfway house. Go fucking figure. Mickey's not sure why, but he thinks it has something to do with Jack's issues with authority. There were too many rules and watchful eyes at Victory House. It made Jack itchy, made him want to buck the system. Mickey's sure having Rowan there didn't help. They fed off each other, making jokes about drugs and sex constantly. And they cosigned each other's bullshit, made it easier to justify the stupid shit they did if the other guy was saying it maybe wasn't so stupid. Mickey's sure they cared about each other, but it was only a matter of time before they got high together. Their relationship was toxic, and they brought each other down.

At this new house, Jack doesn't click with anyone like that. There is no sexual tension, no inappropriate jokes about smoking crack or turning tricks. Those things trigger Jack, Mickey knows it, and so does Jack. Without that temptation around, he's doing great.

All he talks about now is gay fanfiction (Mickey still doesn't know what the fuck that is) and shit he watches on Netflix. He's always telling Mickey he's bored as fuck, but Mickey thinks a little less excitement is a good thing for his friend at the moment.

Things between Jack and Ian had been stilted at first. Jack was nervous and quiet any time Ian was around, and Ian was still working out his confusing emotions about the relationship he and Mickey
shared.
But Jack was nothing if not persistent. Slowly working his way back into Ian's good graces the only way he knew how: staying clean and staying fabulous. He came to the last movie night with the girls, just hanging back at first. But soon the jokes and innuendos started flying again, and Jack and Ian were slowly, maybe getting back to that place they were at before Jack set it all back. Mickey hopes they can get past all this shit. His life was nice when the two most important men in his life were friendly.

He still has hope they can can put this shit behind them.

Even Lauren and Javier are happy, sending Mickey postcards and pictures of a backpacking trip they took down the coast of Mexico. Mickey wishes he could have been there for that.

Everyone is content. Mickey's heart swells with happiness. It feels too good to be true.

And that's probably because it is.

It starts out small, it always does.

It's ironic, in a way, that even though he sees it coming this time, he still can't do anything to stop it.

He's been here before, it all feels so familiar. But he doesn't want to believe it. He's not a hundred percent sure, and he doesn't want to make assumptions or accusations prematurely. It's been so damn long since he's seen it, it's almost easier to convince himself he's overreacting.

Ian's acting off.

It scares Mickey to death to even think it. He's not ready for this shit. He doesn't want this shit. It just doesn't seem fair. But he's positive it's happening.

Little things here and there that he'd ignore if he didn't know what he knows.

It started out with Ian not sleeping. They'd go to bed together, have sex, turn off the lights and go to sleep.

But Ian would toss and turn, kicking and fidgeting for hours on end. Mickey was a heavy sleeper, always had been, but even he would be jolted awake by Ian's restless movements. He would lash out in sleep-addled anger, and Ian would huff at him and toss the blankets aside, leaving to sleep on the couch.

Or Mickey would stupidly assumed he had slept.

Then it was the fact that Ian was barely home all of the sudden. Picking up extra shifts at work. It got so bad, Sue had finally said something to Rita about it, and Ian had been so pissed. Sue actually ended up texting Mickey about it, which was un-fucking heard of. She only had Mickey's number for emergencies.

Was this an emergency? Mickey didn't want to believe it.

Then it was the fucking running. Ian had always been a health nut, but he only got like this when he was on the edge of a slip. Getting up before the sun to run miles and miles. He'd come home drenched to the bone in sweat, barely able to hold himself up. But he wouldn't rest once he got back. He'd go right into making breakfast, or cleaning the already spotless apartment.
Then next thing Mickey noticed was the coupons. At first, he didn't think anything of that either. They weren't poor like they used to be, but old habits die hard, and both of them were always on the lookout for a good deal. So when Ian had started clipping coupons, Mickey thought why the fuck not? Only when Ian was coming home with six or seven different newspapers did Mickey start to wonder. Then it was scouring the internet for deals, then it was signing up for savings websites, then it was joining couponing groups on Facebook. Coupons for shit they didn't need, didn't even use.

But Ian was taking his meds, doing all the shit he was supposed to be doing. Said he was getting enough sleep, working out, seeing Caroline regularly. And if Caroline didn't see a problem, who the fuck was Mickey to say anything?

It was still manageable. They were still okay. Sometimes, these little bumps evened themselves out, like a small swell that ebbed up and flowed away again. So Mickey's not eager to jump the gun and upset Ian.

When the dreaded notebook made an appearance, that was when Mickey started to actually get nervous.

When Ian first got sick, all those years ago, he was constantly writing in that damn notebook. Said he had so many amazing ideas, he had to write them all down before he forgot them. He had so many plans, so many thoughts, so much he wanted to do. It was a never ending stream of consciousness that consumed his waking hours. Once, Mickey had opened it while Ian was in the bathroom and almost puked when he saw page after page of one sentence written over and over, in all capital letters.

I CAN SEE IT. I CAN SEE IT. I CAN SEE IT. I CAN SEE IT. I CAN SEE IT. I CAN SEE IT. I CAN SEE IT.

Mickey had closed the notebook and never asked about it. He had been terrified.

Now, Ian sits with a new notebook in his hands, writing furiously. Mickey is too chicken shit to ask him what he's writing.

Afraid he already knows.

It's just a Friday night, like any other, about a week or two into Ian's gradually increasing curious behavior. Mickey is sitting in their living room with his boyfriend, trying to watch a movie about World War II. He keeps his gaze laser-focused on the TV, no matter how much Ian fidgets. It's like he can't sit still. Like it was physically impossible for him to stop his body from moving.

His leg is bouncing up and down. Up and down. Over and over and over.

If it's not that, his hands are moving. Running through his hair, tapping an odd beat on his thigh, running up and down Mickey's leg, squeezing and releasing his kneecap, again and again.

Mickey shifts uncomfortably, pulling away from Ian's hands, feeling guilt pool in his gut.

If Ian notices, he doesn't say anything, just keeps his eyes focused on the TV, quietly quaking just inches from Mickey.

It's only quiet for a moment before Ian's mouth starts up again. Mickey knows he likes to talk, but this is a bit much, even for Ian.
"So, like, I don't get the Nazis." he says, gesturing toward the TV with the hand that's not twitching in his lap. "Like, I get that they thought they were the master race, but WHY? Like, what makes them any better than the Jews, or the gays? Do you know what they did to the gays? I mean, I'm gay, so I probably shouldn't be calling them 'the gays', but you know what I mean, right? And the gypsies, do you know what they did to the gypsies, Mick? So awful. Those shower rooms, oh god. It was so terrible. I saw this picture of just their shoes, you know? Like all those dead people's shoes, just piles and piles. Little baby shoes, high heels, loafers. It was awful, Mick. I can't imagine. You know, if we were alive then, we'd both have been there. Just because I love you. Someone would kill us just because we love each other. Oh god, Mick! Just like your dad. I know I always said Terry was a Nazi prick, but he was really a Nazi! How awful." Ian paused to take a breath, and Mickey thought his little tirade was over.

He was wrong.

"We should do something, Mick. Like, raise money for Jews somewhere. You know, they are still fighting in Jerusalem. Jews and Palestinians. Even 2000 years later, they are still fighting. So damn sad. I was gonna go there, in the army. If I didn't fuck it all up. But you know, everything happens for a reason, and maybe we could go there now. Help the children. So there's not a pile of their shoes over there. We could do that, Mick." Ian reached over and squeezed Mickey's knee again, before running it over his head and dropping it back down to the couch cushion, twitching.

"Sure, Gallagher." Mickey says, because he doesn't know what else to say to all that. He's so damn scared all of the sudden. The past few weeks of odd behavior solidifying into this exact moment.

It's happening again.

Mickey knows the signs, he read up on it all those years ago, when Ian first got diagnosed. He had poured over articles and first hand accounts, desperate to understand. So this shit is not a surprise. But he still feels blindsided.

He should have said something weeks ago. But he had stupidly hoped it would either go away on it's own, or Ian would notice and say something himself. Mickey had selfishly hoped the problem would solve itself, so he didn't have to say anything.

He remembers the last time he tried to help Ian. He remembers what happened. Ian broke his damn heart, and left him. He had decimated Mickey down to his very soul, and hadn't even been sorry.

Mickey not eager to repeat that scenario. Even though they talked about this exact situation when they had gotten back together, Ian's pained face that day on the Gallagher porch right before Mickey got arrested flashes before Mickey's eyes when he thinks of confronting him again.

Fucking pussy. That's what he's being.

"Oh!" Ian says suddenly, jumping up from the couch and lurching toward the light switch. "Gotta shut this shit off." he says, flipping the switch almost violently, plunging them into darkness. "I can't think with that light on, burns my brain." he sighs, walking toward the kitchen with purpose. "Can you hear that, Mick? That buzzing coming from the light? You should take a look. Or have Matt take a look. I don't want you poking around in the electrical, it's dangerous. Did you know that 30,000 electrocutions happen in the home every year? Not safe. Not at all. So we'll have Matt check out that buzzing. Not safe."

Mickey doesn't hear any buzzing.
But he didn't expect to.

"So! We're gonna go down to the house on Trumball and paint the nursery." Ian says, returning from the kitchen with beer for Mickey, which he takes gladly. He fucking needs it all of the sudden. Ian sips on his own, and it's blissfully silent in the house before Ian starts up again. "So we'll all go down there and help them out. Jack's gonna come. I think it'll be good for him to get out of that house and do something meaningful. Don't you? He's doing so good. I know you're so proud of him." Ian's tone is laced with ill-hidden bitterness all of the sudden, and Mickey's having a hard time keeping up with his fluctuating mood.

"I am." Mickey said carefully, sipping his beer, his eyes still on the television.

"Of course you are." Ian says. It's impossible to ignore the anger in his tone. "So fucking proud."

"Ian." Mickey says, putting his beer down on the coffee table and giving Ian his undivided attention. Now or fucking never. "What's going on with you?"

He didn't want to ask. Especially not like this.

But he can't afford to ignore this anymore.

"Me?" Ian asks, still standing a few feet from the couch. He starts pacing in front of the television.

Back and forth. Back and forth.

"What's wrong with me?" Ian says again, like he's talking to himself. "What's wrong with you, Mickey?" Ian spat, crossing his twitching hands over his thin elbows.

"What?" Mickey balked. "You are not turning this shit around on me." Mickey stood up from his seat, taking two steps closer to Ian, though not getting right in his face quite yet. "I'm not blind, Ian. And I'm sure as fuck not stupid. You need to get down to Caroline and have your shit adjusted. Your meds are out of balance." There. He said it. The one thing he'd been avoiding for a while now. It was out there. Ian knew he knew.

He waited.

"Oh, fuck you, Mickey." Ian screamed, closing the small distance between them, clenching his hand into a fist and delivering a hard poke to the center of Mickey's chest. "You don't know shit. I'm taking my meds. I'm doing all the shit I'm supposed to. I just saw Caroline last week. If I was off, she'd know it. What makes you the fucking expert? You got a psychiatry degree behind my back in your spare time?"

"I'm the fucking expert because I live with you." Mickey said, trying real damn hard to remain calm. He pushed Ian out of his face with a hand to the chest. Ian stumbled back a few steps, but came right back, closer to Mickey's face, looking down on him with anger in his eyes. Mickey flipped the light switch back on angrily. If he's going to say this shit, he wants to look Ian in the eye when he does it. "You're bouncing off the fucking walls. You constantly wanna fuck. I can't keep up with you. You're not sleeping. You think I don't notice, but I wake up in the middle of the night and you're gone. Tossing and fucking turning on the couch. You're writing in that damn notebook again, and that's never a good sign. All those fucked up ideas you think are pure gold. And don't even get me started on the fucking coupons."

"What's so crazy about wanting to save some money?" Ian argues back, voice high and harsh.

"What do we need coupons for tampons for? For god damn mascara? I saw you printing one earlier
Ian's face gets redder. How that's possible, Mickey has no idea. He can see his eyebrows twitching violently. Ian pushed him again, but Mickey won't rise to the bait. Mickey clenches his hands into fists, his instinct to lash out almost overpowering him. He takes a deep breath. Nothing good will come of him laying Ian out right now.

"Unlike you, I think of people besides myself!" Ian yells again, stepping even closer. Mickey can feel his breath on his face, fast and erratic. Ian's face is flushed red, the vein in his neck pounding with his pulse. His pupils blown in his wide, angry eyes. He looks high.

He looks manic.

Fuck.

"Those coupons could be for Fiona, or Vee. Mandy! Did you forget we have people in our lives that need our help?"

"Nobody wants you're fucking coupons! You're acting fucked up. This shit ain't normal. You're acting fucking cra--" Mickey stops mid-sentence, eyes wide. He brings a hand up, swiping it down his face.

"You're acting fucking crazy." Mickey whispers, voice pained. "You're acting manic, or at least hypomanic. We need to get you to Caroline and get your shit adjusted. If you're taking your meds, they ain't working no more."

That's what finally does it. Ian growls lowly. Mickey looks away, which was a bad idea, because the next second he feels a fist crush into the side of his face. The force of the hit knocks him into the wall behind him. He head flies back and smacks hard into the drywall, surely denting it, if not breaking it. He groans, running his fingers over his lip. It comes back bloody.

Ian is crowding him against the wall, his face twisted into an angry grimace.

"You motherfucker." Ian seethed. "You come into my life after being gone for fucking YEARS, and you think you know me enough to get on my case about this shit? You know fuck all about me! I've been doing good for years, Mickey. Years. When shit with Brian fell apart, I checked myself in. I did that. No one had to tell me. I take care of myself. I do that shit. I didn't need you to fucking nurse me back in the day, and I sure as fuck don't need it now. You don't know what the fuck you're talking about. You're a fucking handyman, not a shrink. So why don't you mind your fucking business and get off my god damn back." Ian punched the wall right by Mickey's face, and Mickey flinched. He never flinched anymore, hadn't in years. But Ian was scaring the fuck out of him.

Mickey opened his mouth to reply, but Ian was already turning around. He grabbed a hoodie off the hook on the wall, and left, leaving the door open as he stormed down the hall and into the night.

Ian is crowding him against the wall, his face twisted into an angry grimace.

Mickey turned, swaying a bit, dizzy. He only made it as far as the kitchen, falling gracelessly into a chair. Resting his busted face in his hands, he allowed himself a moment to cry. Hot tears streamed down his face, mixing with the blood. He licked his split lip, tasting iron and salt.

"You are my business, Ian." he spoke quietly to the empty apartment. "You're my fucking everything."
Fuck Mickey. Fuck that pushy know-it-all asshole. Thinks he knows shit about Ian. He has no idea what it's like to live with bipolar disorder. How hard it is, knowing that everyone is always watching you, judging you. Dissecting everything you do, going down some stupid non-existent ‘is Ian acting crazy?’ checklist.

Fuck him. He has no idea what he's talking about. He promised, fucking promised it would be different this time. That he'd let Ian be a god damn adult and take care of himself. Promised that he'd only say something if things were getting out of control.

And they're not. They're not out of control.

Sure, he's been having trouble sleeping, but that's fucking normal. Sometimes, people can't sleep. Even normal, sane people have trouble sleeping sometimes.

And that shit at work was not his fault. Sue needs to learn to mind her own damn business. So the fuck what if Ian wanted to pick up extra shifts? They needed the money, and Ian was an asset to the team. They were lucky he worked there, and they needed to remember that shit. The more he thinks about it, the angrier he gets. Sue probably has this whole secret thing going with Rita, keep at the OT to herself, cut Ian out. It was a god damn conspiracy, and he was gonna tell Rita just that when he goes into work next. They think they can get over on Ian Gallagher? They're sadly fucking mistaken.

God, he's so fucking mad. He hit Mickey pretty hard, but he has no room in his head to feel bad about it right now. Fucker deserved worse. He's lucky Ian left instead of really kicking his ass.

He needs a drink. And a distraction. He just needs to go somewhere where no one fucking knows him. Where no one will look at him -that way-, asking him if he's okay.

No. He's not fucking okay.

He walks and walks. Glad for the sounds of the city drowning out the sounds in his head.

Fucking head. Won't shut up for one god damn second.

He just needs to go somewhere he can forget for a minute.

He makes a decision and gets on the L.

Fuck Mickey. Just fuck him.

------------------------------------

Mickey can't believe he's here again. He is such a fucking idiot. Of course he's here again. He got fucking complacent. He had been telling himself for months he needed to get a better handle on Ian's disorder. Read more shit, learn more signs, ways to head an episode off at the pass, before it got too far.

This was too fucking far.
He'd been toying with the idea of going to therapy with Ian. Meet Caroline properly. Maybe get some insight from someone who actually knows what they're talking about.

Now, it seems like he's dropped the ball. Ian had left not that long ago, but Mickey was already itching to go out and look for him. He'd left his phone and his keys behind, but he had his wallet, stuffed with money from his cashed paycheck, which meant he could get into all kinds of trouble out there.

He didn't even know where to start. Mickey's sick with realization that he should probably hit the clubs if he wants to find his boyfriend before he does something he'll surely regret.

Ian is a creature of habit, and when he's angry or wants to forget his troubles, he always goes out dancing. Something about the mindlessness of moving his body, the reassuring control he feels when strangers ogle his body. The rush he gets from the music, drowning out the noise in his head.

The idea makes Mickey increasingly sicker.

Ian also cheats. When he feels like Mickey has hurt him, or when he wants to hurt Mickey. It's just what he's always done. Mickey used to do that shit too, he's no saint. But he's not that guy anymore.

Neither is Ian, not normally. But Ian's manic right now, so all bets are off.

He grabs his phone, dreading making the call before he even hits the contact. But he does it, because he can't afford to let his hurt feelings or his pride get in the way of finding Ian. Every second fucking counts, and he's got no time to lose.

"Mick? What's up?" his sister's voice fills his ears, and he relaxes the tiniest amount.

"Mands." he chokes out. His eyes start to burn again. Fuck.

"What?" Mandy's voice is high, she can tell something is really wrong.

"Have you heard from Ian in the past half hour?" he asks dumbly. He doesn't know how Ian would get in touch with her, since he's staring at his phone as he's speaking.

"Ian? No. Why? What the fuck happened?" Mickey can hear the fear in Mandy's voice.

"I think he's manic, Mands. I asked him about it, and he flipped the fuck out. Fucking punched me and stormed out. Left his fucking phone."

"Oh god." Mandy whispered.

"No shit." Mickey replied, running a hand down his face. He winced when he felt the tender flesh of his lip pull, fresh blood coming back on his fingers.

This is more like it. Ian sighs with relief as he steps into the crowded club. It's still early for a Friday, but the place is packed already. He weaves his way through the surge of bodies and slides up to the bar. He bangs his hand on the bar-top, getting the attention of the bartender. She smiles widely when she sees Ian standing there. She leans over the bar and pulls him into a hug. Ian hugs her back, happy and relieved to see a friendly face.
"Ian, baby, what brings you to Flipside tonight?" Greta asks.

It's a good question. Ian doesn't come to this club very often. It was one of the only gay AND lesbian bars he ever patroned, usually not into the lesbian bar scene. But he used to come here back in the day with Trevor, and he enjoyed it. The atmosphere was more laid back than the Fairy Tale, but it was pretty much the same. Same anonymous sex, same rampant drug use. But it was more low key, less flamboyant, even if Ian detests that word. Besides, no one else knows he comes here, so he's safe from Mickey or anyone else finding him.

He doesn't want to be found.

"Just needed to get out." Ian says. It's mostly the truth, anyway.

"Well, we missed you around here!" Greta smiles again, her painted lips curling around her teeth. "You want your usual?" she asked, turning to grab a glass.

"Sure, thanks." Ian said, his eyes traveling from her face to the dance floor and back.

Greta poured him a Long Island Iced tea and slid it over to him. "First one's on me, kid. It's really good to see ya." she hit him lightly in the shoulder and he nodded his thanks before taking a big gulp of his drink.

It burned going down, but Ian didn't flinch. He chugged the entire glass before dropping it back down to sticky bar top with a clatter. He spun around on his stool, eyes scanning the dance floor for a moment before Greta tapped his shoulder. He spun again, smiling at the woman when he saw a fresh drink sitting in front of him.

"Wanna talk about it, hun?" she asked, resting on her elbows and cocking her head to the side.

"Nothing to talk about." Ian said, sipping his second drink slower.

"I don't believe you." Greta smiled. She was a gorgeous woman, long straight black hair and striking green eyes that were framed with thick dark eyeliner. She was thin, with delicate tattoos visible along her arms and upper back. The tight red dress she was wearing left little to the imagination. She was a spitfire for sure, and Ian's always liked her.

He should come here more often. He didn't realize how much he missed Greta, or the bar scene until this exact moment. He needs to get out more. He's too fucking young to be stuck at home like some god damn senior citizen.

"Where's the boyfriend?" Greta asked, pouring herself a drink and sliding up against the opposite side of the bar. Ian looked around, wondering if she should be helping other patrons, but it felt good to talk to her.

"What makes you think I have a boyfriend?" Ian asked, swirling his glass. The ice knocked against the cup, a little liquid sloshing out and spilling onto the bar top.

"Trevor comes around." Greta said, still smiling. "Talks about you sometimes." she laughed when Ian's eyes bugged out of his head. She rolled her eyes. "Only when he's totally plastered, so don't get too full of yourself."

Ian laughed at that, loud and long, totally missing the confused look on his friend's face.

"Does he now?" Ian giggled. "What could he possibly have to say about me, or my boyfriend?"

"Oh, you know," Greta said, sipping her cocktail. "Just normal stuff really. How you really fucked
him up, how he wishes he never met you. How you ran away with an escaped convict and cheated like a cheap whore, and now you're shaking up with the guy." Greta's eyes were sparkling, her teasing tone evident. Ian smiled along with her, although he did not find it funny at all. His head was spinning with what she had just said. The fury curled up inside him like a snake until it spilled out of mouth unbidden.

"Fuck that asshole." Ian spat angrily, all humor gone now."He wishes he was half the man Mick was. Literally."

Greta looked appalled at Ian's words.

"Jesus, Ian. I've never heard you say something so blatantly transphobic." Greta grimaced.

"That was not transphobic. It's the fucking truth. Trevor never stood a chance against Mick. " Ian groused, feeling rage bubbling under his skin. He threw back the rest of his drink and coughed a little. "I'm gonna go dance for a bit, you gonna be around all night?" he asked, watching Greta watch him warily. What had he done to deserve that look? She's the one who brought up fucking Trevor to begin with. He came out tonight to forget all that shit. His mistakes, people he let down and hurt. His real life was bearing down on him so hard, and he needed a fucking break.

Fuck Greta for stirring all this shit up again.

He could feel his skin. Burning and itching with electricity, just under the surface. He clenched his hands into fists. He needed to get some of this nervous energy out of his system.

"Sure, baby. I'm gonna be around. Come find me later, we'll party some more." Greta said easily. She was used to Ian's quickfire temper and fluctuating moods. It's just the way he's always been, ever since he started coming around. Greta could never tell which version of Ian was gonna show up on any given night. The fact that she hasn't seen him is months is not a shock either. He had always been a flighty dude, the entire time she's known him.

She watches him melt into the crowd. She sees him tip his head back and sway his body, his hips rocking incessantly to the beat. It doesn't take long for some random dude to slide up against him, ass tucked into Ian's pelvis. Ian wraps his arms around the stranger, tucking his face into the back of his neck as he grinds on his ass.

Greta takes another sip of her whiskey, laughing a little to herself. Ian had just flown off the handle because she had mentioned Trevor calling him a cheater. He had just waxed poetic about this new dude like he gave a shit. Now here he was, hiding from the poor sucker, dry humping some twink on the dirty dance floor.

Ian was a trip. Even if Greta never understood the guy, she would never accuse him of being dull.

"I shouldn't be wasting my time fucking around here. I need to get out there and look for him." Mickey went to stand up again, but a firm hand on his arm pulled him back down onto the couch.

"Mick, you need to calm the fuck down. He's mad right now. He may be a little hypomanic, but that's not the end of the world. He still has the capacity to make decisions at this point. He probably just needs a little time." Mandy said, her tone soothing, even though her eyes were scared.
"You weren't there, Mands." Mickey said, nodding his thanks to Macy as she passed him a beer and sat down opposite Mickey in the chair.

Mickey had bolted to Mandy and Macy's house after he got off the phone with her. He's not sure what pushed him to his sister's house, except the desire to be around someone who understood what he was feeling.

Mandy got it.

"He's been getting worse, but I was hoping it would taper out on it's own, it does that sometimes." Mickey sipped his beer, nibbling on his bottom lip nervously. "But tonight was just fucked. He couldn't sit still to save his fucking life. We were arguing about coupons."

"Coupons?" Macy raised an eyebrow, confused.

"Yes, fucking coupons. He's been clipping them relentlessly. He's got like sixty fucking coupons for concealer and foundation. Says there for you." he says to his sister.

"I don't even wear that shit." Mandy said, brows furrowed.

"Exactly." Mickey sighed. "They're for shit no one uses or wants. I should have seen it sooner."

"Is that all?" Mandy asked, fairly certain it wasn't.

"No." Mickey said, pulling hard on the cigarette he had wedged between his fingers. "He's not sleeping. He got into it with the chicks at his work. Almost got sent home again. He's watching all these fucked up documentaries about Nazis. He said tonight he wanted to go to fucking Jerusalem, help the Jews. What the fuck?"

"So that's when you brought up mania." Mandy surmised.

"Yeah, and then he fucking decked me and took off. Said all kinds of fucked up shit. Said I had no right to say that shit to him, about him slipping. Even though when we first got back together we talked about this shit, and he said he wanted me to look out for the signs. Said he didn't want this shit to happen again. Getting manic. Getting out of control. Now he's going off the handle, telling me he's been doing this shit without me for years, didn't want my fucking help. Said he's not going to take psychiatric advice from a fucking handyman." Mickey slouched against the couch, feeling hurt all over again as he recalled the fight.

Fuck. He really didn't expect it all to fall apart so quickly.

"What do I do, Mands?" Mickey whispered, cradling his head in one hand and his beer in the other. He drained the bottle, chancing a sideways glance at his sister. She looked fucking scared.

"I don't know." Mandy said back. "Call Fiona?"

Fuck.

Mickey really didn't want to do that.

"I dunno, it's only been a few hours. I don't want to get the whole Gallagher clan involved if we can handle this ourselves." Mickey said, his mind automatically going back in time. When he and Fiona had fought it out over what was best for Ian when he first got manic. Mickey still considers that conversation the beginning of the end for them back then. Fiona may like Mickey okay now, but he's not dumb enough to think she's forgotten how badly they bumped heads back then over Ian's well
If she finds out Ian has taken off, and that Mickey is somehow tied up in his reasoning, however
convoluted, Mickey's almost positive she will never been cool with him ever again.

"Mick, we aren't handling shit." Mandy said, her hands twisting in her lap. She looked over at Macy,
then back at her brother. "We're just sitting on our asses talking about how we're doing nothing."

"Fuck, Mandy, I know that." Mickey snapped, feeling like an asshole instantly. "Shit, I'm sorry." he
said much softer. "Listen, like I just said, it's only been a few hours. Why don't we just see if he calls
me? I mean, he could. Right?"

Mandy sighed, her hand reaching out to grip her girlfriend's knee. Macy's hand came up
automatically, her fingers wrapping around Mandy's wrist. Mandy didn't want to wait. She thought
that was a stupid fucking idea. Her and her brother both knew what Ian could get into when he was
manic.

It was a stupid fucking idea to wait around.

"Sure, Mick." she said, her eyes downcast. "Whatever you think is best."

--------------------------------

Ian bounded off the dance floor, his sweat-drenched shirt sticking to his torso like a second skin. He
slid into the booth opposite of Greta, grinning like a madman.

"God! I fucking love dancing. Mickey never wants to dance. Says he don't know how, but that's
bullshit, any dude that can fuck like that can sure as hell dance." he laughed loudly, picking up a shot
glass full of green liquor and tossing it back.

"Jesus, Ian, you are a riot. We need to hang out more often." Greta chuckled, tossing back her own
shot. "But you need to shut your mouth about your man. He ain't here. We're trying to have fun,
right?"

"Yeah, fuck him. Always trying to control me." Ian muttered, mostly to himself. Somewhere deep in
his mind, alarm bells were going off. Mickey didn't do that. Control him. Did he? Maybe. Ian's not
sure about anything right now, except for the fact that he feels fucking good, and wants to feel even
better.

"Is your friend coming?" Ian asks, tone laced with anticipation.

"Yeah, he's on his way. He's gonna love your pale ass." Greta smirked mischievously.

Ian smiled back, unsure of what she meant. It was like her words were hitting him, but sliding right
off before he could absorb them.

He didn't think too much of it, just tossed back another shot when Greta poured it. She was fun, and
Ian's glad she decided to stick around after her shift was over. He didn't want to be alone tonight, but
he also wasn't ready to go home. He just wanted to be an anonymous partier tonight.

So far so good.
The club has changed tone over the past few hours. The after work regulars had gone home a while ago, leaving the place open for the late night crowd. This shift in atmosphere reminded Ian of his dancing days. There were men and women in cages hanging form the ceiling, or dancing on platforms dotted along the space. He let his eyes travel over the dancers. They were gorgeous, boy or girl, didn't matter.

"You know, I used to do that." Ian said, hooking his thumb over his shoulder at a dancer a few feet behind him.

"I bet that was a sight to see." Greta laughed.

"Sure was, I was very popular." Ian smirked filthily.

"Of course you were, hot piece of ass like you. If you're interested, I know some of the dancers do private shows, if you know what I mean." Greta shot him a wink and Ian winced internally.

Turning tricks.

Ian doesn't want to think about that. He's not interested in paying for it. And he's certainly not interested in the memories of his own time on his knees for dollar bills.

He's not fucking proud of that shit.

"Take a shot, Ian. You got that look on your face again." Greta poured him a shot and he dutifully tossed it back, grimacing a bit at the burn and wiping his mouth on the sleeve of his hoodie.

He was fucking wasted. Normally he'd be fucking beat by now, passing out in a puddle of his own drool, but tonight he was on cloud nine. He felt like he was on fucking fire. Every nerve in his body was tingling, his brain whirling and sparking. The music was hard and thumping, pulsing under his skin and throbbing in his heart. His head was spinning.

Just as he was about to start talking about Mickey again, an olive skinned man slipped into the booth next to his friend.

"Greta, baby." the man crooned, pulling the girl into his arms and kissing her cheek tenderly.

"Marco, so glad you could join us. This is my friend Ian, he's been asking about you." Greta smiled over at Ian.

Ian extended his hand over the table, and Marco took it, holding it much longer than necessary.

Marco was a good looking guy. Tall with dark hair and hazel eyes. He was well dressed, looking classy in a steel gray button up and black slacks. Big silver watch with a black face prominent on his wrist. His whole being screamed decadence and money. Ian squinted at the man in the flashing strobe lights of the club, watching the man watch him back.

"I heard you guys were looking to party." Marco said, pulling his wallet out. Out of a small zipped pocket he pulled a bag of coke. "I only brought a little, since we're in public, but if we end up enjoying each other's company, we can always go back to my place and continue the fun." he winked at Ian while he cut out three fat lines for them.

Ian looked around quickly, but no one was paying them any mind. As the hour grew later, the place was descending into chaos. Men jerking each other off over their jeans, women in the balcony with their tits out. The boys dancing on the boxes flashing more and more of their asses, giving the patrons a taste of what was on the menu.
Marco snorted his line before passing the rolled up dollar bill to Greta, who followed suit without hesitation. Her head shot back after, as she pinched her nose with one hand and blindly passed Ian the bill with the other.

Ian took one last look around before he hunched over the table and brought the bill to his nose. He sucked in hard, the harsh chemicals burning his nostril. The coke dripped down the back of his throat as his head shot back up. He gagged.

Marco laughed at that, sliding out of his seat and dropping back down next to Ian. He immediately started cutting out more lines, eyeing Ian hungrily while Ian pinched his nose and gagged once more.

Ian grabbed his full shot glass and tossed back whatever was in it. He couldn't even remember what he'd been drinking all night. The drugs hit him and his eyes widened that much more.

His eyes felt so fucking huge.

He looked around, suddenly feeling like he was seeing so much more. The club came into sharp focus, contrasting colors nearly blinding him.

He felt like he could see everything.

But he missed something.

He missed the guy on the other side of the room, only a few feet away. The kid had been gyrating on a raised box to the loud music, but froze mid-thrust when his eyes landed on Ian.

Ian, sitting in a booth with Greta and Marco the coke dealer. Ian, sitting in a booth with Marco the coke dealer hanging all over him, rubbing his thigh. Ian, sitting in a bar in the early hours of the morning, snorting coke out in the open like he was at studio 54.

Ian didn't notice when the guy jumped off his box and made his way through the crowded dance floor toward the back of the club.

Ian didn't notice the wary look the kid shot him as he walked past him, either.

Ian didn't notice at all.

-------------------------------------------------------

It was late. By any normal person's standards, it was fucking late.

To Jack, the night was just getting started.

And that's part of the problem.

It's taking a ridiculously long time for Jack's body to catch up with his brain regarding his new routine. He's been clean since he got to the sober house. Not a single slip. Not a klonopin, not an adderall, not even a percocet. It wasn't this hard when he was at Victory House, but he'd still been on a shit ton of prescription xanax at that time, and this is an entirely different animal. It's really quite remarkable.

He's working for Bill, a friend of his dad's, painting. It's hard work, long hours, so by the end of the
day, he's beat.

He wishes he could just shower and pass out. But his mind is still stuck on junkie time, and he ends up staying awake until well after three a.m. almost every night.

It's hell on his body, and his brain is starting to feel like it does when he's gone on a real long meth run.

Not good. Not good at all.

Sam, the Head Junkie in Charge at the house, keeps promising Jack that once he gets used to his new routine and his body acclimates to not being hopped up all the time, that normal sleep patterns will return. Jack's not so sure he believes him. He can't remember the last time he had a decent night's sleep that wasn't chemically aided in one way or another. He rolls onto his back in the dark room, listening to his billion roommates snore and make other strange, unappealing noises. He grabs blindly for a bottle on his nightstand.

He can't believe he's that guy now. The dude that is fishing for an ambien when he wants to sleep, instead of doing it the old fashioned way.

What he wouldn't give for a shot of dope right now.

He curses himself silently for his thoughts, popping one of his new prescription sleeping pills in his mouth and swallowing it dry.

He finds endless amusement in the fact that his doctors and his parents are adamant about his 'recovery', while simultaneously stuffing him to the gills with prescription drugs.

Oh, the irony.

He's settling back down into his covers when he sees the light on his phone go off. He keeps it on silent at night. His roommates don't take too kindly to being woken from their collective slumber.

He stifles and irritated groan, gripping his phone and bringing it up to his face.

Rowan.

What the fuck?

Jack shoots up straight, pulling the cord from the phone and dashing out of the room and toward the bathroom.

He slides inside silently, locking the door behind him.

"Rowan? Dude, what the fuck? Where are you? Are you okay?"

"Yeah, yeah." Rowan's breathy voice trickles into his ears. "Were you sleeping? I know it's late."

"Nah, dude, it's all good. Can't sleep for shit these days anyway. Why? What's going on?" Jack was nervous. He hadn't talked to Rowan in weeks. It's not that he doesn't want to, it's just that Rowan's still in the shit, and Jack's only a half step out of the shit. He's been teetering on the edge this whole time. One well placed push is all it would take to send him toppling face first back into the life.

"Sorry about this." Rowan says instead of answering his question. "It's just, I'm kinda fucked up right now, but I didn't know what else to do. Maybe it's not my place, but it just didn't feel right."
"Rowan, man, it's two o'clock in the morning, you're not making any sense. Are you okay? Did someone fuck with you? Do you need my help?" Jack asked, knowing full well he'd go. It may not be smart, but he wasn't gonna leave the kid hanging if he was in trouble.

"No, not me. I'm fine." Rowan said, relaxing Jack the smallest bit. "Well, considering." he added on quietly. "But I'm working at Flipside right now. I saw someone I know and it just doesn't feel right."

Jack furrowed his brow. What the hell was this all about?

"Huh?" he asked. "You called me to tell me you ran into someone at the bar? What business is that of mine?" Jack was thoroughly confused.

Not to mention that ambien was kicking in now, making him go fuzzy around the edges. He closed the lid to the toilet and sat down, resting his head in his hand.

"I didn't know what else to do. I don't have Mickey's number." Rowan said quietly.

"Mick?" Jack balked. "Why the fuck would you need to talk to Mickey?"

"Cuz his boy is here, he's fucked up, and it looks like he's gonna end up going home with fucking Marco." Rowan said, as if that was a normal fucking response.

Jack's breath caught in his throat. He took the phone away from his ear to stare at it for a moment. There is no way in hell he just heard that shit right.

Mickey had texted him earlier in the evening, asking if he'd talked to Ian. Being vague as usual, just mentioning they had a fight, and if Jack hears from him, tell him to call a.s.a.p.

But Ian has to be home by now, right?

"Ian? Are you telling me Ian is at fucking Flipside right now? With Marco? Coke Marco? What the fuck? What the fuck?" Jack stood up so fast his head spun.

"That's what I'm saying!" Rowan shouted. "Isn't he, like sick in the head or something? Didn't you tell me shit like coke can really fuck him up?"

"Yeah, yeah I did." Jack answered absently while he snuck back into his room silently. He balanced his phone on his shoulder while he stripped his sweats and stepped back into his jeans. "What the fuck is Marco doing right now?" he whispered harshly, because that was the most pressing issue at the moment.

"He's just sitting there with Ian and Greta, feeding 'em drugs and feeling all up on Ian. Jack, man, I don't have to tell you how this story ends..." Rowan trailed off.

"Nah, I know all about it." Jack sighed, he pulled a hoodie on over his head and shrugged his jacket on. "Don't let Ian leave with him. Or Greta for that matter. Keep him the fuck there, I'm on my way."

"Jack, I didn't call you for you to come rescue his ass. Shit, I don't know why I called you."

"Nah, Rowan. You did good. If Ian's down there doing what you say he's doing, he's not okay. I gotta get there and stop him from doing some shit he's gonna hate himself for later. He could be really sick, Rowan. He needs help."

"Isn't that Mickey's job?" Rowan asked.

"Sure it is. But we gotta get him to Mickey before he can do anything." Jack said as he walked out of
the house and hit the street. "Just keep him there. I won't be long."

Jack's not even sure Ian will talk to him. They aren't in the best place at the moment. But none of that shit matters right now. He has to try. For Mickey, and for Ian.

He may be a junkie, and Ian may think he's a loser who just won't leave his boyfriend alone. But Jack's more than that. He fucking gives a shit. And even if Ian never sees it that way, this is the right thing to do.

He keeps his head down as he makes his way toward the L. He just hopes he gets there in time.

---------------------------------

Ian was beyond trashed. He had gotten significantly more fucked up than he intended to. His new/old friends were fun, and he was having a great time, but he couldn't help the nagging thought in the back of his mind.

Mickey.

He wanted Mickey. Even though he was furious with Mickey and fed up with Mickey and disappointed with Mickey.

He still wanted him. He always wanted him.

But Ian could not just forget all the shit Mickey had said to him tonight. Told him he was crazy. Said he couldn't handle his own life. Saying he needs a damn babysitter.

Fuck that.

Mickey doesn't know shit. Trying to hold him back, keep him down.

If Ian wants to go to Jerusalem to help orphaned Jewish children, he's gonna fucking do it. And if Mickey really loved him, he'd support him.

Ian's mind is bubbling over with emotions he can't name and thoughts he can't control. He has a surreal moment when he wishes Monica was there. She'd know what to do. She always had a plan.

Well, if wishing for Monica isn't a red fucking flag, Ian doesn't know what is.

God damn it.

Ian feels angry and impotent in the face of his disorder. He knows he needs help, he has to go in and see Caroline, get his meds adjusted. He knows Mickey's right.

But he's irrationally pissed off at Mickey for pointing it out. It makes him feel useless and small, like he made another huge fucking mistake, and didn't even see it until someone else brings his attention to it.

He's slipped. It's embarrassing, and he has that same suffocating feeling of failure pressing down on him. The only thing keeping him upright right now is the tinge of hypomania, and the coke. He's pulled from the quicksand of his mind by a strong hand on his inner thigh. His head lolls to the side, heavy with the weight of all the alcohol he's consumed.
Marco.

Oh, right.

"You good?" Marco purrs, applying light pressure to the inside of Ian's thigh.

Ian nods like an idiot, causing Greta to chuckle on the other side of the table.

"He's falling out, Marco." she laughed, pulling the small plate with the coke on it toward her and dipping her head over it.

Ian's still wondering how no one has come over to confront them about their obvious drug use, but the thought dies in his mind as the plate is placed in front of him. He grabs the rolled up bill and snorts another line.

His head falls back against the back of the booth and Marco slides impossibly closer. Ian closes his eyes, unsure of what's going on anymore.

He can't remember why he even came here tonight. He's mad, right? Shit.

"We should go back to my place." Marco whispers, face close to Ian's ear. He licks lightly at his neck before biting on his earlobe. "I got more shit at my house. We can party all night." he tipped his head down, sucked a little harder, rolling his tongue along Ian's exposed collarbone. "I can make you feel real good."

Ian closes his eyes, not really listening anymore. He can feel an inkling of 'no no no' scratching at the back of his psyche, but it's muted and dull. That line he just blew decimating any emotion he was feeling previously. This is what he wants. To forget. Just for a little longer.

"Marco, fancy seeing you here." A voice calls out, much louder and harsher than anything Ian's heard all night. His eyes snap open just as Greta gives a shocked gasp.

"Jack?" she asks, jumping up from the booth, clearly excited.

For a second, Ian thinks he's hallucinating. What the fuck did he take tonight? Does coke make you see apparitions?

Because that is Jack standing there in sweats and a hoodie, arm slung around Ian's friend's shoulder as she cuddles into him.

"Hey Gret." Jack says fondly, before extracting himself from her and depositing her back into her seat heavily. "Sorry to be so terse, but I'm here for Ian." Jack gives Ian a look that makes him feel about two inches tall. Like a naughty child about to be reprimanded. It's another surreal moment, getting that look from Jack of all people.

"Jack, what the fuck are you doing here?" Marco laughs before Ian can muster a response of his own.

"Are you deaf, Marco? I came to take Ian home." Jack said, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Oh, come on now, Jackie." Marco says, making no effort to move away from Ian. "I was just inviting Ian back to my place. You wanna come? I got what you like. We could do like old times. You love that shit." Marco eyed Jack appreciatively, then cast his hungry eyes back to Ian. "I bet the three of us could have a lot of fun."
Even through the haze of his intoxicated mind, Ian knows he's fucked up royally. How the fuck Jack found him, he's got no fucking clue. But seeing Jack standing there is like a bucket of ice water getting dumped on him. All the shit he's been desperately trying to block out all night come roaring back in full force.

He's fucked up.

He's fucked up good.

"No one's having any fun." Jack spat angrily before turning to Ian with much kinder eyes. "Can we talk for a second?" he asks, eyebrows raised in such a blatant 'Mickey' fashion, Ian has to fight not to burst into tears right there.

Ian nods before sliding out of the booth and following Jack toward the bathrooms.

----------------------------------------------------

It's almost three in the morning, and Mickey is laying on the couch in his sister's apartment, fully clothed, staring at the darkened ceiling. Dull moonlight illuminates the space, but other than that the room is dark.

He should have gone home, but as much as he didn't want to admit it, he couldn't be alone right now. He knew Ian wasn't going to come home tonight.

Mickey had a sinking suspicion he knew what Ian was doing right now. And the thought made him sick.

Could he get past this? Could he forgive Ian for cheating again? Even if he was manic, or hypomanic at least, could Mickey really overlook the betrayal, once again? How many time can he be expected to let that shit slide?

Ian knows he's sick right now. Mickey saw the truth in his eyes when Ian had hit him. That single moment when he looked down on Mickey's bloody face. A flash of shame and sadness before the wall went back up and Ian had stormed out.

Mickey knew what he was getting into when he took Ian back. But he promised himself he wouldn't let Ian walk all over him just because he was sick.

Ian didn't want to be coddled. He didn't want to be treated differently due to his disorder. No fucking kid gloves. So Mickey was going to do the same thing he would do if any other guy cheated on him.

He'd leave.

He loves Ian more than anything else in his life, but he won't let him shit all over him like that, sick or not.

Ian has the tools to avoid these types of things. Slips are inevitable. Mickey knows that. He's not stupid. But once Ian knows he's out of balance, what he does next is what matters.

But Ian had done what he's always done. Denied it to high heaven, and then fled the scene. If history is anything to go by, Ian's already balls deep in another dude by now.
Fuck, with a manic Ian, there is no limit to the shit he could get into. The porno incident seeps into his mind unbidden and his throat starts to sting. He blinks back the start of tears, taking a deep breath.

Mickey can't do this again. He can't drag his ass down to the free clinic once a month because his boyfriend won't stop fucking strangers. He can't do that again.

If Ian fucked someone else tonight, Mickey will have to walk away.

He doesn't even realize he's crying at first. Just silent tears rolling down his face. Then his breath hitches and a choked sob rips from his chest. He runs a hand down his face furiously as he rolls over on his side, stuffing his face into his sister's couch cushions to muffle the sound of his pussy breakdown.

God fucking damn it.

He's not sure how long he lays there, crying like a bitch when his phone goes off, shattering the moment.

Mickey rolls back over onto his back and grabs his phone off the coffee table, squinting in the dark as the brightness of the screen almost blinds him.

It's a text from Jack.

What the hell? What could that asshole have gotten into now? It's almost 3:30 in the god damn morning.

Mickey groaned, swiping the screen with his thumb and brought up his message thread.

jack: i think i found something that belongs to you. call u soon.

Mickey read and reread the text.

What the fuck was he on about? He has something of Mickey's? Is that a fucking euphemism? Is he fucking high right now?

Mother. Faker.

Mickey immediately tried to call Jack, but got his god damn voicemail. Shit. He tried again, to no avail. He got up from the couch, but was at a loss as to what to do next. Should he go looking for him? Head over to the sober house? Try calling again?

Didn't he tell Jack the last time was the last time? That he wasn't gonna do this with him anymore? Didn't Jack promise he wouldn't DO this shit anymore?

Fuck. Shit.

This is the last thing he needs right now. First Ian takes off, now Jack is sending him cryptic messages in the dead of night. How much more bullshit is he supposed to deal with?

His sits back down on the couch heavily, resting his head in his hands, elbows on his knees.

What's he supposed to do now?
Jack finished send the text, then pockets his phone. He'll call Mickey after he talks to Ian. No use getting his hopes up if he can't work some black magic and get Ian to look past his mania or whatever it's called, and see what's going on.

Jack is no psychiatrist. He doesn't know the first thing about bipolar disorder or mania. But he sure as shit knows about feeling out of control and doing shit you know you are going to regret later, but being unable to stop yourself. Mickey told him being manic is kinda like being high, but not wanting to be. All Jack can think of is a bad trip. He thinks of Ian, out doing shit he really doesn't want to be doing, seeing or hearing shit that's not there. Being scared and paranoid, lashing out.

It sounds terrifying.

And now that he's inadvertently stumbled upon Ian, he doesn't want to just call Mickey and pass him off. He feels like he should at least try to help on his own. He owes him that much.

He's not going to compare being a junkie to being bipolar. But he can clearly see that he and Ian have more in common than he realized until this exact moment.

Mickey has been mentioning Ian's odd behavior for a couple weeks now. He never went into too much detail, and Jack hadn't wanted to ask. Mickey always got sad and snippy when he talked about Ian's disorder. Jack hadn't wanted to push. It was between Mickey and his boyfriend.

Now it looks like Jack has dropped himself right in the middle of the shit. Wonderful.

Ian pushed open the door to the men's room. Jack is leaning back against one of the grody sinks, arms crossed over his chest.

Ian rolls his eyes at Jack, twisting the lock on the bathroom door before leaning against it and mirroring Jack's position, crossing his arms over his chest. He arches an eyebrow at Jack, silently inviting him to get the fuck on with it.

When Jack doesn't immediately start talking, Ian heaves a deep sigh, shaking his head ruefully.

"Did Mickey send you?" Ian asks. Jack can't read his tone, Ian's too high. It could be resentment, or it could be hope. Who the fuck knows?

"Mickey doesn't know I'm here." Jack says tiredly. "Does he even know where you are?" he asked, almost positive the answer was no. There's no way in hell.

Ian shrugged, then sniffed hard. Jack felt the prickling under his skin. Marco was out there with coke right now.

"Well then, how did you find me?" Ian asks, confused. Nothing is making sense.

"Rowan dances here. You didn't see him?" Jack says it like Ian is stupid.

"Huh? No, I mean, I wasn't really paying attention." Ian said, running a hand through his hair. He bit his lip, thinking back over the night's events. Had he seen Rowan?
"Of course you weren't. You were too busy stuffing yourself full of yayo." Jack laughed bitterly. "Ian, what the fuck are you doing here? Do you know who Marco is? Do you know what he does?"

"Excuse me?" Ian asked, eyebrows raised. "Who the fuck are you to tell me what I can and can't do? You sound just like Mickey right now. I don't know what you think you're doing here, but I don't need a fucking rescue." Ian's blood was boiling. Fuck this guy.

"Ian." Jack said, his tone much softer. "Rowan called me because he knows Marco. Just like I know Marco. He's a coke dealer. And his MO is to get pretty boys whacked out of their gourds on white, bring them home and fuck them. I know this from personal experience." Jack grimaced at the memory.

"So now you're saying I'm a whore." Ian spat, taking a step closer to Jack, getting in his face. "You don't fucking know me."

"Maybe not." Jack conceded, not backing down. Ian may tower over him, but he will not be cowed. "But I think I know what it feels like to be a slave to your own mind."

That gave Ian pause. He took a step back, his shoulders dropping a little.

Jack took a deep breath, not really sure how to talk about this shit. But he had to try.

"I know what it feels like to not trust yourself. Not trust your own mind. I know what it's like to let down the people that love you, to betray them. I know what it's like to have the ability to fix your problem, but not the desire to get better. I know what it's like to fall apart, wondering how you got so damn lost so fast. I know what it's like to hurt, and feel like it's all your fault."

Ian flinched away, not wanting to listen. Jack grabbed his elbow and spun him around so they were face to face again.

"Ian, I know it's not the same, being an addict and being bipolar. I know I can never really understand what it's like to be you. I know you never asked for this. And I know you probably think I brought my addiction on myself." Jack sighed, feeling adrift. He can't help but feel like he lost the plot somewhere during this monologue. "But I really do feel like I get it, even if just a little bit. I know what it's like when you can feel yourself slipping off the ledge. You are so sure you can fix it yourself. You're so sure it's not that bad. You are so sure everyone else is overreacting. You are so sure you have it under control. Well, let me tell you, from one fucked up guy to another, you are not in control right now. Or you'd be home with your man."

Ian shook his head violently, trying to pull out of Jack's grasp, but Jack's other hand shot out and wrapped around Ian's waist. He held on tight while Ian struggled half-heartedly.

"I don't know what happened, or what's going on. But I know this isn't you, Ian. Not the guy I know now, and not the guy my best friend has been running his mouth about for years." Jack sighed when Ian dropped his head to his shoulder. "What do you think Mickey would say if he saw you right now?"

Ian's eyes started to burn. He shook his head again, like that would erase all this shit. Like he could blink and he'd be back in the apartment with Mickey. Through the haze of the drugs and the booze and the mania, he can see Mickey's broken expression after he decked him. That shocked pain and sadness as Ian turned and walked away. Again.

"Jack, I fucked up." Ian whispers, the weight of his actions finally crushing down on him.

"Maybe." Jack conceded, pulling Ian deeper into the embrace. "But I think we may have caught it in
time before we reach critical mass."

Ian laughed at that.

"Are you suggesting that I'm about to go nuclear?" he chuckled.

"That's what it's like for me. Is it not that way for you? You just go off, lay waste to everything in the vicinity? Then when you resurface, you're the only living thing around, surrounded by a desolate landscape of destruction."

"Jack, I am way too fucked up for something that poetic." Ian mumbled into his shoulder, causing the other man to break out into a fit of giggles.

"Can I take you the fuck outta here? Will you come with me?" Jack whispered, not pulling away. Afraid to let Ian go. If his hail mary plea fell on deaf ears, he didn't know how he would explain his failure to Mickey.

"I'm not ready to see Mickey yet." Ian murmured, tears finally spilling from his bleary eyes. "I can't see him til this shit wears off."

"Yeah, okay." Jack said, feeling uneasy about this turn of events.

"I just can't. I can't see him high like this. I'm so embarrassed." Ian's mind was spinning with memories of all the times Mickey had dragged him home manic and high out of his mind.

He's so stupid.

"Hey, look, okay. It's okay. You can come back to the sober house with me tonight. We can call him in the morning, okay? Everything's gonna be fine." Jack soothed. He let himself have hope for the first time since he walked into the bar.

He really didn't think this was going to work.

"You think he'll forgive me?" Ian asked, his voice breaking.

"Ian, don't be dumb." Jack said without malice. "You had a slip. Take it from me, Mickey is not mad. If anything, he's scared, and he's blaming himself. It's just who he is. You know this as well as I do. You're just in a fucked up head space right now and can't see it. Did you fuck someone else tonight?"

"What? No." Ian said. He didn't say anything about how Marco had indeed been cruising him all night, no doubt intent on taking him home.

But the knowing look Jack was shooting him had Ian thinking he knew all about it anyway.

"Well, then, it looks like we dodged the train just in time." Jack said, a bright smile on his face. "You didn't do anything that can't be forgiven, Ian. But let's get you the fuck outta here before anything else happens. This isn't the best place for either of us to be."

And just like that, it clicked in Ian's addled brain.

"Shit, Jack. You shouldn't be here. With the...."

"Drugs and booze and rampant sex? Yeah, I know." Jack said flippantly. "But I couldn't just go to sleep knowing you were out here about to burn your life to the ground."
The words struck a chord in Ian's mind and he shivered. He can't make the connection right now, but he doesn't like the feeling.

"Thank you." is all he says. Jack just nods. He grabs Ian's hand and leads him out of the bathroom. He doesn't stop to say goodbye to Greta or Marco. Now that his mission is accomplished, he has to get the fuck out of there before he does something monumentally stupid. The desire to sit down and let Marco hook him up is crippling. He can feel the pull of the cocaine deep in his bones.

He ignores it.

He's doing this for Ian. He's doing this for Mickey.

Like Mickey has done for him so many times.

He can admit, as he's leading Ian down the street toward the L, it feels a lot different on this side of the equation. It's a strange mixture of happiness and sadness. He did a good thing tonight, but he wishes he hadn't had to do it at all.

He looks over at Ian, close to passing out on the train. The booze is heavy in his system and the drugs are wearing off. Jack wonders how manic Ian could be, if he's so close to sleeping right now. He admittedly doesn't know shit about it.

Maybe he'll ask Mickey to explain it to him.

He feels the ambien in his blood starting to pull him under, but he forces himself to stay awake. He watches Ian slipping in and out of consciousness the whole way home.

He feels good about what he did tonight. He feels good about himself for the first time in a long time. Imagine that.

-------------------------------------

Mickey tossed and turned all damn night. He was laying on his back on his sister's couch, waiting for the sun come up on Saturday morning when his phone went off for the first time in three hours.

He'd been on edge the whole time, barely holding it together since he got that mysterious text from Jack a few hours prior. He's been laying there, like an asshole, when he should be out there, doing fucking something.

But what? What could he really do? He had no idea where Jack was, never mind fucking Ian. He felt helpless and impotent. Two feelings he hated more than anything. He clenched his eyes shut against fresh tears, digging his fingernails into his palms until the sting drew his mind away from his spiraling thought and forced him to focus on the pain.

The sound of his phone vibrating on the table startled him so much, he jerked toward it, falling off the couch and landing on the carpeted floor in a pathetic heap.

He had no idea who it was when he fell off the couch, hand blindly flailing for the device as he landed loudly on his ass.

"Motherfucker." he whispered harshly, eyeing the screen.
"Jack?? You cocksucker. Where the fuck have you been? I've been dying over here, you prick. What the fuck?" Mickey seethed, sitting up on the floor.

"Mick? Hey." Jack said. Mickey could tell he was nervous, which was never a good sign. The kid had a shit poker face. So if he sounded nervous, something was sure as fuck not kosher.

God damn it.

"Hey? Hey?" Mickey balked. "What the fuck do you mean, 'Hey'?" Mickey asked, losing his non-existent patience.

"Mick, come on, don't be a prick to me." Jack said, his voice low and soothing, lulling Mickey despite his best efforts to stay fucking pissed. "I need to talk to you about Ian."

"What? What are you talking about?" Mickey asked, running a hand through his hair. He's trying to keep his voice down, but failing.

"What happened with Ian last night?" Jack persisted.

"You know what fucking happened. I told you earlier." Mickey spat angrily. "We had a stupid fucking argument and he bolted. Like he always does. Why are you asking me about this shit at fuck o'clock in the god damn morning?" Mickey was at the end of his fucking rope. He was about to haul his ass across town just to beat Jack's ass.

"It's just that." Jack sighed tiredly. "Ian's here. And I don't want you to freak."

Mickey was standing before Jack even finished speaking.

"He's there?" Mickey yelled, all thoughts of being quiet shattered, "Where? The sober house? I'm on my way." Mickey was up and walking around before he knew he was moving.

He grabbed his coat and threw it on, tossing his keys and his smokes into his pocket, double checking to make sure he didn't leave anything behind.

"Is he okay? What the fuck happened? How did you find him?" Mickey rambled as he left the apartment, locking it behind him with the key his sister had given him.

"He's fine, Mick. He's sleeping now." Jack said, voice soft and low. "Can we talk about it when you get here? It's not really something we should talk about over the phone."

"You sure he's okay?" Mickey asked, jumping into his work truck and turning the engine over. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah, Mick. I'm sure. He's fine. Nothing he can't sleep off." Jack said. Another cryptic fucking answer that just intensified Mickey's worry.

"I'll be there soon." he said, ending the call before Jack could say another word. He sped through the streets, keeping his eyes peeled for cops and drunks crossing the street without looking. It feels like it takes forever to get there.

He turns on the radio with an angry flick of his wrist, the silence bearing down on him.

He groans, shaking his head, as 'Sometimes love just ain't enough' bleeds out of the speakers.
Fuck Patty Smyth.

"Now, I could never change you
I don't want to blame you
Baby, you don't have to take the fall"

Mickey sniffed, rubbing his nose furiously with his knuckles as his other hand gripped the steering wheel painfully tight.

Fuck Don Henley too.

"But there's a danger in loving somebody too much
And it's sad when you know it's their heart you can't touch
There's a reason why people don't stay where they are
Baby, sometimes love just ain't enough"

And especially fuck this polterguist asshole of a fucking truck.
Fuck everyone and everything right now.

The streets were empty in the early morning hours. The sun was just barely coming up, the sky a combination of grey and pink, stars still visible, moon hanging low in the sky. Mickey's eyes didn't really take it in, his mind a jumbled mess of thoughts and feelings.

He was angry with Ian. But he was also worried. Not to mention incredibly relieved. He can't believe Jack found him. He can't believe he convinced Ian to go home with him. He can't help but hope that that means Ian's mania is not that intense yet, and maybe they have a chance to get him some help before things decline even more.

God, he feels like such a fucking failure. He's supposed to protect Ian. He's supposed to take care of him. He sure as fuck isn't doing either of those things at the moment.

He pulls up in front of the sober house just as the sun is peaking through the clouds, hitting his face and hurting his eyes. He shields his face with a hand as he sprints up the walkway. He barges in without knocking and hits the stairs, taking two at a time to get to Jack's room.

What he didn't expect when he walked through the door was to see his boyfriend wound around Jack in the bed. The two of them were passed out, holding onto each other like a lifeline.

The room was full of sleeping dudes. The air was full of the sounds of snoring and heavy, medicated breathing. Mickey took two steps closer to Jack's bed, looking down on his best friend and his boyfriend, sleeping the sleep of the innocent, curled up together like it was the most natural thing in the world.

Relief flooded Mickey's system, and he took a breath for what felt like the first time in hours. He feel to his knees in front of the bed, his eyes wandering over Ian's lax face. God, he'd been so fucking scared. The threat of losing Ian is never far from his mind, and nights like tonight never cease to devastate him.
He's got to get better at this.
He just doesn't know how.

He reaches up and runs a hand softly along Ian's face, pushing a stray strand of fiery hair away from
his eyes. Ian sighs and nuzzles into the touch.

Mickey takes his hand away, wrapping his fingers around Ian's wrist instead. He rests his head on
the mattress, closing his eyes for just a moment.

He had been running on terror and adrenaline for hours now, and as it drains from his body as he
revels in the comfort of Ian's presence once again, he lets it all go and promptly passes out on the
floor, hand still wrapped around Ian's wrist like he's afraid he'll disappear again if he lets go.

Ian wakes up more hungover than he's felt in a very long time. He also wakes up scared to death,
feeling a body pressed up against his that he knows is not Mickey's. He can tell, even with his eyes
closed. This body is too thin, bones too pronounced. His eyes crack open slowly as his stomach rolls
with nausea.

Shit. He may throw up.

The room looks unfamiliar, and the fear inside him doubles. As the events of the previous night come
back to him, it's choppy and incomplete.

He and Mickey had a fight. He stormed out, as usual. Ended up at a bar he hasn't been to in months.
Greta was there.

His vague memories become sharper and clearer as he lays there.


Oh shit.

Fuck. He fucked up.

He pulls away from Jack and moves to sit up, finally opening his eyes.

What he does not expect is to see Mickey, passed out on the floor, full clothed, hand stretched out
toward the bed like he's reaching for Ian.

Ian knows how to spot his episodes before they spin out of control. He's been living with and
learning about his illness since he finally accepted the fact that he was sick. He had known,
somewhere under the racing thoughts and elation that he was slipping into mania, but he had figured
he could ride it out, sometimes it went away on it's own.

He knew. He had seen the worried looks in Mickey's eyes. He had watched himself doing shit that
could be considered 'crazy' by the uninitiated.

He knew.
But it was hard to stay rational when he felt like this. It was hard to see past the feelings. Even now, watching his boyfriend sleep fretfully, knowing he'd almost done something terrible last night, there's a part of him in that moment that wants to slip out of the room silently and fucking run. Run from Mickey and his pained glances. Run from his life and his own disappointment. Run far and long until he lands somewhere where no one knows him.

That in and of itself is a sign that something is very wrong.

But he's not ready to deal with any of this right now. He just wants to go the fuck to sleep and not see anyone for a while.

The thought gives Ian pause. He's hitting The Switch, then.

That's what Ian calls it in his head when he tumbles off the Mania Highwire and falls into the Pit of Depression.

He doesn't know if he's even going to be able to make it home.

He doesn't want to go home anyway. He's not ready to deal with any of that.

He sits up in the bed, his movement miraculously waking only Jack and Mickey. Ian wonders what kind of meds Jack's roommates are on. They sleep like they're dead.

Mickey shoots up to a sitting position comically fast. Jack is slower to stir, but sits up as well, rubbing a hand through his mess of curls on top of his head.

"Ian, Jesus fuck." Mickey says, his hand reaching out on it's own accord. Ian flinches back. He sees another hurt expression flash across Mickey's face before it hardens again.

"Take me to Mandy's, please." Ian says. "I just want to sleep."

Mickey's eyes go wide, and he looks from Ian to Jack, who's face is twisted in a sympathetic grimace.

"You don't want to go home?" Mickey whispers, voice hoarse.

"Not now." Ian says, breaking the eye contact. "I need to be alone for a while." Ian's not even sure what he means, or why he needs that, but he knows he does.

Mickey is devastated, but he tries to not let it show. He knows Ian gets like this sometimes after an episode. Where he doesn't want to be around Mickey. He needs time to process what he's done and how he feels. He told Mickey once that he feels suffocated and claustrophobic when he's like this, and he just needs to breathe.

Why he can't breathe with Mickey, Mickey doesn't know.

"Sure. Okay." Mickey says sadly. "Uh, the truck's downstairs. You wanna go wait, I wanna talk to Jack for a second."

Ian looks over at Jack with glassy eyes, like he'd forgotten he was there at all. "Sure. Whatever." he replies listlessly. It takes him a long time to stand up. Even longer to put his shoes on. He shrugs on his hoodie, which is disgustingly dirty by this point, and trudges out of the room without another word or glance at anyone. Once he's gone, Mickey sits on the bed heavily, head in his hands again.

Jack throws the blanket off and cuddles up to his friend. He wraps an arm around him and pulls
Mickey to his side. Mickey leans into the touch, overwhelmed by the events of the previous few days.

"Tell me what happened." he says.

Jack sighs, pulling Mickey closer while he speaks.

"Rowan called me last night. He's dancing at Flipside now I guess, still strung out. He saw Ian there with a girl we know, Greta. She's a cokehead we used to party with sometimes. Marco was there, one of my old dealers. Ian was getting high with them."

"Ian was doing coke with some asshole?" Mickey asked hollowly. "Were they...?" Mickey trailed off, hoping Jack wouldn't make him say it.

"Not really." Jack said quietly, recalling Marco's lips on Ian's neck. "I mean, when I got there, it looked like it was heading in that direction. That's what Marco does, really. Gets twinks high as kites and brings them home to fuck. Ian didn't look opposed to the idea. I think I got there just in time, actually." Jack decided being honest was the best game plan. He wasn't going to lie to Mickey. And Jack thinks if Ian were in his right mind right now, he wouldn't want Jack to lie either.

"Shit. I was afraid of that." Mickey mumbled.

"But I got there in time, and we talked for a bit. I got him to come home with me. He didn't even put up much of a fight. That has to be good, right?"

"Yeah, Jack. You did good." Mickey said, pulling away a little so they could look at each other. "But why didn't you call me?"

Jack sighed, trying to articulate why he'd done what he'd done. "Mick, Ian didn't want you to see him like that. High and shit. We talked about it, and he asked me not to. Now, you know I'm loyal to you and our friendship, but the guy just needed a minute to get his shit together before he saw you. Don't worry, I wasn't gonna let anything bad happen to him. He may not like me that much right now, but that doesn't mean I'd let him get hurt."

Mickey nodded, running a tired hand down his face. "Okay then, get outta here before my asshole roommates wake up. I can't believe these Thorazine zombies slept through this whole Hallmark moment."

"You're such a douche." Mickey chuckled, pressing a kiss to Jack's head before releasing him. "Thank you, Jack. Seriously." he said as he made his way toward the door.

"Don't mention it." Jack waved him off. "Just consider it me paying you back slowly for all the times you bailed me out or saved me from myself. I love you, Mick." Jack smiled before dropping back down on his bed with a flourish.

"You too, man." Mickey replied as he opened the bedroom door. "Always."
Jack lays back down on his bed after the boys leave. He tucks his hands behind his head and stares sightlessly at the ceiling.

He hopes Mickey can get Ian the help he needs. And he selfishly hopes the night's events have somehow leveled him up with Ian. He likes the kid a lot, considers him a friend. Wants him to be healthy, happy.

He wonders if this is going to be what it's like from now on, just him and these two men, constantly saving each other from themselves.

He huffs a little laugh at the thought.

If that's the case, he can't see anything wrong with that....

----------------------------------------------------

The ride over to Mandy's house was silent between the two men. The radio played, meaningless songs. No hidden messages or psychic revelations, much to Mickey's relief.

Mickey opened the door to his sister's apartment and was greeted by a harried looking Mandy pacing the floor in the living room.

"Ian! Jesus Christ." Mandy yelped, crossing the room in an instant and pulling Ian to her chest. "You fucker." she whispered.

Ian let himself be held, even though he wanted nothing more than to lie down and block the world out.

"Can I sleep in the spare room?" Ian muttered. He didn't look up, just stared at the floor, still listlessly leaning into Mandy.

"Sure." Mandy said quickly, her eyes darting over to her brother, who looked beaten down and exhausted. "It's all made up, just make yourself comfortable. You hungry? Want some tea or something."

"Not really." Ian said quietly, pulling out of Mandy's embrace and slinking off toward the back room without another word.

He didn't even spare Mickey a glance.

"Mick." Mandy said quietly, stepping toward her older brother. He took a step back, like she knew he would.

"Listen." Mickey said, crossing his arms over his chest, defensive. "I'm guessing he's gonna wanna stay here a couple days, if that's cool with you. I'll bring his meds by, and some sweats or whatever. I'm guessing he's just gonna sleep and shit. I'm pretty sure he's gone from mania to depression. I think we'll have to bring him into see Caroline on Monday. If he gets worse before then, we'll bring him to the ER, but I really don't wanna do that." Mickey sighed.

"What happened?" Mandy asked quietly.

"He wound up at Flipside. Doing coke with some asshole who was trying to fuck him. Jack found
him and took him to his house. I guess they slept there. I just picked him up, but he don't wanna be with me right now. Asked to come here."

Mandy tried to process all that information as quickly as possible. It was a lot to take it, and not at all what she had expected to hear.

She owed Jack a very sincere thank you. Maybe a fruit basket.

"Mick, you know how he gets when he feels this way." Mandy said, once again trying to close the distance between them. "It's not you, or anything you did. He just needs a little space right now."

"I know, Mands." Mickey said, sounding broken. "I just wish it didn't always end with him not wanting to be near me."

"It's not like that." Mandy said, taking another step.

"Then what's it like?" Mickey asked, his eyes red rimmed and bleary. "What does it mean, when after an episode like this he always runs. Then when he comes back, he can't be in the same room as me? I just wanna make sure he's okay. I need to be near him. I want... fuck. Nevermind. I'm gonna go home. I'll bring his shit over later. He needs his meds, but I'm guessing he's gonna sleep for a long ass time. I need some shut eye too. So I'll bring the shit by after I wake up."

Mandy nodded, finally face to face with her brother. She reached out and grabbed him before he could resist, pulling him to her. Mickey stiffened in her arms at first, but relaxed almost immediately. He presses his head into her shoulder, pulling her body tight against his own.

It's over as soon as it began. Mickey's pulling away and making his way to the door. "I'll call when I'm on my way back."

Then he's gone.

Mandy makes her way over to the spare bedroom. The door is open a crack, and she pushes it open further and leans against the casing, arms crossed over her chest.

Ian is sleeping in the middle of the bed. The blankets pulled all around him like a cocoon. He always does that when he's feeling low. Builds a shell around himself with blankets and pillows. A barrier between him and the rest of the world.

Mandy can feel tears prickling in her eyes, but she doesn't let them fall.

They'll be fine.

They've been through this a million times, and they'll do it again after this.

Her brother and her best friend are two of the strongest people she's ever known.

She just wishes for once they didn't have to be strong.

She sighs, her eyes raking over Ian's still form for a moment longer before she walks away, back to her own bedroom. It's still early, and Macy had slept through all this shit. As she eases herself back into bed and pulls her girlfriend into her arms, Mandy's last waking thoughts are for her brother, alone in his apartment, while his heart and soul is sleeping in the other room.

They'll be fine.
They have to be.

Ian can't really tell how much time is passing. When he gets like this, nothing feels real except the pain.

He's been laying in bed in Mandy's spare room for a while now. No light gets into the room, thanks to those black out curtains. He's grateful for that, because light is the last thing he wants to be subjected to at the moment.

He hasn't moved except to take his meds when Mandy brought them in, immediately returning to his spot under the covers once they had been swallowed.

He's hot. Sweaty. His bones hurt and his head is throbbing with sharp pulses of pain. His muscles are sore and he swears even his fucking organs ache. This is one of the worst parts of the depression. People don't know how much depression actually HURTS. Physical pain that has no real cause except the crippling sadness he feels.

He tosses the blankets off his body with a low groan, only to be hit with the worst case of chills he's ever experienced in his life. The sweat on his skin turns to ice in a matter of seconds, and his whole body shivers.

Fuck.

He pulls the blankets back over his body. The sweat is better than the chills.

God, he wishes this shit would just end.

It wouldn't take too much. A well placed cut to the inside of his arm. A few too many pills from one of his bottles. A length of rope or some rubber tubing. Hell, he could probably get the job done with one of his stupidly expensive ties.

He shouldn't be thinking this shit. He knows, somewhere inside, that this isn't good. But he just feels so guilty. He's a burden. To his family. To Mandy. Fucking Mickey.

Poor Mickey. No one should have to put up with this level of bullshit.

He's a fucking waste of space and he doesn't deserve Mickey's love. Anyone's love. All he does is fuck up. All he does is destroy shit.

He's a fucking ruiner.

A single tear slips from his eye, and he rolls over on his stomach, pulling the covers over his head. He curls his body into the smallest ball manageable. As broken sobs wrack his body, he curses himself for being born. He curses Monica for giving him this fucked up life. He curses anyone who ever loved him for being stupid enough to waste time on him.

He hates everyone and everything.

But not nearly as much as he hates himself.
He cries until he can't anymore. Until there are crusty, salty trails dried on his face and his eyes are swollen shut. He's got a sharp pain under his ribs from all his heavy breathing, and his ab muscles hurt from being contracted so long.

The door swings open and he doesn't move to see who it is. He couldn't give less of a shit at the moment.

The bed dips and a body slides up next to him, over the covers. A gentle hand runs along the top of his sweat-soaked hair, down his neck and rests on his shoulder.

"Hey, sweet-face." his sister's melodic voice flows into his ears. He closes his swollen eyes, comforted by Fiona's presence. Just like all those times when he was sick as a kid.

Ian doesn't say anything, just lets his sister cuddle him.

"Mandy says you sent Mickey away." Fiona says, her hand idly running through Ian's hair. "You know you always regret pushing him away."

She's not looking for a response. She knows better than that when Ian gets this way.

"Mandy also told me Mickey made an appointment for you to see Caroline tomorrow. You're going to go, yeah? He already talked to Rita, she gave you the customary three days off. Remember, from last time?" when Ian gives her a listless nod, she smiles softly. "So there's no excuse for you not to go."

Ian curls in on himself a little more, letting his sister's words wash over him. He knows she's right. He can't go on like this. He's been here so many times before, and it could get much, much worse. "Ian. Are you hearing me?" Fiona asks, her hand again running through his hair.

"Yeah." Ian croaked. "Yeah."

"Good. That's so good, Ian." Fiona's arm wraps around his waist and she rests her head between his shoulder blades. "I'm proud of you." she whispers.

Ian feels the tears again. They slips from his eyes and puddle on the pillow below. He's sure Fiona can feel him crying, the shaking of his body as he tries to hold it in. She says nothing else. They just lay there together in the dark for god knows how long. Her running her hand along Ian's side, while Ian tries to comprehend how anyone could be proud of him, for any reason.

--------------------------------------------------

It's been a long and lonely weekend for Mickey. He kept his promise to his sister, and stayed away from her apartment. He was getting by on random texts from Mandy regarding Ian's well being, and a steady diet of Jack and coke.

He knows it's not the healthiest way to deal with the issue, but he doesn't have much else in the way of coping mechanisms, so...

It's the middle of the day on Monday. Matt had given him the day off, again. Dude was a straight up saint. There should be a statue of him at a church somewhere, all the nice shit he's always doing for Mickey.
Ian's appointment with Caroline is at two. Mickey told Mandy that, but she's at work right now, so he's not sure who's going to make sure Ian's ready to go when Mickey shows up to take him.

He should be there, but he's doing his best to respect Ian's wishes. His wishes to stay the fuck away from Mickey. That shit stings, just as much as it did the first time. Mickey's fairly certain it will never hurt any less whenever Ian decides he can't stand the sight of him.

He knows it's not Ian, that it's his illness, but that fact does nothing to ease the ache in his chest, or the sadness that fills him as his eyes travel over the empty apartment. With Ian gone, it's like all the life has been sucked out of the place. It feels darker in the rooms, colder.

Mickey doesn't like it at all.

He's sitting on the couch, TV on, killing time until he has to go get Ian. It will be the first time in years that he'll be in the same room as a shrink of any kind. It reminds him of his time in jail, when the headshrinkers tried to put him in a box. Neatly categorize his demons and vices. Label him. He doesn't know how Ian does it. Let those people in, to pick apart his thoughts and feelings, spitting them back at him in some jumble of psychobabble bullshit.

No thank you.

After he's wasted enough time to actually make him nervous that he's going to be late, he lurches forward, grabbing his drink off the coffee table and downing it before standing and heading for the door.

He's not drunk. Just buzzed enough to survive this hour in the den of the psychiatry beast.

He's doing this for Ian. Like most things he does.

He pulls on his hoodie and walks out the door, locking it behind him and making his way to the truck.

Here goes nothing.

"I told you, I'm fine. You don't have to be here. I'm not going to ditch out on my appointment. This low's not even that bad, comparatively. I even dressed myself and everything. You can calm down a bit." Ian said tiredly. He pulled at his polo shirt, trying to smooth out some of the wrinkles. All the clothes Mickey brought over are still sitting in the backpack on the floor, so finding something that didn't look dirty had been a challenge.

But fuck it. Who gives a shit what he looks like? He sure as hell doesn't.

"I'm just making sure. You can't really blame me, can you?" Fiona asks, crossing the room with Ian's pills and a glass of tap water. "You worried us. All of us."

Ian knows she doesn't mean it as a dig. But it feels like one regardless.

"Yeah, that was my plan all along. I do all this shit just to fuck with you guys. Keep you on your toes." he said bitterly. He took the pills from his sister and tossed them in his mouth. He grabbed the
glass and took a sip before passing it back to her angrily.

He defiantly stuck his tongue out and up, giving his sister a view of the inside of his mouth.

"We good now, Warden?"

Fiona sighed, placing the glass on the kitchen table.

"Ian, it's not like that, and you know it. I'm not here to control you or to make you do anything. Are you really trying to tell me you don't want to see Caroline? That you don't want to stop this shit before it gets worse?"

Ian sighed again, his whole body sagging with it. He sat down heavily in one of the kitchen chairs, laying his head on his folded arms.

"I'm so tired of this shit." he whispered. "Every time I think I'm okay, it all blows up in my face. And the people I love are always having to pick up the pieces. I'm not worth all this effort."

Fiona sat down in the chair next to him, placing a gentle hand on the back of his neck, rubbing soothingly.

"That's not you talking, Ian. We both know what it is."

"I am my illness, Fiona. And the illness is me. I can't blame it for shit I do. I do it. Me."

Fiona stayed quiet after that, unsure of how to respond. When Ian got like this, there was no reasoning with him. She just sat there, silently comforting him the best she could until she heard the door open. Her head shot up and she locked eyes with Mickey.

He looked tired. Fiona understood that. She's had countless sleepless nights due to Ian's disorder.

She nodded to him as he gave her a small wave.

"Hey Mickey." she said, standing up. "Ian, are you ready to go? I have to get going, I've got some errands to run."

Ian tilted his head up, his unfocused gaze landing on Mickey for the first time since he'd been dropped off two days ago. Mickey gave him a small, unsure smile, and Ian felt ten times worse.

Fucking ruiner.

"Yeah, I'm ready." Ian said tiredly. All he's been doing for days is sleeping, but he's tired like he's been up for a week. He stood up and was promptly wrapped up in his sisters arms. He let himself be hugged, knowing Fiona needed the contact in that moment. Ian didn't really feel much.


The normal shit.

Fiona finally pulled away, giving Ian a brittle smile before letting him go and making her way to the door. She gave Mickey's shoulder a squeeze as she walked past him and out the door.

"You good to go?" Mickey asked, rubbing his nose with his knuckles.

Ian could tell he was nervous. Ian hated that he made him feel that way.
Ian nodded, moving past Mickey and toward the door without a word. He heard Mickey sigh behind him, but didn't turn around.

They climbed into the truck and Mickey piloted them toward Caroline's office. It was a bit of a drive, and the tension in the car was palpable.

Mickey turned on the radio, desperate to fill the silence, but instantly regretted it when he heard the song that was filtering through the speakers.

He should have known better.

"Now maybe I didn't mean to treat you bad
But I did it anyway
And now maybe
Some would say your life was sad
But you lived it anyway"

Mickey chances a quick look over at Ian, who is mouthing the words to the song under his breath, tapping out the beat on his knee. Mickey is torn between turning off the ghost radio, and letting Ian purge a little of his pain through the music. He decides to let it ride.

Ian seems more content as he mutters the lyrics, and Mickey will do pretty much anything to ease his pain. He listens, as his own pain increases as the song goes on.

"Now maybe I could have made my own mistakes
But I live with what I've known
And then maybe we might share in something great
But won't you look at where we've grown"

Ian keeps singing as his voice cracks and breaks, his eyes swelling with unshed tears.

"And that cold day when you lost control
Shame you left my life so soon, you should told me
But you left me far behind."

Mickey decides in that moment that the truck is indeed possessed, beyond a doubt, and flips the radio off without further hesitation. Candlebox can suck his dick right now. He then wraps his free hand around Ian's twitching wrist, stilling his movements.

The rest of the ride is silent. And Mickey's not about to complain about that.
"Ian, it's good to see you." Caroline says as she pulls Ian into a warm embrace. "I just wish you'd have called me when you first became symptomatic. We talked about this." she doesn't sound mad, her voice remains calm and even. "Have a seat and we'll talk about it." she releases him and goes to close the door when she sees Mickey standing there.

Mickey says nothing, just fidgets on the other side of the threshold.

"Caroline, that's Mickey. I thought it may be a good idea for him to come in today. So maybe we could avoid this kind of thing in the future."

Caroline gives Mickey a warm smile, moving to the side so he can slip into the room as she shuts the door behind him.

"Mickey?" Caroline says as she drops into her chair behind her desk. "What a pleasure. It's nice to finally put a face to the name."

Mickey nods, unsure of what to say. He knows there's no way in hell Ian's told her only good things. She probably thinks he's a monster. Probably thinks Ian would be better off without him.

"So Ian, tell me about this last slip." Caroline says, poising a pen over a legal pad, eyes focused on Ian.

So he tells her. Everything. All the shit he left out during his last few sessions. About New Years, and the ecstasy. About how he felt fine after that, no strange symptoms at all. He then told her about how he started to feel off a few weeks after Valentine's day, but thought he could handle it. He told her about Jack's disappearing act, and the resulting fight it caused between Ian and Mickey. Told her how they got past it, mostly. Told her about his fights at work, about the exercising and the god damn coupons. Told her how Mickey had noticed, but admittedly too late to stop it. He told her about their fight, Ian hitting Mickey and running to the bar. He told her about the coke, and how he almost went home with Marco. He ends the story with the tale about how Jack had swooped in like a poor man's Batman, saving him from making a huge mistake. How he's been staying with Mandy, unsure how to go home with Mickey and fix things.

"Jack? As in the young man you were just talking about?" Caroline asked, her eyes flicking from Ian to Mickey then back.

"Yeah, we're more or less friendly now." Ian says sheepishly.

"That's good, I know you had some issues with that." Caroline says cryptically.

"Mickey knows all that." Ian says. "We don't keep secrets."

"That's good, Ian. I'm glad you're working on getting past that hurdle. I do have some serious concerns, though. You've left out some pretty impactful things during our past few sessions. I could have helped you avoid some of this if you'd have been honest with me, Ian. Also, I am concerned about the drug use. We've talked at length about how these narcotics can affect your balance."

"I know." Ian sighed. "And I've been really good, until the other night."

"What about New Years?" Caroline asks, clearly not willing to drop it.

"I was fine after New Years, this has nothing to do with that." Ian ground out. He's trying to keep his
temper in check, but it's hard when he feels this way.

"Okay, Ian. I just wish you'd consider cutting these substances out of your life all together. The drugs and alcohol are not good for your bipolar. And you know it can negatively affect your medication. It looks like you were very close to making some very poor choices the other night at the bar. What do you think would have happened if Jack hadn't found you when he did?"

Ian's eyes dropped, focusing on his clenched fists as he answered. "I'd have probably gone home with that guy."

"And how would you feel about that after the conclusion of your manic episode?" Caroline prodded.

"Shitty." Ian responded.

"And you, Mickey? How would you have dealt with that? If I recall correctly, Ian's had a history of infidelity. Would you be able to get past that?"

Mickey's mouth hung open, shocked to be put on the spot like that. Caroline's gaze did not waiver, she expected an answer.

"Um, I don't know. I'm not sure I could. Not again." Mickey muttered.

Ian's head shot up and his eyes found Mickey's instantly.

"Okay, that's fair." Caroline said. "Are you hearing him, Ian? Mickey's saying he may not be able to forgive another infidelity. I think that's understandable, don't you?"

Ian nodded mutely. His insides felt like ice.

"So why don't the three of us come up with a plan to recognize the signs of a possible slip, see if we can't get better at spotting and managing it, huh? If we work together, I think we can find a better way to deal with these little bumps, okay?"

Ian nodded again. He was still reeling from the knowledge that he could have lost Mickey for good this time.

God, he's so stupid.

He feels his throat tightening up, his eyes burning. But a gentle hand running along his wrist gives him pause.

Mickey is looking at him, eyes soft and full of love.

Mickey is here with him now, willing to learn how to help him better.

Mickey is here, willing to forgive him one more time for screwing up so epically.

Ian takes a deep breath, turning his hand over so Mickey can slot his fingers between Ian's.

"Okay." Ian says. "Tell me what we need to do."
Mickey listens intently as Caroline outlines the various signs of the start of a manic episode. This is all shit he knows already. What he needs to know is how to get through to Ian when he feels that way. That's the fucking issue.

So he asks.

"Uh, excuse me." he says, in the most polite way he knows how. "I, um, I know all this shit already. The signs, I mean. I knew shit was fucked up. I just didn't know how to approach him without him losing his shit on me. I don't know how to get him to listen when he's like that. Manic or whatever. It's like nothing I say gets through. Can you tell me how to fix that?"

He doesn't look at Ian as he says it. He knows Ian hates it when people talk about him like he's not there. But Ian asked him to come today, so he's gonna get what he needs.

"That's a good question, Mickey. It's also nice to know that you are invested in Ian's treatment. Taking on the role of caretaker can be difficult at times."

"I'm not his caretaker." Mickey says fiercely. "He doesn't need a nurse." his hand grips Ian's tighter as he says it, a long ago memory swimming in his brain. "I just wanna be able to help him when he needs it."

"That's good." Caroline smiles. "I know how independent you are, Ian." she says, turning to him. "But we've spoken about this too. It's okay to rely on loved ones sometimes. It doesn't make you an invalid, and it doesn't mean you're broken. Letting Mickey care for you when you are unbalanced is the exact opposite of weak. It takes strength to admit you may need help."

Ian nodded. "I know."

"So, let's talk about what we can do to avoid these issues." Caroline says, pulling some papers out of a folder on her desk.

She hands Mickey a printout of a checklist.

"Signs of a Manic/Depressive Episode" Mickey reads out loud.

Caroline nods. "You can keep that somewhere, go over it when you get a feeling that things may be a little off. If you check off more than three on either column, it's time to have a talk."

Mickey nods, reading the lists once more before stuffing the paper in his pocket.

"It may also be a good idea to revive the support team, Ian." Caroline says.

"Support team?" Mickey asks.

"It's a group of people I trust to tell me when I'm acting off. It was Fiona and Lip. If I was out of control, they would get together and sit me down. It usually worked pretty well."

Mickey nodded, not a bad idea.

"I was thinking, Ian, it may be time to amend the list to include Mickey and his sister. You talk about them all the time, and it's obvious they are an important part of your life again. If you add Mickey and Mandy to the list, it's imperative they speak with Lip and Fiona, talk about the emergency plan."

"Well, Lip's kinda unreliable right now." Ian muttered.

"You mean he's drunk half the time." Mickey said, earning a glare from his boyfriend. "What? It's
"fucking true."

"Well, that's a shame." Caroline said. "I was hoping it would stick for him this time." she added on meaningfully. "Well, Mickey, would you and your sister be willing to get together with Fiona and talk contingency plan? If that's okay with you, Ian."

Ian nodded again. He hated feeling like this. Weak and small. But he knew sometimes he couldn't trust himself. Knew sometimes he needed someone to pull him back from the edge.

"Mickey, do you think that you and your sister would be willing to work with Fiona for Ian's benefit? Ian has told me that in the past the two of you haven't seen eye to eye regarding Ian's well being."

Mickey bristled a little. Ian had told this woman a lot more than Mickey had thought. Stupid of him, really. This is his fucking therapist. She probably knows more about Ian that he does. He irrationally hates that idea.

"Fiona and me are fine now. Have been for a while now. I'll do whatever it takes to help. I got no issue with Ian's sister."

Caroline nodded happily. "That's good to hear, Mickey. I'm glad you're so willing to assist in Ian's treatment."

"It was never a question." Mickey says, his eyes falling to Ian again. "Whatever it takes."

The talked the rest of the time about how Ian had gone to Mandy's after the episode. How he felt suffocated after a slip like that. How the pained glances from his boyfriend made him feel infinitely worse. How it was easier at Mandy's because Ian didn't feel like he failed her when he slipped.

He certainly feels like he's failed Mickey.

"Can I say something?" Mickey asked, after Ian had just finished spilling his guts about all that shit.

Caroline nodded and Ian held his breath.

Mickey kept his eyes down as he spoke, his hands curled into fists in his lap. "I, uh, know I can come on kinda strong when you are feeling off. Especially when you're low. I know I hover. I know I watch you like a hawk and trail you around the apartment. I know that shit pisses you off, and I'll try to do better. But you gotta understand, it's not easy for me either. I know it's nothing compared to what you go through, but when you're down like that, Ian, I feel like I'm dying. I'm fucking useless. I can't help. I can't do a god damn thing to fix it. And I knew I shoulda said something about you acting whacko way before the Nazi shit, but I was scared that you were gonna flip out on me. And it looks like I was right." Mickey muttered, feeling flustered when he looked up and saw both pairs of eyes on him. "I'm not stupid enough to think you'll agree every time, but if me and Mandy do this Crisis Team shit with Fiona, you gotta promise me you'll listen, and try not to get offended. he took a deep breath. "You know I'd never say something unless I thought I had to. Right?"

Ian nodded, reaching for Mickey's hand again, pulling them from twisting in his lap to cradle one between his long fingers. "Yeah, Mick. I know. I'm sorry. I kinda knew something was wrong too. Just thought I could handle it on my own."

"Well, we're in this shit together now, Ian. We don't do any of this crap on our own anymore. You get all my shit, I get all yours, that was the deal, right?"
"Yeah, Mick, it was." Ian gave him a small smile. The first real smile Mickey had seen from him in days. It lit his insides up, and Mickey was smiling back before he knew what hit him.

"I think that's good for today, gentlemen." Caroline said. "Ian, I'm proud of you. I know you think this was a bad slip, but I beg to differ. You've come a long way."

Ian smiled at his therapist.

He had come a long way, but he had a long way to go, too....

------------------------------------------------

The ride back the their apartment is a quiet one. Mickey puts the radio on some classical music station, not in the mood at all for the truck's opinion on the state of affairs. He toyed with the idea of doing some kind of exorcism, his sister had mentioned some hippie shit about dousing it in sage smoke or something.

Mickey kept his mind occupied with frivolous things like truck exorcisms the entire ride home. Ian's mind on the other hand, was desperately trying to piece together what had just happened in Caroline's office. The effects of his depressive episode were not as crippling as they could be, but he still found it hard to focus on the shit going on around him, not to mention retaining information once it'd been given to him.

His mind is replaying the very end of the appointment.

Caroline and Ian had made a follow up appointment for a week from Tuesday. Ian had moved to stand up when Caroline had spoken again.

She had handed Mickey a business card of a colleague of hers, mentioning in a offhand way that Mickey may want to consider getting a therapist of his own.

Ian had watched, mildly confused, as Mickey's hand reluctantly reached out and took the card, stuffing it into his pocket before leading Ian out of the building and back to the truck.

Now, Ian's sitting there, listening to Moonlit Sonata wondering if his crazy shit has finally driven Mickey crazy.

So he asks.

"Mick. Do you think Caroline suggested you get a shrink because I've made you crazy?"

"What?" Mickey asks, shooting Ian a confused glance.

"Like, is dealing with me making you loses it?" Ian asks, turning his head to look out the window.

"Fuck no. Why would you even say that?"

"I know I'm a mess. It can't be easy on you."

"Ian, how much have you told your shrink about me? My life?" Mickey asks, hitting the blinker and taking a left.
"Well, almost all of it, I guess." Ian concedes.

"Don't you think then, that she might just think I need a little head shrinking? I've been through some shit. Done a lot more. Maybe she just wants me on my A game to be able to help you. And if I'm always misreading shit and getting all bent outta shape, I can't do that. I mean, that's what I got out of it."

"Yeah, I guess." Ian sighed, sounding unconvinced.

"Ian, have you or have you not been trying to get me to see a damn shrink since we started with the rape group?" Mickey asked, keeping his eyes on the road.

Ian nods, but says nothing. He had indeed been dropping hints about it since the start of the group. He thought it would be good for Mickey to talk more in depth about his history of abuse and neglect outside sexual assault.

He never thought Mickey would go for it.

He knows he should be happy with this turn of events, but the way his head is right now, he's wary of everything, positive all roads lead back to his own insanity.

But that's not fair.

He'll have to think about it more when he's not so mixed up. Nothing makes sense at the moment.

He really just wants to sleep.

Mickey makes a detour at the pharmacy. Caroline had written Ian a new prescription, switching up his mood stabilizer again, and adding a sleeping pill.

Wonderful. More drugs to ingest on a daily basis.

They make it back to their apartment and Ian follows Mickey up the stairs. Once they are inside, Ian kicks his shoes off and heads right to the bedroom. He strips down to his boxers and crawls into bed. He doesn't know if he'll actually sleep or not, but laying down is the only thing he wants to do right now.

----------------------------------------

Mickey knows the drill. He's used to this shit by now.

As far as swings go, this one was actually pretty tame. Hypomania instead of full mania. Mild depression instead of 'hide the knives' depression.

Ian was walking and talking. Ian was eating, a little. Ian had spoken to Rita and was going to take a few more days off while he stabilized. Ian got his new meds and was starting the regimen tomorrow. Ian was going to be okay.

Mickey hadn't doubted that fact. But he can admit now, at least to himself, that he'd been pretty scared.

He always gets scared when Ian has a slip.
Mickey's hoping Ian will be cool with him sleeping in their bed that night. He knows when Ian's feeling low, he needs to be alone. Mickey doesn't mind sleeping on the couch, but after what's he's been through in the past few days, he really just wants to be close to Ian.

He's not sure when he became such a clingy bitch, but there's nothing he can do about it now.

Ian's been sleeping since they got home from his appointment. It's normal for him to do this shit when he's down, and honestly, after the past few days he's had, he probably needs the rest.

Mickey makes them each a sandwich, grabs himself a beer and makes the decision to risk rejection by heading into the bedroom.

He sees an all too familiar Ian-shaped lump in the middle of the bed when he pushes through the door. It doesn't scare him as much as it used to. He drops Ian's sandwich on his nightstand and makes his way over to his own side of the bed. He tries not to jostle Ian when he climbs into the bed on top of the covers. He grabs the remote and turns the TV on low, sipping his beer before dropping it on his own nightstand and taking a bite of his sandwich.

He ate as silently as possible, not wanting to disturb Ian. Sipping his beer periodically, eyes fixed on the cop drama on the television. However, his eyes kept drifting to his sleeping boyfriend.

Ian looked so peaceful when he was sleeping. All of the stress that ate him alive during his waking hours disappeared, and his face was lax and serene.

He's gorgeous.

Mickey sighs, taking the last bite of his sandwich and dropping the plate down next to his beer. He leans back against the headboard and just stares at Ian's unconscious form. He raises one hand slowly and carefully runs his fingers through Ian's hair. Ian doesn't stir at all, totally exhausted.

Mickey smiles softly at him, his fingers brushing through his hair over and over.

This shit never really got any easier. Ian's little slips. Ian shutting him out or running off. The anger and resentment that lingered after these arguments. The fear of Ian's infidelity after he took off like that.

He knows he told Caroline earlier today that if Ian cheated again, he'd walk away. But now, laying in bed with Ian, watching him sleep, Mickey's not so sure. He's not sure he could ever just walk away. He doesn't know if that's good or bad.

Probably bad.

But laying here, feeling the heat radiating off Ian's body, listening to the soft huffs of his lethargic breathing, Mickey feels powerless to do anything but take care of him, even if Mickey suffers for it.

It's always been this way with Ian. He loves it as much as he hates it.

And it scares the fuck out of him.

He wonders then, as he reaches for his beer with his free hand, if Caroline's shrink friend could help him make sense of all this shit.

God damn it.

Now he's actually considering seeing a shrink when it's not ordered by the court.
He lets his eyes fall to Ian's still form again. He runs his hand through his hair once more, then slides his fingers down his face, resting it along his jaw.

He may have never seen himself going to a shrink, but he may as well just add it to the list.

The list of things he thought he'd never do, that he did for Ian Gallagher. Maybe even getting to the point where he could admit he did it all for himself too, even if only a little bit.

He has to admit to himself, as he cuddles a little closer to his sleeping lover, that crossing these self-impose boundaries with Ian isn't all that bad.

Chapter End Notes

i was super nervous about this chapter. it took a lot out of me, and it took forever to get it just so.

i know this has been a super angsty ride, but i can report with moderate accuracy that this will be the last major upset in this fic. we are on the home stretch, more or less, and this is the last major hurdle to be expected. i wanted to wrap this up all in one chapter, since i felt like leaving it on a cliffhanger would be needlessly cruel.

thanks for sticking with me.
Is this progress?

Chapter Summary

Things slowly get back on track after Ian's little slip. A few things get sorted out, and a few important conversations go down.

Chapter Notes

so this is a little shorter than my usual chapters, but this is just kind of a bridge between two points. it wasn't even originally in the story, but i think some important things happen, so i decided to include it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ian is going out of his mind.

He rolls his eyes at his own thought. 'out of his mind.'

Ha ha.

He wishes he could just go back to work. He doesn't feel like he needed three whole days off. Sure, he had gone in for a med adjustment. Sure, he supposes this could constitute a blip on his bipolar radar. He'd been acting symptomatic. He'd done some things he regretted.

But he'd gotten it under control quickly, and he was doing better.

He hates that Rita has this rule. Hates that he's forced to take time off any time his medication gets tweaked. But he knows it's for the best. For his safety, as well as the safety of his coworkers and patients.

He just hates how broken it makes him feel.

Sitting around the apartment alone all day while Mickey is out working is not Ian's idea of progress in his mental health journey. Is there anything progressive about watching trashy bitches beat the shit out of each other on Maury? Is it considered maintaining his mental health if he watches other people go insane over paternity results?

Fuck. This.

Ian heaves himself off the couch. The sun is out, it's pretty warm outside. Maybe he'll go for a run. He hasn't done that shit in a long ass time.

Yeah, that's exactly what he needs. To feel his heart pounding, his blood pumping. His feet hitting the pavement as the neighborhood flies by.

Yep. He's gonna go for a run.
At least he'll have accomplished something during the day.

He heads toward the bedroom, going through the draws in search of his gym shorts. He's just pulling them over his hips when he hears a knock at the front door. His eyebrows knit together as he makes his way over to the door.

Who the hell could be here in the middle of the day?

He pulls the door open without looking in the peephole. When he comes face to face with the person on the other side, he quirks an eyebrow.

What the hell?

"Jack? What are you doing here?" Ian asks, standing back so the other man can walk into the apartment.

Jack gives him a small nod of his head and slides by him and into the living room.

"You're not busy, are you? Mick said you were gonna be home." he asked, dropping down on the couch. It would look casual to an outsider, but Ian knew Jack well enough by now to sense he was nervous.

"Was gonna go for a run. No big deal, what's up?" Ian asked, sitting opposite Jack in one of the arm chairs.

Jack runs his fingers through his curly mop of hair, biting at the skin of his lower lip. Ian's reminded of the first time he saw Jack. When he used to call him 'off-brand Lip' in his head. The memory makes him smile.

"I got off work early." Jack said, running a hand through his wind-blown hair once more, nerves evident. "I, uh. Well. I just wanted to see how you were doing." he mumbles quietly, unable to maintain eye contact.

Well, that was unexpected.

"Huh?"

"I, eh, fuck it." Jack sits up a little straighter, arms crossed over his knees. "I haven't see you since that shit with Marco happened down at the club. I've been asking Mick, but he's super tight-lipped about the whole thing. Which is not a surprise, but I just can't seem to mind my god damn business." Jack huffs, leaning back again. "I know we're not really friends, Ian. Not like I'd like to be. And I get it! I really do. I'm not asking you to like me. I understand if you can't or whatever. Cuz of who I am. Or cuz of who I am to Mickey. Or because I'm an addict that keeps fucking up. Or that you think I'm bad for Mick..."

"Jack. Jack." Ian said, putting a hand up to stop the word vomit. "What are you talking about?" Ian stands and starts walking toward the kitchen. "Do you want a drink? I've got sprite and beer. Can you drink beer? I don't know..."

"Sprite's fine." Jack says, using all his willpower to refuse the beer. He's really trying to do better. And day drinking is not part of that plan today.

Ian comes back with two sprites and pops the top on his. Jack does the same and for a moment they just sit there, drinking soda and staring at each other.
"Okay." Jack says, setting his can down on the coffee table. "I guess I just wanted to clear the air with you, personally. A lot of shit has gone down between us over the past little while, and it just feel, I don't know, unfinished to me?" he ends the statement like a question, unsure.

"I mean." Ian replies, a little reticent himself. "Yeah, I guess a fair amount of shit has gone down recently."

Jack barks a laugh. "You think?" eyebrows raised.

Ian laughs with him, but they settle quickly.

"I just want to apologize to you. About my relapse."

"Jack, don't. You don't owe me anything." Ian waves him off, but Jack is undeterred.

"No, Ian. I dragged your man back into the shit with me, even if I didn't do it on purpose. I know he's on probation."

"You didn't call him, Jack. He went out looking for you. And he found you. I'm glad he did." Ian says, and he means it. No matter how mad he had been at Jack at the time, he wouldn't want him to get hurt, or worse.

"Me too." Jack gave him a small smile, picking his soda back up and playing with the tab of the can as he spoke. "I'm really glad. I could have ruined everything. Almost did." he looked up at Ian for a moment before returning his eyes to the coffee table. "I owe him a lot."

Ian smiled, but didn't say anything. Jack sure did owe Mickey a lot. But Ian wasn't about to rub that in.

"You and I both know I can't promise I'll never fuck up again." Jack sighed. Ian gave him a sympathetic nod. He knew how it worked. "All I can promise is that I'll do my best. I don't want to let anyone down. Especially Mickey. And I don't want him to worry about me. I don't want to cause problems between you two. I just wanted to say that I'm gonna try my best, and I hope you can give me another shot. You don't owe me anything, but I wanna show you, and Mick, and my dad, that I can do better."

Ian smiled. This was the last thing he expected when he opened the door and saw Jack on the other side. He's not sure if he believes him or not. But he wants to.

"Okay, Jack." he said, nodding. "That sounds good. You're doing okay, you know. Give yourself a little credit."

Jack gave him a small smile, a little blush creeping along his neck.

"The other thing I wanted to talk to you about was what went down at the club." he chanced another look at Ian, who's eyes were also now trained on the table.

"What about it?" Ian asked quietly.

"Um, well." Jack sipped his soda once more before putting the can down and finally looking over at Ian. "You don't think I overstepped, do you?"

Ian's brow furrowed, confused. "What?"

"Like, showing up there, all Milkovich-mode. Making a scene, talking to you like that. Convincing
you to come home with me. Bringing up all that personal shit, like we're friends or something." Jack sighed, his shoulders falling. "Did that piss you off? Was I out of line?"

Ian's face softened.

Oh.

"No, Jack. You weren't out of line. I'm actually glad it was you that found me. I'm not sure I would have gone with anyone else at that moment."

Jack's head whipped up, his hair flying in all directions, eliciting a chuckle from Ian.

"Really?"

"Yeah, I mean. I had just had a fight with Mickey. Even though it was meaningless and brought on by my episode, I probably would have bolted if he showed up that night. I needed some space. You gave me that. A safe place to cool off, sober up, you know?"

Jack smiled, clearly relieved. "So that shit I said about us both being fucked up didn't bother you?"

"It's not like you were lying." Ian laughed, shaking his head.

"Yeah, I guess not." Jack giggled, before sobering again. "So, are we good then? Like, me and Mick and you? Sometimes I'm not sure where we stand. Makes me nervous." Jack looked down again, embarrassed.

Was he really sitting here, in this guys house, formally asking for his hand in friendship?

That's sure what it feels like.

"I like you a lot, Ian." here we go, cards on the table. "Mickey's probably the best friend I've ever had. I know our relationship is a little twisted, and we may be too close, but I don't know what I'd ever do without him." Jack had a wistful look in his eyes, like he was reliving some beloved memory. He sighed, eye turning back to Ian. "I don't want you to feel threatened by me, or think I have any kind of designs on him or whatever. He's loved you the whole time I've known him. It's actually kinda beautiful, the way he loves you." he shoots his eyes up to a blushing Ian before focusing on the table again. "I know sometimes I can be high maintenance, and it takes a lot of energy to be my friend. I'm not trying to get between you and Mick, or take him away from you. I would never do that. I'm hoping me and you can be friends, like, independent of Mickey." Jack gives Ian a soft, hopeful look. "What I did for you the other night, picking you up from the club, I don't want you to think I did that for Mickey."

"What?" Ian asked, confused yet again.

"I didn't go out and find you for Mickey's sake. I know that's probably what it looks like, and what you thought. That I did that for my friend, to help him. But I didn't."

"Then why did you do it?"

"Ian, I did it for you." Jack replied easily. "I did it because you needed help. Cuz you needed a friend. I was trying to look out for you like Mickey looks out for me. I wanted to do that for you, because I care about you."

Ian's eyes widened, a small smile splitting his face.

Jack's right. Things between them had been rough since his relapse. Ian couldn't quite get past what
Jack had done, and how his actions had affected his relationship with Mickey. Ian felt like he was always in competition with Jack for Mickey's attention. It's probably a childish way to look at it, but he can't help the way he feels.

A little insecure. A little jealous. A little unsteady.

He hates that feeling. And he'd been blaming Jack for all of it.

But that's not really fair, is it? Jack is Mickey's friend. That's all there is to it. Ian knows that, logically. He's not sure he'll ever understand what they have together, but he doesn't really have to. He just has to accept it.

Accept Jack.

And here he is, coming to Ian to clear the air. To set the record straight. To extend an olive branch. Can Ian do that? Let all that fear and insecurity go? Let Jack in again after everything? Be his friend?

Looking at the man in question, Ian knows.

Yeah, he can.

Jack's a good kid. He's got his issues, but who the fuck doesn't? Ian's certainly not one to judge. Jack's never been anything but nice to Ian, and he's been an amazing friend to Mickey when he had no one else.

Not to mention what Jack did for him at the club. He didn't have to do any of that shit. And he did it for Ian. Just for Ian. To help him.

Before all this chaotic bullshit went down, Ian and Jack were well on their way toward actual friendship territory. Ian's about ready to put this shit to bed, get back on course.

Ian smiles. "Thanks, Jack. That means a lot." he ran a hand through his hair. "I want that too, y'know. To be friends, like you said."

"Yeah?" Jack gave Ian a childlike, hopeful look. All wide eyes and bright teeth. Ian laughed. The kid can be such a puppy sometimes. It's hard for Ian to reconcile the silly kid he knows with the hardened addict he's seen in action. Ian nods, giving Jack a warm smile. Being friends with Jack doesn't sound like such a bad idea. He could use a friend like him. A guy friend, outside of Mickey. Someone who's not family, someone who's not a girl, like Mandy. Someone like him. A little broken, maybe. A lot gay, for sure. The thought makes Ian chuckle.

"Oh, you have no idea how happy that makes me." Jack beamed. He hopped off the couch and flopped down on Ian's lap in the chair, wrapping his arms around him. He pulled Ian tight against his chest with a girly little giggle. He laid a smacking kiss to Ian's hair before he could think better of it.

He leaned back, trying to gauge Ian's reaction. "Is this a bit much?" he asked, tilting his head to the side.

Ian chuckled. "I actually don't know."

"So!" Jack changed the subject, sliding off Ian's lap and standing next to his chair. "Did I interrupt your day off?"

Ian shook his head. "I was just about to go for a run. No big deal."

"Oh!" Jack started clapping, hopping around excitedly. "I love running! You think I could come? I
haven't ran in forever."

Ian eyed him, surprised. "Really? You run?"

"Sure I do. Not just from the cops, either. For, like, fun." he nodded, totally straight-faced.

Ian lost it then, cracking up laughing. "Okay, yeah." he nodded, standing. "I'm sure Mick's got some gym shorts you can borrow. It'd be nice to have some company."

"Sweet." Jack said, clearly excited.

As Ian made his way back toward the bedroom to fetch Mickey's shorts, he couldn't help but think he was making some progress after all today...

"Thanks for this, Matty. Real nice of you." Mickey said, grunting a little under the weight of the load they were carrying. "Y'know you didn't have to do this. Although I really appreciate it."

Matt closed the tailgate and leaned against it, crossing his arms over his chest and giving Mickey a look he couldn't decipher.

"It's fine, Mickey. Not like we need it anymore. After everything you've done for my family, it's the least we can do."

"Eh, fuck off. I work for you, you pay me. You don't need to be giving my family charity on top of that. We're square as long as my check clears, man."

"You know that's not what I'm talking about." Matt said, eyebrows raised.

Mickey rolled his eyes. "Matt, come on dude. How many times do I have to tell you? Don't you dare thank me for anything I ever do for Jack. We're boys, that's what that shit means. We get each other's backs when shit goes south. That's how this works."

"Mickey." Matt sighed. He walked over to Mickey, who was still leaning against the truck. He put his hands on Mickey's shoulders and shook him. "You went down to a crack house and retrieved my missing son. My only child. You got him into a halfway house. Then you got him into a sober house. You put your relationship in jeopardy for him."

"No I didn't." Mickey balked.

"Let me finish." Matt said sternly. Mickey clammed right the fuck up.

"Your boyfriend saved my son's life. I will never be able to repay him for that. And he's accepted Jack as your friend, even though if I were in Ian's position I probably would have kicked his ass by now. Hell, if it weren't for you and Ian, Jack probably wouldn't be clean right now. He'd be dead."


"He is." Matt conceded "I'm not trying to take any of that away from him. I'm very fucking proud of how far he's come. All I'm trying to say is that Jack is lucky to have you, and so am I. You're a good guy, Mick. And a good worker, too. So let me do this one small thing for your family. Just say thank
"Thank you." Mickey muttered, patting his pockets for his cigarettes. "It's real nice of you, Matt. Thank Lexi for me too."

"How's things, anyway?" Matt asked, holding his hand out for one of Mickey's cigarettes. Matt doesn't smoke much, but Mickey always gives him one when he asks. Mickey passed one over and then the lighter. Matt lit his cigarette, passing the lighter back and blowing a thick cloud of smoke over Mickey's head.

"Good, good." Mickey nods. "Uh, Ian's doing better. Has some days off. Probably going out of his skull at the house right now." he laughed. "Dude doesn't know the meaning of the word 'relax'."

"He probably needs it, even if he doesn't want it." Matt said. "Jack told me what happened. Must have been scary for you."

"Nothing I can't handle. Been there before, probably gonna be there again. We've got it." Mickey said, flicking his ash onto the pavement.

"You boys are a handful, I'll give you that." Matt laughed. "But you're all moving in the right direction. I think you're all good for each other. Look out for each other, take care of each other. I can't tell you how important it is to have people in your corner, Mickey."

Mickey nodded but said nothing.

"You have come a long way in the short time I've known you, Mickey. I'll be honest, when my son first told me about you, I was wary. He just kept going on and on about this boy he met in jail and how amazing he was and how it was kismet and all this mellow dramatic 'Jack' type shit. I was nervous you were going to bring him down, distract him from his recovery. I thought you were just another scumbag who was using my kid for one thing or another." Matt dropped his cigarette and stomped on it with his booted foot. "But I was wrong. You have been nothing but good for Jack, and I'm happy he has you. Keep doing what you're doing Mickey. You've come a long way, and I'm sure you've got nothing but good things in your future. And when you hit a bump in the road, you've got quite a circle of people to depend on now. Myself included, if you ever need."

"Jesus, Matt. Did you ask me down here to pick this shit up, or to have a fucking heart to heart? I'm growing ovaries over here." Mickey laughed. He had to diffuse this emotional conversation somehow.

Matt chuckled, clapping Mickey on the shoulder heavily. "Fine, fine, I'm done. Get the fuck outta here, I'm freezing my balls off." Matt laughed, rubbing his hands up and down his arms. He'd come out of his garage with just a hoodie on.

"Okay man. See ya tomorrow? That building with the black mold?"

"Yeah man. We're gonna have a ball with that shit." Matt chuckled as Mickey opened the drivers side door and slipped in.

Mickey waved as he started the truck and drove away. Matt turned and headed up his driveway, throwing a wave over shoulder as he walked up the path.

Mickey smiled at Matt's back in the rear-view mirror, his eyes catching on the crib that was sitting in the bed of the truck.

Iggy and Tess were gonna freak.
Ian ran. He ran fast, he ran hard. He ran a lot. Not nearly as much as he used to, but enough that he was still running laps around Jack at the moment.

If Ian wasn't breathing so hard, he'd be laughing.

Jack was a few paces behind him, breathing heavy and swearing under his breath.

"Motherfucking machine over here. God-ungh, god damn terminator robot." Jack stopped abruptly, leaning over with his hands on his knees. "Yo! Bolt! Hold the fuck up. I got a cramp." He straightened up, holding his side.

Ian laughed as he turned back, stopping his forward motion and jogging in place. "C'mon Jack. One more mile and we're back at the apartment." Ian teased, huffing a little himself.

"Another MILE? What the fuck? How did we get so far out? I wasn't paying attention, obviously." Jack wheezed, running his fingers through his sweat-drenched hair. "You owe me a beer after all this."

"Thought you weren't gonna drink today?" Ian said, pulling his leg up behind him, stretching out the muscle.

"I'm pretty sure I said I wasn't drinking before noon." Jack said, waggling his eyebrows. "Besides, Mick'll be home soon. I know for a fact he has at least one when he gets home from work."

"Okay, fine. One beer. But you gotta race me back for it." Ian said, taking off like a shot before Jack could even reply.

"God damn asshole thinks he's the fucking flash." Jack grumbled, dutifully taking off after Ian.

"Yo, Mick." Iggy smiled as he opened the door. He had a semi-clean wife beater on and a pair of basketball shorts.

"Hey. Come help me with this thing." Mickey said, turning around and heading back down the stairs.

"Dude, let me grab my coat." Iggy said, turning around and grabbing his coat off the hook. He slipped it on and followed his brother down the stairs, shivering in the cold. "What's going on?" he asked as he followed Mickey back to the truck.

"Gotcha something. Is Tess home?" Mickey said, dropping the tailgate.

"Nah, she's.....holy shit, Mick. Is that a crib?"

Mickey looked from the jumble of wood in the bed of the truck back to his brother standing
astonished on the sidewalk. He rubbed his eyebrow with his thumb, shrugging. "Yep. Used to be Jack's if you can believe it. Matt and Lex gave it to me. For you and Tess."

"Bro..." Iggy said, shocked.

"I know. I know. I told 'em we didn't need their fucking charity, but Matty insisted. Once he's made up his mind, there's no changin' it. Grab some fucking parts, let's get it put together so I can go the fuck home. You got a philip's head screwdriver, right?" Mickey started grabbing up loose pieces of the crib in his arms and backing away so Iggy could grab the rest.

Mickey stumbled back up the stairs and through the open door, walking awkwardly, struggling to get through the hall without dropping anything.

He placed all the pieces on the floor in what would be the nursery. It used to be Mandy's room. Tessa picked it because the walls had the least amount of damage. All the walls in the boys' old rooms were scarred with holes and knicks. The walls told the story of violence and youthful aggression. Holes punched in the plaster, or a dent the size of Mickey's head. Knife marks and damage from throwing stars. Too much work to rehab all that before the baby arrived. So Mickey's old room was being used as Iggy's gym, which was a joke if Mickey ever heard one. The room was empty except for some dusty free weights and a card table littered with empty beer cans.

Mandy's old room had been thoroughly cleaned recently in preparation. Mickey had never seen it so spotless. The rest of the house was much the same. Mickey had thought it was clean when Tess first moved in, but he now realizes he hadn't even know the meaning of the word.

"Yeah, I got a toolbox under the sink. Wanna beer? You're gonna stick around and help me put this shit together, right? Tessa will have a fit if we leave this mess in the baby's room. She on this fucking cleaning kick like I've never seen. Says it a pregnancy thing. Y'ever heard of that shit?" Iggy kept talking as he moved toward the kitchen.

"Yeah, dude. It's called 'nesting.'" Mickey called back, separating the parts into small piles. "Svet was a maniac when she was knocked up." Mickey shuddered a little at the memory, but was pleasantly surprised by how quickly the discomfort passed. He was kinda proud of himself, being able to let go of that nasty feeling so fast.

He made a mental note to call his kid later. It'd been a while since he talked to the little man.

"Huh, whadda mean, nesting? Like a fucking bird?" Iggy asked as he walked back into the room. He handed Mickey the screwdriver and placed his beer on the floor next to the crib parts.

"I guess." Mickey shrugged. "It just means she's gonna run around cleaning and organizing shit like crazy until the kid pops out. Svet was a nut about that shit. It just got worse and worse as she got bigger. So you better be ready." he stood two of the parts up and rested them against each other. "Hand me the screws when I say."

Iggy grabbed up the screws and crouched down next to his brother, waiting. Mickey worked quickly, attaching the sides and standing the contraption up in the corner by the window. He had just started attaching the springs to the bottom when his brother spoke again.

"So how are things with your two boyfriends?" Iggy asked innocently, pulling on his cigarette (even though Tess had forbade smoking in the house about a week ago.)

"Fuck off, Igg." Mickey groused, wincing as he scraped his knuckles when the screwdriver slipped. He dropped the screwdriver to take a sip of his beer before picking it back up and resuming his task.
"Just asking, dude. The last time we saw your ginger, he was pretty heated. Took all of me and Tess's combined wisdom to talk him off the ledge."

"Why's it any of your business anyway?" Mickey asked, moving on to the next leg of the crib.

"It's my fucking business when dude shows up here in the middle of the fucking night for god damn relationship advice." Iggy countered, sipping his beer.

Mickey groaned. Iggy was right.

He hated when that happened.

"Everything is fine. That was a while ago, anyway." Mickey said. He pulled up another side of the crib. "Hold this shit while I screw it in, you lazy fuck."

Iggy laughed, but did as he was told. "Seriously, though. He was pretty bent outta shape. I mean, I had your back, of course, but you had to know he was gonna react that way. Gallagher's a jealous little bitch."

"Iggy, fuck off. You don't know shit about it. Ian had a reason to be upset. But we've talked about it, and everything's going to be fine. Do you really think something as simple as a queer little fight was gonna fuck up our shit? After everything we've been through? We've got it under control, we're good. Besides, this shit with Ian and Jack is gonna work out just fine. They're grown ass men, not hormonal tween girls. It's a lot more complicated than your simple mind can grasp."

"Harsh, bro." Iggy said, swatting at the back of Mickey's head half-heartedly. "Don't seem too complicated."

Mickey rolled his eyes as he attached the final leg. "Get the mattress thing outta the living room."

Iggy left the room and Mickey was alone with his thoughts for a moment. He knows things with Ian and Jack are up in the air right now, but he doesn't know how the hell he's supposed to do anything about it.

Iggy stumbles back in, the tiny mattress tucked under his arm. "This thing ain't half bad, Mick." he says, handing it over to Mickey so he can place it in the crib.

The two men stand back, looking at the newly assembled baby bed. The have matching posture, arms crossed over their chests, heads cocked to the side.

"Yeah, you'd never guess it was 25 years old." Mickey laughed.

"Thanks for doing this, man." Iggy said, reaching over to playfully push his brother. "Who woulda seen this coming?"

"Seen what coming?" Mickey asked, picking up his beer off the floor and taking a sip.

"Two Milkovich boys, putting together baby furniture. Doing actual family-type stuff. Planning ahead and shit." Iggy said. "I remember when you were born, Ma put you in a laundry basket for the first year. Must be why you like jail so much. You got those baby memories of being in a cage."

"You're a fucking idiot." Mickey laughed.

"Come on, man. This is progress, right? You're working out your problems all mature-like with you gay lover, I'm living with my baby mama, getting ready for my first kid. No one's in jail. I don't even
think either of us have a gun in our houses at the moment." Iggy said, grinning.

"Yeah, man. I guess you could call that progress." Mickey smiled back.

"C'mon dude, play some Zelda with me before you go." Iggy said, leaving Mickey in the soon to be nursery as he made his way to the living room.

"Who plays fucking Zelda anymore?" Mickey wondered as he followed behind his brother.

Mickey stayed later than he meant to. When he got playing video games with his brother, time just seemed to slip away from him.

As he makes his way back to the apartment, Iggy's words are running through his head on repeat.

He has come a long fucking way, from the kid he used to be when he was living under Terry's thumb.

Progress.

He likes the sound of that.

Tess had lost her shit when she came home and saw the crib. Crying like crazy and hugging Mickey like he cured cancer or something. Mickey blames the emotion on the pregnancy. She's not due until August, but there's no way she could be that happy about a second hand crib.

It's not that big a deal. But Mickey's glad he could make her smile. He's happy he could do this one small thing for his brother's little family.

Now if he could only figure out a way to calm the waters between Ian and Jack, he'd be golden.

Unfortunately, he has no idea how to make that shit happen.

Ian has not talked about what happened with Jack at all, after the club. Mickey had hoped that the incident would be a bridge between the two men. Mickey still doesn't know the whole story, only what Ian and Jack had told him separately, and what he heard at Ian's therapist's office.

He can only hope this incident will be some kind of catalyst for peace between the two men. He's not sure how much more of this catty bullshit he can endure.

He pulled up in front of his building (still crazy, that he lived here in this nice ass apartment with Ian.) and parked the truck in a spot out front. He made his way upstairs quickly, tired from work and his trip to his family home.

He turned the key in the lock and pushed his way in. "Ian?" he called out, shrugging off his coat and kicking his boots to the side. "You home?"

He wandered further into the apartment when he got no response, stopping dead in his tracks when he hit the living room.

"What the fuck?" he whispered, unsure if he was hallucinating or something.
There, on the couch, were Ian and Jack. Passed the fuck out. All tangled up in each other, feet and arms everywhere. Ian was pressed up against the back of the couch on his back, one hand dangling off the sofa.

Jack was laying half on top of him, his head lolling on the back of the couch. There were two half empty beers on the coffee table, as well as Ian's glass bowl, packed with what looked like high test medicinal weed. Mickey chuckled under his breath, not quite ready to wake the duo yet. This was the last fucking thing he expect to see when he got home today.

Some serious shit must have gone down between his boyfriend and his best friend while he was at work today, for them to be all twisted up in each other on the couch in an apparent weed coma.

He wonders, as he looks down at the sleeping men, if he has some kind of magic powers. Here he was, driving home hoping that somehow, some way Ian and Jack could work out their shit, and he comes home to find them cuddled up together on the couch.

There's a word for this. Mandy's always spouting off about it.

Manifestation.

Mickey chuckles.

Ridiculous.

Mickey grabbed up to two half full beers, downing one immediately on his way back toward the kitchen. He dropped the empty in the recycle before finishing off the other one and placing it in the bin as well.

He grabbed a fresh beer for himself, walking back into the living room and taking a seat in the armchair across from the men on the couch. His eyes wander from the boys, the the TV. Some weird anime he's never seen is playing on Netflix. He's sure that's Jack's doing.

He takes a long, satisfying sip of his beer before placing it down on the coffee table and grabbing up the bowl and the lighter. His eyes flick over to the sleeping men again, a small smile tugging at his lips as he brings the bowl up and lights it. He takes a deep inhale, holding the smoke in his lungs as long as he can. He breathes out smoothly, the pungent smokes billowing out of his mouth in a thick cloud.

He drops the bowl back down on the table and picks his beer back up. He feels the fuzzy tendrils of the high weaving it's way through his body. This weed is no joke. One hit and he's toast, every time.

His head falls back against the chair's cushion, and his eyes fall back to the two men passed out on the couch.

He can't wait to hear this story. Obviously something has changed. Ian and Jack have come to some kind of armistice. That, or they got so fucked up they forgot they had problems.

Mickey chuckles a little. He's feeling pretty good himself.

He settles quickly, though, as his eyes travel back over the sleeping men. He hopes to god Ian and Jack have squashed their problems. He's got enough issues in his life without these two guys dancing around each other awkwardly all the time.

His eyes flick back to the TV as his brother's words from hours earlier seep back into his mind.
Progress.

Looks like everyone's moving forward a little bit today.

Mickey can get on board with that.

Chapter End Notes

i'm getting real close to the end here, and i have to say, it's a little bittersweet for me.

i also wanted to add that i put in that little zelda nod for the actor that plays iggy. i follow j michael on instagram, and he does a lot of zelda cosplay, so i just had to add that in.

thanks for reading.
Happy Birthday, you ginger fuck.

Chapter Summary

Ian's birthday rolls around. Mickey makes sure it's one he won't forget.

Chapter Notes

we're getting pretty close to the end. i'm thinking probably around 40-41 chapters. that actually bums me out.

i have some ideas for some new fics, but i think it's gonna take me a while to get my shit together enough to post.

i really appreciate anyone who takes the time to read my stuff, it means the world to me.

so, let's get to it, i suppose....

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A month goes by, and Ian's slow to get back to where he was before his slip. It always feels like his episodes always come on so damn fast, but it takes him forever to recover from one. April sneaks up on him, nonetheless, and his birthday is less than a week away. He stopped celebrating after his 21st. After that, it feels like there are no milestones left until you reach 40.

But this will be his first birthday with Mickey since well before prison, so he kind of wants to make a big deal out of it.

If he's being honest, he wants to make a big deal out of everything with Mickey. The excitement he felt for any of the holidays over the past six months has intensified ten fold now that Mickey's back in his life. He wants to make the most out of every moment. And this birthday is just another special date in a long line of special dates that he wants to make a bigger deal than it has to be. He's turning 24, nothing special.

But it feels like a whole new life.

It is, really.

Mickey makes everything feel brand new.

His boyfriend has been nothing but patient and kind through Ian's stilted recovery. At first, it was a little awkward. Talking about Ian's behavior, and the fact that he'd almost cheated again was hard. But they had sat down and not gotten back up until they had both said what they needed to say. It was one of the most honest conversations Ian's ever had with anyone. He was left feeling open and vulnerable when they were finished, but hopeful and happy at the same time.

And lucky. So damn lucky.
Not everyone has someone to rely on like Ian has Mickey.

And the most shocking thing to come out of this whole fiasco was Mickey getting his own therapist. Mickey is on a waiting list for a guy that Caroline recommended. She swears the dude is a pro at getting guys like Mickey to open up. Ian supposes only time will tell. But just the fact that Mickey is even open to the idea is totally mind blowing to Ian.

Either Mickey has really grown as a person, or Ian has really driven him crazy.

"So, what's your plans for the big 2-4? Sue asks from the other side of the ambulance. They are parked in a lot outside a burger joint on the North side. Taking their lunch when they can get it between calls, Ian stuffs his face as fast as he can, always listening for the crackle of their radio.

He swallows quickly, washing down the bite with a gulp of Dr. Pepper. "Well, not too much, actually. Just gonna have a party at my family's house. First time we've done that in quite a few years. Then Mick said something about the guys coming over for dinner and drinks. No big deal."

"Sounds nice." Sue said, stuffing some fries in her mouth, chewing loudly. "How's it going, with you know..." she made a vague reference toward her head with a finger dripping ketchup.

"I'm good. I've been feeling a lot better these past few weeks. Caroline keeps telling me I dodged a bullet, but I still feel like a failure." Ian said, casting his eyes down toward his lap.

"Fuck that, Gallagher." Sue barked, sounding oddly like Mickey. "I've seen you off your rocker, kid, and this was nothing like that. You took a few days off, got your act together, and came back like nothing happened. If I can be honest?" she asked. When he nodded, she continued. "I think this is the best handle you've had on your illness since you joined the crew. I know it was touch and go there for a while after what happened with that patient."

Ian's mind automatically went to that scared girl. The one he unstrapped from the gurney, only to watch her jump out of the moving bus, get run over by another car, and end up with a broken back.

Ian would never forgive himself for that.

"But." Sue interrupted Ian's negative thoughts with a poke in his arm. "But, you got it together again. You've been doing good for a long time. This whatever-it-was last month was the fastest you ever caught it, and the fastest you've ever bounced back. You're doing good, kid."

"Thanks, Sue." Ian smiled, finishing his burger and throwing the wax paper in the empty bag.

"So tell me, what kind of kinky homo sex does your boy got planned for the big day?"

"Excuse me?" Ian laughed, blushing despite his best efforts not to.

"Oh Ian, don't get shy now. I have a feeling that bad boy of yours ties your dick in knots. I need details. I haven't gotten laid in weeks."

Fucking Sue. Jesus.

"I was kinda hoping I could weasel my way outta it, but it would be a dick move, right?"
"I thought you were cool with them now. You can't avoid them forever."

"I'm not avoiding them. I'd just rather not be around them."

"That is the definition of avoidance, Mick."

"Fuck off, Jack."

Jack laughed, tossing another bag of chips in the shopping cart as he trailed behind Mickey at the supermarket.

"This store is fucking stupid. Why does everything cost twice as much on the North side? It's the same fucking shit. Makes no sense." Mickey griped, grabbing some of Ian's disgusting pita chips. "Remind me to grab that faggy hummus shit when we get to the fridge isle." he muttered.

"You are so whipped. It's adorable." Jack sighed, tossing more chips in the cart.

"Fuck off, I'm not. And cool it on the chip bonanza, I'm not feeding an army of queers. It's just a few queers and a couple lesbo. Calm the fuck down, fatass."

"I am not fat." Jack swiped at Mickey, who dodged him at the last moment.

"Getting there." Mickey chuckled. "Better do some actual lifting at that gym you go to, instead of just sucking off randoms in the locker room."

"I knew I never should have told you about that." Jack grumbled as they turned the corner into the next isle.

"You tell me everything." Mickey reminded him.

"And that makes me an idiot."

"You said it, not me." Mickey laughed.

They wandered through the isles, tossing in items as they caught their eyes, picking on each other and making jokes as they went along. Once they got to the alcohol isle, Mickey skidded to a halt, eyeing his friend warily.

"Mick, are we seriously going to do this every time?" Jack sighed, moving toward the hard liquor. "You know booze is not my vice." he grabbed a handle of Jack and placed it in the cart.

"But I thought if you were sober, that meant no drugs at all? Booze or weed or anything like that." Mickey said.

"Okay, first of all, I know you brought this shit up to avoid talking about going to Ian's family's house. We're going back to that." Jack gave him a pointed look. "And second of all, that 'no substances of any kind' rule is that AA/NA bullshit. I do not subscribe to that belief system. I am not a drunk. I'm a junkie. If I'm not shooting up, I consider that a win. Not everyone sees it that way, but it works for me. You still have carte blanche to call me out if you think I'm getting out of control. But if you think I'm gonna stop drinking or smoking weed, you're out of your damn mind." he took in Mickey's unbelieving look and continued with a shrug. "You know, some of those militant AA soldiers also think prescription drugs are unacceptable. My antidepressants, my anxiety shit. Hell, some old timers even say cough syrup is off limits. It's a damn cult, Mick. Do you think I'm doing okay?" Jack asked honestly.
"Yeah, man. I do." Mickey replied, because it was true.

"Me too." Jack smiled. "So why don't we take the win, and let me live my life?"

Mickey nodded, though he was still unsure. Admittedly, he didn't know much about how addiction worked. Only what he'd heard from other addicts. If Jack said he was okay to drink, who was Mickey to say otherwise? He's been doing good for months now, working full time with the painting company. He's even been spending time with his parents. Lexi is still wary, but Jack just keeps on working on it. Proving himself, little by little. Just like he's working on his relationship with Ian. Mickey was surprised by Jack's vehemence to get back on friendly terms with Ian. He had stupidly thought it was about him. Telling Jack he didn't have to be friends with Ian to stay friends with him. Jack had laughed in his face, called him a conceited prick. Said he liked being friends with Ian, and that Mickey had nothing to do with it.

Mickey grabbed a case of beer and stowed it under the cart as Jack pushed it further down the isle.

"So, back to the matter at hand. Why do you feel all icky about the party at Casa de Gallagher?"

"Icky, Jack? Really?"

Jack just gave him an unimpressed glare.

Mickey scoffed. "Oh, fuck off. It's just, you know how it is with them. I've told you a million times."

"Yeah, I know how it was before. But this is now. You and the sister are golden, right? And the boozehound is a non-factor. That's what you said, right?"

"The boozehound is dry as a bone these days. At least that's what Ian's been saying."

"No shit? Since when?" Jack asked, grabbing some random candy off the shelf and stuffing it into the cart while Mickey was looking at snack cakes.

"Dunno. Probably since around New Years. I guess that last blowout he had with his family triggered something. He's been sober since. Going to those same culty AA meetings you were just bitching about. I guess he called Ian the other day to apologize, again. Told him he wants to make it right."

"Ian must be happy," Jack said, slipping a pound bag of Jolly Ranchers in the cart while Mickey was looking at snack cakes.

"That's what I'm worried about. Ian will get all happy, then Lip will let him down again. It's a never ending cycle of douchbaggery with him, and I don't want Ian getting sucked in and stomped on again."

"And you have to be on your best behavior and play nice all night." Jack beamed. "You're gonna be wound tighter than a spring by the end of the night. This is going to be hilarious."

"Who's side are you on, dick?"

"Yours, Mick." Jack laughed. "Always yours. If shit goes south, gimme a call. I'll take an Uber down there and help you curb stomp that pretentious lush."

"Oh, Jack. You always know what to say to make me feel better." Mickey chuckled as he steered the cart toward the checkout.
Ian's birthday is on a Saturday this year. It hadn't ever really mattered to him before, having never really celebrated it.

But as he stirs late Saturday morning, he can see the appeal of a little celebration.

It's dark in the room, the black-out curtains Mickey's so fond of pulled tight along the windows. So there's no real way to know what time it is.

Ian sucks in a sharp breath as he feels a warm hand reach up from below him and skim along his bare torso. Fingers dancing along his pecs, trailing along one nipple, then the other. He feels the solid weight of Mickey's body settled between his spread legs. Mickey's other hand comes up slowing, sliding along his thigh before settling on his hip.

Next he feels feather-light kisses along his left calf, a hot tongue swirling around his knee cap. The barest press of lips into the dip of his hip.

His breath catches in his throat as he feels a hot puff of breath along his dick, which is standing hard against his stomach.

He wonders how long Mickey has been trying to tease him awake.

"Happy Birthday." Mickey whispers against his skin, his tongue darting out, just barely running along the head of his dick before pulling it back and nuzzling his nose into the soft curls of hair in his pelvis.

Ian groans, tilting his head back as Mickey's other hand comes around to grope his ass, fingers getting dangerously close to his hole.

"Mick." Ian whines.

"Don't worry. I gotcha, birthday boy." Mickey murmurs, tipping his head down to suck the head of Ian's dick into his mouth. He swirls his tongue around the tip, then flattens the muscle and swipes it from Ian's balls all the way back to the tip and repeats the whole process. Licking long wet stripes from base to the head, making his cock slippery with saliva. He relaxes his throat and takes it all in, sinking down slowly. He loves the taste of Ian, the heavy heat of his dick stretching his mouth.

Ian's hand shoots up to tangle in Mickey's bed head, pulling the dark locks between his fingers.

Mickey bobs his head, hollowing his cheeks and sucking hard. Ian groans, finally lifting his head, peeling his eyes open to watch his boyfriend work.

He's not disappointed.

Mickey is settled between Ian's spread thighs, up on his knees. One hand cupping Ian's balls, index finger resting on his hole, the other one Mickey has wrapped around his own back, fingers working in and out of his ass as he deep-throat's Ian's cock like a pro.

"Jesus God." Ian moans as Mickey buries his face in Ian's pubes. Ian can feel Mickey's throat constricting around his dick as Mickey swallows around him.
Ian's head is swimming. Drowning in pleasure. His fingers twist tighter in Mickey's hair as his boyfriend sucks him off almost violently. The room is filled with the sounds of slurping and gagging mixed with the wet squelch of Mickey finger-fingering his ass open for Ian.

Ian shudders at the thought, wishing he could see what Mickey's doing back there.

He decides to just go with it, his head falling back to the pillow as he loses himself in the feeling of Mickey's hot, wet mouth. His lips sliding up and down his cock, his tongue undulating on the underside, applying just the right pressure to make him see stars. The feeling of Mickey finger dancing along his entrance, just enough attention to add that extra spark of excitement.

"Mick, Mick." Ian moans. Just when he feels like he's about to blow, Mickey pulls completely off, pulling back and sitting up on his knees.

"Not yet, tough guy. I'm not finished with you." Mickey smiles darkly, wiping his slippery fingers on the sheets as he moves up to straddle Ian's waist.

"Don't move." he orders, "I'm gonna do all the work."

Ian nods dumbly, his hands curling around Mickey's hips without a thought.

Mickey reaches behind himself with one hand, steadying himself with the other on Ian's chest. He grabs Ian's throbbing dick and presses it against his entrance. "I'm gonna rock your world, birthday boy." and with that, he sinks down all the way in one fluid motion, his ass cheeks resting on Ian's thighs as he curls a hand around the headboard.

He doesn't pause, like Ian likes do to. He falls into an immediate, punishing pace. Lifting himself up and dropping back down onto Ian's rigid cock. If Ian thought his head was swimming before, he was totally at sea now. His fingers dug into the fleshy mounds of Mickey's ass, feeling the muscles contract and relax with every bounce of his body. Mickey's tight inner walls flexing around him deliciously.

Mickey's head was thrown back, guttural moans slipping from his lips as his nails scratched down Ian's chest, leaving angry red marks in their wake. He stopped bouncing so hard, content for a moment to just slide back and forth on Ian's dick buried in his body. He tilted forward, hands gripping hard into Ian's pecs as he ground down hard. Ian's dick brushed against his prostate and Mickey moaned loudly. Mickey started popping his ass, up and down in short, hard bursts. Ian was losing his damn mind.

"C'mon, Mick. Take that dick." Ian groaned. "Fuck me so good. Turn me on so much, fucking yourself on my cock like that." Ian's hand slipped up, running along Mickey's chest, tweaking a nipple between two fingers.

Mickey cried out, his hips picking up speed again as Ian neared the end of his rope.

" Fucking hell, Mick, you're gonna make me come." Ian said, reaching for Mickey's dick. He was stopped, however, by Mickey's hands wrapping around his wrists and pinning his arms to the bed above his head.

"Uh uh." Mickey said breathily. "Told you, I'm gonna do this for you." he gripped Ian's wrists tight as he rode him like nothing Ian had ever experienced before.

Mickey starts bouncing impossibly harder, impossibly faster, until he's just a blur of sex writhing on top of Ian. Ian clenched his hands into fists so tight he could feel the skin on his palms tearing. He
gasped as Mickey slammed down onto his cock over and over.

"Mick." Ian groaned. "Mick, I'm close. You gotta come."

Mickey nodded wildly, one of his hands releasing Ian's wrist to curl around his own cock, which had been bobbing obscenely for the duration of his ride.

"Motherfucker." Mickey moaned as he took himself in hand. He jerked his cock in time with his hips, working them both toward orgasm.

"That's it, fuck yeah." Mickey sighed as Ian's back bowed beneath him. The fire in Ian grew so fast, and his orgasm hit him with such intensity that he almost bucked Mickey right off him. He quaked and spasmed through his powerful release, until he was left replete. He was still rolling through the aftershocks when he opened his eyes a moment later. Mickey continued to pump his dick, his hips still rocking on Ian's softening cock. He moaned loud as he stilled on top of Ian, digging the nail on his free hand into Ian's skin even harder as he shot his load all over his chest.

Immediately after, Mickey collapsed onto Ian, his head nuzzled into his neck, heedless to the sweat and come pooled between their chests.

Ian reached up and curled a hand through Mickey's sweaty hair, pulling the strands slightly before petting it down again.

"Happy birthday, Gallagher. Hope you're ready to party." Mickey said softly, kissing his neck tenderly.

"I'm gonna need a minute, after that."

"I've gotta be honest with you, Ian." Mickey said as he slid the truck into park and shut off the ignition.

Ian stopped unbuckling his seat belt, turning in his seat to give Mickey his full attention. "What?"

"I'm not even a little bit nervous about going in there right now." Mickey smiled over at his boyfriend. "I think I'm finally getting past my Gallagher-induced PTSD. And I haven't even started therapy yet!"

Ian laughed, shaking his head. "You're an idiot."

"Don't make fun of my trauma, Gallagher. Shit's real, and it runs deep. I still have nightmares about that one time we were fucking and I looked up and Carl was watching. Fucking creepy little pervert."

Ian laughed again, turning to open his door. "He was just curious."

"Yeah, I remember." Mickey scoffed. "Gay wieners."

"How the hell do you even know about that? You weren't here that day, were you?" Ian chuckled.

"Carl told me." Mickey laughed. "Wish I had been here though. The look on that prissy asshole's
face must've been priceless."

"Who, Jimmy?"

"How many other prissy assholes you have living here at that time? Were you running a bed and breakfast for runaway rich boys, Gallagher?"

Ian laughed again, finally getting out of the car and heading toward the stairs, Mickey close behind.

"Although, I do have to say, I kinda get where Jimmy was coming from. The thought of your dick in that pruney queen's mouth grosses me out too."

Ian huffed, pushing Mickey lightly as the other man continued to laugh.

When Ian opened the door, he was accosted by a rabid group of people. He was sucked into a massive group hug, swarmed by flailing arms and legs.

"Ian!! Happy birthday!!"

"Hey old man, how's the arthritis?"

"God, Ian. So good to see you. Missed you."

"Alright, alright, let him through. Jesus." the last voice was his sister's. Warm and happy, full of affection. Ian finally extracted himself from the huddle, coming face to face with Fiona. "Hey, Ian. Happy birthday." she smiled, pulling him into a hug. He fell against her, finding immense comfort in her embrace. He may not always agree with Fiona, she's done a lot of shit he will never understand. But she did her best to raise him right, and always did what she thought she had to do. Even if sometimes she was fucking wrong....

Nope. Not going there today.


Focus Ian.

He pulled himself back from his negative thought spiral just as Debbie wrapped him in a hug. "I haven't seen you in forever, jackass. What the fuck?"

"I'm sorry, Debs. Life, y'know?" Ian shrugged, flexing his fingers along Debbie's shoulder. "Where's Frannie?"

"With Derek's mom. Wanted to let my hair down tonight." she smiled.

"That a regular thing?" he asked. He felt really out of the loop all of the sudden.

"Trial basis. You know how things are with that family."

Ian nodded. He remembered. Derek's mom trying to keep Frannie. Monica going ballistic with a bat. It's actually one of the only good things Ian can remember his mother doing, even if she went about it in a classic 'Monica' way.

"That's good, Debs. Real grown up way to deal with it." Ian smiles.

Debbie nods. "Liam was gonna come, but one of his rich friends took him outta state to some weird rope climbing resort." Ian nodded, if it were him, he'd have gone to the resort too. "But this is nice
right?" she asks. "Like old times, huh?" she adds, giving her older brother a bashful smile before pulling away and wandering into the kitchen.

Ian throws himself down onto the sofa, his older brother plopping down next to him. Ian's eyes scan the room, but comes up empty.

"Relax, Jesus." Lip laughs. "He's in the kitchen with Debs."

Ian shoots his brother a glare before glancing toward the kitchen, indeed finding Mickey standing in the kitchen, beer already in hand. He's talking animatedly with Debbie, his hands flying as he tells some crazy story. Ian's face curls into a fond smile as he watches the exchange.

"You are so whipped." Carl chuckles, flopping down on Ian's other side, handing him a beer of his own.

"Fuck off." Ian smacks him across the chest with the back of his hand. "Don't act like it would be a weird thing for him to dip out the back."

"Fair point." Carl nods. He settles back on the couch and sips his own beer. "But you know he's just as stuck on you. I doubt he'd make a break for it without dragging you along."

"Besides." Lip says, bringing his own beer to his lips. "When has a Milkovich ever ditched a party when there was still booze and food around?"

"I fucking heard that." Mickey said, walking into the room. He stood in front of the couch, beer in hand. He made a wide sweeping motion with his free hand, eyebrows raised in Lip's direction.

"What?" Lip asked, confused.

"Move the fuck over." Mickey replied, exasperated.

Lip rolled his eyes, but moved. Mickey wedged himself between Lip and Ian. It was a tight squeeze with four grown men on the sofa.

"Okay, I get it." Lip groused, lifting himself off the couch unsteadily. "I know when I'm not wanted." he joked, saluting the men with his half empty beer before heading toward the kitchen.

"How's he doing?" Ian asked Carl, moving to sling his arm around Mickey's shoulder. Mickey shrugged him off with a terse 'gay', eliciting a chuckle from Ian. He split the difference, laying his open palm on Mickey's thigh instead.

"Eh, you know. Obviously he's drinking again." Carl motioned toward the kitchen with his head, bringing his own beer back up to his lips. "But he's not nearly as bad as he was before."

"Thought he was sober?" Mickey asked, glancing over toward the kitchen where Lip was stuffing his face with chips.

"He is and then he isn't. It's hard to keep up." Carl shrugged. "But he's doing okay now, so you know...."

"Yeah, but you know it's only a matter of time before it gets bad again." Ian sighed, his fingers digging into Mickey's thigh as his thoughts started to spiral again.

"Deal with that shit if and when it happens, Gallagher." Mickey said, resting his hand over Ian's and squeezing it. "Can't do nothing about it. Let it go. This is your day."
Ian sighed again, nodding. He glanced at his older brother once more, as he stumbled around the kitchen leaning on the counter for balance.

He knew Mickey was right, but that didn't mean he had to like it.

"What about you?" Ian asked his younger brother, changing the subject. "Aren't you supposed to be at school?"

"Took a long weekend. To be here for this shit."

Ian smiled at his little brother. Not so little anymore. Carl was turning into quite the man.

"So, what's going on down at this fancy murder factory of a school of yours? Let you shoot AKs?"

"It's not a murder factory, it's a military school." Carl laughed. "And no, we don't get to shoot AKs, but we get into a fair amount of shit..."

Carl then launched into a long drawn out story about some hazing ritual he participated in back at school, since he was a senior now. Mickey was enthralled, swapping favorite methods of torture with Carl like they were discussing bowling tips.

"I'm telling you, man. If you have the tools, that's the best way to make an impact."

"Where the hell would I get a car battery in the dorms?" Carl laughed. "Besides, it didn't work so well for the last time you tried it."

"That bitch can't handle her drugs. Ain't my fault she fell the fuck out before I could get to the actual electrocution." Mickey sniffed, shrugging his shoulders. "Never even got to the good part." Mickey said grumpily. "Debbie lost her shit and we ditched that skank before I could even hook her up to the juice."

Carl cracked up at that, punching Mickey's shoulder. Mickey pushed him back and it quickly descended into chaos. The two men jumped off the couch and started wrestling around the living room.

"Cut the shit, kid. There ain't a single Gallagher I can't take in a fight." Mickey laughed breathlessly as he got Carl in a headlock. Carl squirmed and struggled, finally catching Mickey in the gut with an elbow. Mickey released him and doubled over.

"Low blow, asshole." Mickey wheezed, dropping back down next to Ian. "No one in your family fights fair, Gallagher." he looked over at Ian, smiling.

"Oh, and you're the poster boy for fair play, huh Mick? We were or were we not just talking about you roofieing my sister?"

"Half." Mickey and Carl spoke in unison. Their heads shot up and they gave each other matching irritated glances before simultaneously flipping each other off.

"It's like looking in a fun house mirror." Mickey mused. "At a less cool, less sexy, less bad ass version of myself."

"Oh fuck you." Carl laughed.

Ian watched the exchange, amused. If Ian had to guess which members of his family Mickey would
click with the most, Carl and Debbie would not have been his picks. But Mickey has always been full of surprises. He would never say, obviously, but Ian can tell Mickey really likes Carl and Debbie both.

Over the course of the past few months, Ian and Mickey had been over to the house a few times, and Mickey and Carl had developed some kind of friendship. It warmed Ian's heart, watching Mickey finally integrate into his family. Ian had always wanted that, but never really saw it happening.

Things would probably never be that easy with Fiona or Lip. There was too much history between his older siblings and his boyfriend. Too many hurt feelings and differing opinions.

But they could all be in the same room now. And they barely talked shit about each other anymore. So Ian would take what he could get and be happy with it.

"Ian! Come in here." Fiona called from the kitchen. Ian left Mickey and Carl discussing Jason Stathem movies and followed his sister's voice into the kitchen. He found Fiona sitting at the kitchen table with Lip and Debbie.

"Have a seat." She said, patting the empty chair next to her. Ian did so, and his sister immediately wrapped her arm around him, pulling him close to her. She kissed his temple, and he could smell the wine on her breath. "It's nice to have you here." she said. "We never see you anymore."

"Just busy." Ian replied automatically. It's true. Pretty much.

"Really, cuz I heard you had a slip." Lip said, voice somewhere between hurt and angry.

Fiona's face is unreadable. Ian wonders if she told him, even though Ian asked her not to. He can feel anger bubbling up inside his stomach, getting ready to boil out of his mouth.

"Come on, Lip." Debbie sighs. She sounds tired, like she's been discussing this topic long enough to exhaust her. So Debs must know too.

Everyone fucking knows.

Ian doesn't really want to talk about this right now, either. It's his damn birthday, and he'd like to not discuss his fucking bipolar. Just once, he'd like to spend some time with his family without all this shit coming up.

He's also pretty fucking curious who sold him out to his brother.

Just then, Mickey wanders into the kitchen, grabbing another beer from the fridge and dropping down next to him. Carl is close behind and soon the kitchen is full to capacity. Fiona jumps up and grabs a huge raspberry cheesecake from the fridge.

"I remember you don't like cake-cake." she said as she went about plating as passing the cake.

"Don't change the subject." Ian groused, taking a piece nonetheless. "Who's been running their mouth about my business?" he glances from Fiona to Mickey, eyebrows raised.

Fiona just shook her head, eyes downcast, while Mickey openly balked.

"Fuck no." he shakes his head vehemently. "You know I don't do that shit. When do I ever even talk to Lip??"

Ian knows that. He just can't think clearly when he feels cornered like this.
"No, he didn't." Lip concedes, sipping his beer. "I ran into Iggy at the Alibi." he said, like that made any sense.

"And how the fuck does Iggy know?" Ian asked, stuffing a bite of cheesecake in his mouth. He almost moaned out loud. God, that shit was good. Almost good enough to distract him from the conversation.

Almost.

"Chicks talk, Ian. Mandy told Iggy's bitch, she told Iggy. Iggy told me. Stop avoiding the question." Lip was openly aggravated now.

Like he had any right to be pissed.

"And what question is that?" Ian spat, dropping his fork down onto his plate with a clatter. "I don't need to call you every time I have a bad day, Lip. Like you would fucking answer anyway. Neither of you do." he glanced at Fiona, who had only shown up after Mandy left her four messages.

Fiona looked away again, her eyes a little sad. Ian's not trying to negate what she did for him. He's grateful for everything his sister did for him during his last slip, and through his entire life. But she just can't be there for him like she could when he was a kid. It's unrealistic to expect that of her.

"You know, Caroline said I should revive the crisis team, but I think it's a waste of time. I think I'll just keep it to Mick and Mandy. Hell, maybe I'll ask Jack if he'd be interested."

Mickey's head shot up comically fast. It looked like he almost spat beer all over the table. Fiona looked over, fork poised halfway to her mouth. "Jack?" she asked. "Who's that?"

"A friend." Ian answered simply before shrugging. "Look, okay." he sighed. "I had a bad couple days. But I had it handled. Mick and Mandy and Jack took really good care of me" he glanced from his brother to his sister. "And I'm grateful for you stopping by when I was low." he smiled, reaching over the table to place a hand over Fiona's. "But you guys have your own shit going on, and I don't know if I can always count on you to be there when I need you. But that's fine, cuz we've got it covered, right Mick?"

Mickey gave Ian a shell-shocked smile. "Yeah, Ian. We do."

"Ian, come on." his sister said, twisting her fingers in his grip. "I know I said to take me off your list, but that was years ago. I wanna be there for you, if you need me. I was there." she insisted.

"I get that, Fiona, and I appreciate it, I really do." Ian said, before adding on as an afterthought. "How about I put you at the bottom of the list? Like you suggested? Remember?"

Fiona flinched at that, but nodded. "Okay, Ian, sure."

Ian wasn't trying to be cruel. He just didn't feel as comfortable discussing his disorder with his siblings as he did with his friends. Fiona was there for him, but it always felt like she considered it a chore. Like something she had to endure, but didn't really want any part of. Ian supposes he understood that. After a lifetime of dealing with Monica, Ian's shit probably did feel like a chore.

She looked like she wanted to say more, but held her tongue. She picked up her wine and downed the rest of the glass.

After that the conversation thankfully turned to less serious things. No one said another word about Lip's drinking or Ian's bipolar or his issues with his older siblings. The talked about sports and
Frannie’s school. Mickey showed them some pictures of Yevgeny and his dog. It was nice.

This is what Ian misses about being young. Living all together under one roof with his family, just shooting the shit and teasing each other. Without the chaos and the drama that inevitably tore them apart.

"Hey, where the fuck is Frank?" Ian asked, just realizing his wayward father was nowhere to be found.

"Haven't seen him in months." Carl says, snagging a piece of cheesecake off Mickey's plate, earning himself a harsh slap on the wrist, cheesecake falling back to the table in a crumbly mess. "Ow, fuck!" he yelled, cradling his hand to his chest. Debbie couldn't contain her laughter, holding up her hand for a high five, which Mickey readily reciprocated.

"That shit would get you shanked inside, asshole." Mickey shot at Carl, but he was smiling.

Ian sat back in his chair, sipping his beer and looking around the room. Sure, his family pushed his buttons. Lip was a drunk, and Fiona these days was simultaneously overbearing and oddly absent. But he loved them, and he was secure in the fact that they loved him back.

Debbie and Carl are both doing better than he'd ever dared to hope. Frannie was smart and adorable. Carl was kicking ass in his last year of school, minor torture aside.

And Frank was apparently missing. That little bit of information was just the icing on the birthday cake. Frank's absence left the house feeling lighter in ways Ian could never explain. He felt more at ease and happy in the knowledge Frank wouldn't be stopping by to shit all over their good time.

He was happy and in love with the one man he's wanted since he was just a kid. It wasn't perfect, but Ian never wanted perfect. He just wanted Mickey.

Looking over at the man himself, seeing his eyes sparkle with that special adoration he reserved just for Ian. It was enough to take his breath away.

Ian may not be big on birthdays, but he can admit, even if only to himself, that this past year is certainly worth celebrating.

A few hours and a few more beer later, Ian said goodbye to his family, with promises to come around more and keep them in the loop.

Mickey wasn't sure if Ian was going to keep either of those promises, but that was beside the point. Ian had had a good time at the Gallagher house, and that was what mattered to Mickey. He had been worried when Lip and Fiona started laying into him about his slip, but Ian held his own and stood his ground. Mickey almost shit himself when Ian mentioned putting Jack on his crisis team list.

Although, Mickey could see it now that it's been put right in his face. Ian and Jack were a lot alike. Both needed help sometimes, and consequently they were both always willing to help someone in need. It would make perfect sense for them to lean on each other, lift each other up. Mickey never expected them to become friends. After Jack took off from Victory House, Mickey was legitimately scared Ian was going to be weird about Jack forever.
He wasn't sure they'd ever be on good terms ever again.

But now that it's happening, he has to admit, he should have seen it coming. The shit Jack did for Ian during his episode seemed to really change their relationship. They were actual, real friends now. Mickey wonders what kind of Freudian shit is going on in his fucked up head, falling in so deep with two idiots that were so similar, yet completely different.

He chuckled at that ridiculous thought.

"What?" Ian asked, hand poised on the radio button.

"Just thinking about Jack being on your crisis list or whatever. He'll probably wanna make t-shirts or something."

Ian laughed, twisting the radio knob. "What, like 'Ian's angels'?"

"More like 'Team Whacko'."

Ian smacked Mickey on the arm. "Asshole."

They pulled up in front of their building and made their way upstairs.

"This is gonna be low-key, right?" Ian asked. "I'm not really used to people making a big deal over me like this."

"Totally low-key." Mickey agreed, unlocking the door and pushing his way inside.

The apartment was dark, which was odd to Ian, since everyone was supposed to be there already.

Mickey pushed his way inside and hit the lights.

What happened next almost sent Ian to the floor.

The room erupted into utter chaos.

The lights flipped on and confetti went flying in all directions. Ian flinched away when a raucous chorus of "HAPPY BIRTHDAY!!" shook the room.

Ian's eyes widened as he scanned the room. There were balloons everywhere. Streamers hanging from the ceiling. There was even a banner that said "Happy Birthday, Bitch!" hanging along the back wall.

Mandy and Macy were wearing ridiculous party hats, blowing freaking streamers. Jack had a lei around his neck and devil horns on his head for some odd reason. Ian couldn't help but chuckle as he took in the state of the apartment. It looked like Party City threw up all over the place. But as he took a closer look, he broke down into hysterical laughter. He looked over at Mickey, pointing at the balloons. "Those balloons, have penises on them."

Mickey shrugged, pointing at Jack. "Blame that perv. He was a one-man decorating committee."

Jack giggled, pulling Ian and Mickey into a three way hug, placing a bedazzled crown on Ian's head, and a top hat on Mickey's, which he promptly tossed on the floor.

"There are also ones that say 'Happy Fucking Birthday' and 'Let's Party Motherfucker.' Jack pointed over his shoulder at some balloon floating by the window. "They had ones that said 'that ass, though.', but I figured we'd save those ones for Mick's birthday." he laughed, reaching out to smack Mickey's ass, which earned him a hard punch in the arm. "Ow, bitch. What? We all know how you
Ian laughed. He pulled Mickey to him with his free hand, planting a wet kiss on his lips. "You didn't have to do all this." he whispered, but his smile gave him away. He was over the fucking moon.

"Sure I did. You said no one ever threw you a real party before. I know it's just a few of us, but I just couldn't invite your fucking family, man."

"No, Mick. This is fucking perfect." Ian smiled, kissing him once more. "Thank you."

Mickey nodded, pulling away. "C'mon. Jack's got food around her somewhere. One piece of cheesecake is not enough to sustain my ass."

Ian laughed again, smacking said ass as he walked toward the kitchen.

The kitchen was a god damn food bonanza. There were chips and dip, cut up vegetables, (which Ian knew no one but him would touch) little sandwiches and a cheese platter. Someone had even put out some hummus and pita chips. Then there was a huge bowl of candy and a collection of sweet treats. Cheesecake bites and cupcakes. Flippin fudge and other sugary confections.

"It's going to take months to eat all this shit, Mick." Ian said, eyes wide.

"Talk to Jack. That motherfucker has a bigger sweet tooth than me. And since I was bankrolling this little shindig, he went a little overboard."

"A little?" Ian chuckled. He grabbed a strawberry tart and took a bite, moaning a little at the tangy burst of flavor on his tongue.

"Hey!" Jack said, sliding up behind Ian and snagging a tart of his own. "Only the best for the birthday boy. My mom made those tarts."

"Your mom?" Ian asked, surprised.

"Yeah. She makes 'em every year for my birthday. When I told her what I was planning, she whipped up a batch. Delicious, right?"

Ian nodded, licking his fingers clean. "Yeah, they are. Thanks Jack. This is something else." Ian smiled, waving his arm around the apartment.

"You're so very welcome. I had fun planning all this shit. Been a while since I've been to a party that didn't involve group sex or smoking meth." Jack's words were teasing, but his eyes were dead serious.

"Well, it's awesome." Ian smiled, trying to convey his sincerity. "I'm glad you're here."

"Me too." Jack smiled. They shared a glance that did not go unnoticed by Mickey. All soft eyes and minute nodding.

"Hey, what the fuck? How is there not a drink in my hand yet? You're a shitty host, Jack." Mickey teased, walking around the pair to get to the booze that was sitting out on the counter. "I'm making a Jack and coke, who wants one?"

Both men raised their hand, and Mickey went about mixing the drinks. Ian left him to it, wandering into the living room.
Mandy and Macy were there, fucking around with the Ipod dock.

"You guys really outdid yourself." Ian says as he throws himself down on the couch. Once Mandy has picked the music (311, if Ian's hearing it right. Mandy's got the most eclectic taste in music) she drops down next to him and cuddles up to his side.

"You know, all the years we've known each other, I don't think we've ever had a party for your birthday." Mandy says. She sighs softly as Ian wraps an arm around her shoulder. He girlfriend drops down next to her, laying a gentle hand on her drawn up knee.

"I never really did much with anyone." Ian concedes, his hand running up and down her shoulder. "Was never much of a big deal."

"That's bullshit." Macy says, causing both Ian and Mandy to look over at her, confused.

"I'm just saying." she shrugs. "The day you were brought into the world should always be a big deal. It's something to celebrate. Something to be grateful for."

Ian nods, unsure of how to respond. Growing up, he was never really grateful to be alive. It had always been a struggle. He was lucky to have his siblings, but they were all just kids. Just trying to glom together some kind of existence. Being gay only complicated things further. One more thing to make him different. One more thing for people to point out, ridicule him for. Then the god damn bipolar disorder swooped in and took that last little piece of hope for a happy life.

So no, he'd never really thought to be grateful for his life. And he never considered it something to celebrate.

But things are different now. Sure, he may not be on the best of terms with Fiona and Lip, but he doesn't ever really expect to get back to that easy camaraderie they had growing up. They're in his life, at least. They have his back, for the most part, and he has theirs. That's something.

And he's got his friends.

He was never one for friends growing up either. Mandy had been his only real friend when he was a kid. He considered her his best friend, if you don't count Mickey. But that was it, just the two of them and Ian.

But now, here in this apartment, he is surrounded by people he can call real friends. Macy is smart and kind, and so damn funny, always saying something that has Ian cracking up.

And Jack, Jesus. Ian never would have guessed when he met the kid that this is where they'd be right now. He snaked his way under Ian's skin like a stealthy gay ninja, tearing down all Ian's misgivings and distrust and proving to him once and for all that you can not judge a book by it's cover. He never thought he could stand to be in the same room with another guy that had fucked Mickey. But being friends with Jack was easy, and Ian hardly ever thought about his past sexual history with his boyfriend.

Will wonders never cease?

Just then Mickey and Jack came back into the room, drinks in hand. Mickey handed Ian his glass and slid down onto the couch next to him. Jack took up a seat in the arm chair, crossing his legs up on the cushion indian-style.

"You child, who sits like that?" Mickey laughed, earning himself a pointed glare and a middle finger from his friend.
"You wish you were flexible enough to sit like this, asshat." Jack spat.

Mickey shrugged, turning to Ian. "So, we didn't have a real plan for this party shit, besides booze and food. I thought we could just watch a movie then maybe you assholes could dance or whatever later. I know you dig that shit." Mickey shrugged again, clearly a littler nervous.

He had no idea what he was doing. Parties were not his thing. At all.

"That sounds great, Mick." Ian smiled. "Let's get liquored up, and then we'll see how the night goes."

Mickey smiled, relieved. He patted Ian's face with an open palm before turning to grab the remote. "Birthday boy picks the movie." he said, handing it over.

Ian took the remote, clicking through Netflix until he landed on a movie he could never pass up. "Seriously, Ian? Reservoir Dogs? Again?" Mandy sighed.

"Okay, A) It's a god damn classic. and B) It's my birthday, bitch." Ian punctuated his words by sticking out his tongue like a five year old.

"I love this flick. Bring it on." Jack said, taking a long pull off his drink.

Mickey eyed his friend, but said nothing. Mickey had mixed the drinks, and they were fucking strong. If he kept going like that, he wouldn't make it to the dancing portion of the evening. Mickey dismissed the thought. He promised Jack he'd let him live.

"Anything with murder and robbery in it is good by me." Mickey said, curling up closer to Ian. Ian took his arm back from around Mandy's shoulder so he could sidle up to Mickey properly.

Ian smiled to himself as he started the movie. Looking around the room, at all these people who had come together today to celebrate him. Celebrate the fact that he was born. Made him feel wanted. Made him feel like he was part of something real. Made him feel good.

He could get used to the feeling.

C'mon, Mick. It's my birthday." Ian whined. He hadn't had too much to drink, he most recent slip still in his mind, but he was tipsy at least, and when tipsy, he turned a little pouty when he didn't get his way.

Mickey thought it was adorable.

"You gonna pull the birthday card all night?" Mickey laughed, letting Ian pull him to his feet in the middle of the living room.

"Yep." Ian smiled, pulling Mickey flush against his chest as he started to sway to the music.

Mandy and Macy were already dancing, arms wrapped around each other, flirty smiles on their faces as they stared into each others eyes. Totally lost in each other.
Jack was dancing alone. Rocking his hips to the beat, arms up above his head. He looked over when Ian pulled Mickey into the center of the room. "I want the next dance." he said, pointing at a clearly uncomfortable Mickey. "And I also want a spot on your dance card, birthday boy." he shot Ian a wink before turning his back to them as he spun around to the music.

Ian pulled Mickey against his body, one arm around his waist while the other was firm on his hip. He shoved one of his thighs between Mickey's legs and started to grind against him.

"I've always loved dancing with you." Ian whispered, his mouth right next to Mickey's ear. His hot breath fanning over Mickey's neck, causing a shiver to thrill down his spine. "Don't know why you always fight me on this. You can fucking move." Ian punctuated his words with a sharp roll of his hips.

Mickey's body started moving on it's own accord, letting Ian guide his movements easily. They dance like that for a while. Mickey loses all concept of time when he's lost in Ian like this. His hands on his ass, his face buried in his neck, his body moving against him like that. It's so good, feels so damn right.

And just like that, Mickey adds dancing to the list of shit he'd never do with anyone but Ian.

But just as he's having that thought, the song changes to something way more upbeat and Jack rolls up, pulling them apart with a playful shove to Ian's chest.

"My turn, bitches." he says giddily as he pulls on Mickey's hands. Mickey goes with minimal fight, surprising even himself. Jack gives him a knowing smile, to which Mickey scoffs.

Mickey watches Ian wander over to the girls, grinding on one while the other clings to his back, all three of them laughing like maniacs. Ian's movements are almost balletic, switching between girls easily, moving gracefully around the space while managing to still look dirty as hell. His hands glide down Mandy's thigh as he dips her low. He smiles wide as he sets her back on her feet before grabbing up Macy and spinning her elegantly.

Ian was like poetry in damn motion. Mickey was entranced, nothing and no one else existed as he focused on Ian's movements.

Mickey was drawn out of his trance by his best friend tapping his forehead with his index finger. He batted Jack hand away, scowling. "Watch it."

Jack just giggled, the asshole, pulling Mickey closer with a hand gripping dangerously close to his ass.

Jack grabs one of Mickey's hands, drawing the other one up to rest on his hip, and starts walking him around in some kind of weird circle.

"C'mon, Mick. One-two-three, one-two-three." Jack smiles, gliding across the available space, pulling Mickey along clumsily.

"What the fuck kid of dancing is this?" Mickey asks, watching Jack's feet move back and forth, back and forth.

"It's a waltz, Mick. Try and keep up." Jack said, flinching when Mickey's booted sole landed on his socked foot. "And watch the toes."

"Fuck off." Mickey spat, looking down to watch his feet. "Told you I don't dance."
"You were just dancing with Ginger Dreamboat." Jack laughed, still leading them across the floor.

"Yeah, that's easy. Pretty much like sex with less lube." Mickey said, earning himself another chuckle from his friend. "This Victorian bullshit is an entirely different animal. Where'd you even learn this shit?"

Jack smiled, pulling Mickey closer with the hand on his waist. "It's a prerequisite for any card carrying twink, Mick. How did you ever graduate from Homo Hogwards without knowing this shit?"

Mickey scoffed, pushing his friend away. "You're an idiot."

"Uh huh." Jack nodded eagerly. He seemed to take pity on his friend, letting him throw himself back down on the couch, grabbing up his abandoned drink and tossing it back.

Jack bounded over to where Ian was still wrapped up in the girls, tapping him on the shoulder. "Can I cut in?"

Ian nodded, dropping a kiss on Mandy's head and letting Jack lead him back to the center of the room.

"Do you waltz?" Jack asked him, glancing over at Mickey as he said it.

"Uh, sure. Everyone knows the waltz, right?" Ian shrugged.

"HA!" Jack laughed, turning and pointing at Mickey. "You hear that, bitch? You are a failure as a gay man. I'm going to have to revoke you ass-reaming privileges."

Ian laughed, watching Mickey roll his eyes and flip Jack off.

"Fuck all the way off, Jack." Mickey said, sipping his drink. He watched as Ian and Jack moved together. The whole thing looked much better when they were doing the dancing. Fluid and graceful. Ian had always been an amazing dancer. His skill in the bedroom transitioned seamlessly onto the dance floor. And Jack just had that way about him. He was so full of energy, so easy going. Never stopped to wonder if he looked stupid, just did what felt right.

He and Ian were a lot alike in that respect.

They made quite the picture together.

Mickey takes a moment to really appreciate the strange turn of events that brought him right to this moment.

Jail.

Jack's OD.

Both things that should never be associated with happiness or gratitude. But Mickey is both happy and grateful looking back, for both of those things. Since they brought him to this exact moment, watching his unlikely best friend and his undeniable only love, fucking waltzing together in his living room.

Life has always thrown him curve balls. But he has to say, these last few doozies have fucked him up in the best ways possible.

-------------------------------------------------------
"Seriously, guys." Ian sighed as he eyed the small pile of gifts Mandy had just dropped onto the coffee table. "I told you, no presents."

"Bullshit, kid." Jack said, reclaiming his seat on the overstuffed chair, feet tucked securely under his thighs. "Everyone likes presents on their birthday."

"I'm not used to getting gifts." Ian reiterated for what felt like the hundredth time.

People don't make a big deal over him like this. He doesn't know how to take it.

"Well, that's too damn bad." Jack smiled. "Get used to it. If you hadn't noticed..." he motioned around the ridiculously decorated apartment. "We're celebration-type people."

Ian laughed. That was the understatement of the century.

"We good to go?" Mickey asked, walking back from the bathroom and grabbing up his abandoned beer. He tipped it back, letting the last dregs of his drink flow down his throat. He flops back down on the couch next to Ian, grabbing a fresh beer out of Jack's hand, nodding his head in thanks.

"Yeah." Mandy said, handing Ian a small wrapped box. "Go on. That ones from me and Mace." she said, sitting back and letting Macy pull her against her body.

Ian looked from the box back to his best friend, feeling a blush creep up along his neck.

He's so not used to this.

Attention he's used to. The kind of attention that comes with dancing on a box or saving a toddler from choking. Attention he sought out with his own actions. Attention he needed to validate himself in one way or another.

He's not used to being important for just being Ian. Just who he is, no special skills or favors to offer.

Just Ian, imperfect and broken as he is. But these people love him. He's not sure he's ever felt so accepted or cared for. Not even by his family.

It's nice.

He rips into the paper, tossing it behind him to pick up later. He slides the top off the box and peers inside.

"Holy shit." he smiles, his eyes finding the girls again. "Is this what I think it is?"

"Dunno." Mandy smiles back. "What do you think it is?"

"A swiss army knife?" Ian asks, pulling the knife out of the box, twisting it around in his hands.

"It is, but it's so much more than that." Macy pipes in, clearly excited. "It's actually the Victorinox Swiss Army Rescue Tool." she jumps up from her seat and skips over to Ian. She pulls the small tool from his hand then starts pulling the attachments free and showing him all the knife can do. "It's got the blade, obviously, then the phillips and flathead screwdrivers, right? Crate opener, keyring, bottle opener, all that jazz. But then! Then it's got this seat belt cutter, this removable disc saw for tempered glass, wire strippers. All this cool shit you don't find on regular swiss army knives, specifically for rescue situations. Y'know, for your job," she is so animated that Ian can't help but get excited too.
It is a really nice knife.

"Don't forget the toothpick, Mace." Mandy laughs, amused by her girlfriend's enthusiasm.

"That is the most important part." Ian laughs, pulling Macy into a hug. "Thanks guys, this is awesome." he says just as Mandy comes over and falls into his arms. He held her close, inhaling her scent. Part Herbal Essences and part Newports. Purely Mandy.

God, he loved her.

She pulled away, dropping a kiss on his cheek before slipping out of his arms and dropping back down next to Macy, falling back into her embrace immediately.

"Me next!" Jack smiles, leaning over to grab up a small rectangle shaped boxed wrapped in striped rainbow paper. He tosses it at Ian, ignoring Mickey's scoff in the background.

"You are so fucking gay." Mickey laughs as he eyes the package. Not only is the boxed covered in bright rainbow print, it has a huge yellow ribbon wrapped around it, ending in a flamboyant flowing bow. "What the fuck, Jack?" he chuckles.

"Fuck off, Mick. It's pretty." Jack sniffs, giving his friend a cold glare.

"Pretty fucking gay." Mickey says under his breath.

Ian chuckles, ignoring Jack's slapping hands and Mickey's artful dodging. Those boys are idiots.

He rips into the package, slipping the cover off the box. When he tosses out the glittry tissue paper to get to the actual gift, he's flabbergasted. Utterly speechless.

His eyes go wide and he just stares for a moment, completely at a loss. After what feels like a really long time, he looks up at Jack. He's beaming at Ian, a wide, dirty smile on his face.

"What is it?" Macy asks, sitting forward a bit to get a look inside the box.

Ian wraps his hand around the object. It's fucking heavy.

"I don't know." Ian says, confused. He holds it up for further inspection, twisting it one way and then the other.

What the fuck?

"It's a dick." Mickey says, eyebrows shooting up to his forehead. "A glass dick?" he looks at Jack, who's still smiling like a maniac.

"It's a CRYSTAL dick." Jack says, like it's the most obvious thing in the world. "complete with ball sack, Ian."

"And you were offended why I suggested your wrapping paper was too gay??" Mickey scoffs. "Jesus, Jack. Can you be any more of a homo?"

"Shut the fuck up." Jack growls, standing up and walking over to Ian. He takes the crystal phallus from his hands, holding it reverently. "Ian, you don't understand. This is not just ANY crystal dick. This is a dick carved from a single piece of Labradorite."
"Like the dog?" Mandy asks.

"That's Labrador, Mandy." Jack sighs. "This is Labradorite. It's used in crystal healing. It's a highly protective and stabilizing stone. Supposed to ground you, harmonize all your scattered energy." he taps his head once, then his heart. "It helps you combat negativity in your life, while opening you up to spiritual and emotional growth." he smiles at Ian kindly. "And of course, you can use it for ass play." he tacks on cheekily, blowing the emotionally charged moments to smithereens with a laugh.

Ian looks from the cock in Jack's hand back to his face. He smiles.

Jack may have played it off like a gag gift, but Ian can't help but see the truth behind it. In Jack's mind, this stone could help Ian. Help him fight his inner demons, help him feel rooted in the real world. Help Ian let go of some of the bullshit that still weighs him down.

Ian's not sure how much he believes in the healing power of crystals. But he sure as fuck believes in the healing powers of a good friendship.

"You are not getting anywhere near me with that thing." Mickey interjects before Ian can say anything.

"Since when are you a prude?" Jack giggles, handing the crystal back to Ian.

Ian places the heavy piece back in it's box, slipping the lid back on. "Thank you, Jack. That was really thoughtful." Ian says as Jack walks over and drops in his lap. He wraps his arms around Ian's neck, dipping his head down to lay a tiny kiss on his neck. When his face is right by Ian's ear, he starts speaking, low enough just for Ian to hear.

"I wanted to get you something to help you, y'know, with your biploar. But I don't know a lot. I thought, if nothing else, this could be a funny little reminder, that you're stronger than you think. And even if you don't believe the crystal has powers, YOU have power. In your heart, and in your cock." Jack's hand makes a grab for Ian's junk, and Ian startles, laughing. He pushes Jack off him and he lands on the floor with a thud.

"I deserved that." Jack said, picking himself up and going back to his seat.

"Tell me you didn't just try to grab my man's dick, Jack."

"It was for demonstrative purposes only, Mick. Retract the claws, girl."

Mickey swipes at Jack's head, but it's half-hearted. They both laugh.

"K, it's just you left, Mick." Mandy says, looking around. "You did get Ian a gift, right?"

"Fuck you, of course I did." Mickey says. "I got you a couple things, but I'm only giving you this one with all these other assholes around. Gotta wait for the other one." he gives Ian a look that goes straight to his dick.

Oh.

Okay.

Mickey lifts his ass and pulls a card envelope from his back pocket. He hands it over, and Ian's confused. He's never gotten a card from Mickey. Not once.

He looks from the envelope back to Mickey, who gives him a nod and waves the envelope in his
face. Ian takes it, opens it, pulls the card out.

The card is nothing special. Just a standard 'happy birthday', probably from the dollar store.

But tucked inside is a small piece of paper. Ian unfolds it, read the words.

It's a gift card. For a tattoo place downtown.

"A tattoo?" Ian asks.

He's got one. That stupid eagle on his side. Mistake is what that was, but he can't do anything about it now.

He almost got another one, when Monica died, but the tattoo guy was wasted off his ass, couldn't even keep his eyes open, so Ian had passed.

"Yeah," Mickey says, suddenly feeling nervous. What if this was the wrong move? "I thought we could go together. They don't have to be matching tattoos, or anything gay like that. I just thought it might be cool. To do that together."

Ian's heart speeds up. He likes that idea. He wants to do that with Mickey. So every time he looks at his tattoo, he's reminded of Mickey, of how far they've come. Of how lucky he is to love him, to be loved by him.

"Oh, Mick. I love it. I can't fucking wait." Ian says, so sincerely. He suddenly feels like he's going to cry.

Shit.

Mickey must sense it, because he gets up and crosses the room, sitting down on the arm of Ian's chair. "Didn't know what to getcha. D'you like it?" he grips Ian's chin, still wobbling with his attempts to keep his composure.

"I do." Ian whispers. He tilts his head up, and Mickey takes the hint, dipping his head down to capture Ian's lips in a slow kiss. The barest presses of lips, a gentle swipe of tongue. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." Mickey smiles, pulling back. "We can go whenever you want."

Ian's mind is spinning. He's excited. For some reason, getting a tattoo with Mickey feels like a promise. He's probably reading too much into it, but he can't help the way he feels. He pulls Mickey to him again with a hand on the back of his head. Mickey comes willingly, slipping onto Ian's lap and draping his legs over his knees. They kiss like they are the only two people in the room. Like they are the only two people on the planet.

It's just Ian's hands and Mickey's lips. Soft presses of fingertips and quiet sighs. It goes on until Mandy clears her throat.

"Um, so are we gonna eat this cheesecake, or what?" she asks, earning a glare from her brother.

"Sure, whatever. Eat it all." Mickey mutters, turning his head back and pulling Ian in again. Strong fingers pulling his hair, the push of his tongue against Ian's teeth.

Ian smiles into the kiss.

Best birthday ever.
"So, this is the other thing I gotcha." Mickey says, dropping a small black gift bag on the bed they now share.

Everyone else has gone home. Mandy and Macy getting an Uber, Jack walking the short distance to the L. It's pretty late, the party having gone on longer than Mickey had thought it would.

He knows it was a stupid, naive idea, to think this group of people could do anything small.

It was nice, though. He knows Ian had fun. And everyone had gone easy on the booze tonight, which made Mickey stupidly happy. Jack and Ian had hardly drank at all, content with a few drinks and some good weed. Mickey had stayed relatively sober out of solidarity. He's glad he did. He wants to be completely present for what goes down next.

It was a good night.

But Mickey's glad it's over. Glad it's just the two of them, again.

He's got one more surprise for Ian's birthday.

"Mick, what did you do?" Ian asks, picking up the bag and pulling the top open. The bag was stuffed with white tissue paper. "Did Jack wrap this gift?" he asked, positive Mickey would never spend money on tissue paper of all things.

"We may have gone to the store together." Mickey muttered, standing behind Ian with his arms crossed over his chest. He looked nervous, which piqued Ian's interest. There were only a handful of things in life that got Mickey flustered like this.

Ian had an idea what was in the bag.

He opened it and peered inside.

He was wrong.

Oh so wrong.

"Mick, is this... are these restraints?" Ian gasped, pulling the soft hand-tooled leather cuffs from the bag. They were simple. Black (of course) with buckles on either cuff, making them look like a set of miniature belts, almost. There was a small metal ring on either cuff, with a metal snap-lock connecting the them in the middle, a twisting carabiner in the center so you could twist the cuffs one way and then the other. Ian ran a finger along the inside. It was soft, padded almost. He felt his dick twitch.

Jesus.

"Um, yeah." Mickey muttered, taking the cuffs from Ian and rolling them around between his fingers. "I don't know if you'd be into this kinda shit, but you seem to like it when you hold me down, or whatever."

Mickey was blushing hard now. Why was it so hard to talk about this shit? He and Ian had done some pretty kinky shit together over the course of their relationship, but actually talking about it had
always been difficult for Mickey.

"I do like that." Ian smiled darkly, he grabbed the cuffs from Mickey's hand and pounced on him, pinning him to the bed with his hands wrapped around Mickey's wrists. Mickey smiled up at him, hitching his legs up onto Ian's hips. "I like it a lot." he ground his hips down against Mickey's, pressing his growing erection hard against Mickey's ass. "I love that you trust me that much, that you give yourself to me like that."

"Ian, come on." Mickey said, his face hot with a mixture of embarrassment and arousal. His eyes darted around Ian's face, unable to maintain eye contact.

"What?" Ian asked innocently, rolling his hips. "You wanna deny the fact that being dominated gets you hard? You didn't just buy those cuffs just for me." Ian pointed at the cuffs with one finger, then ran that finger down the side of Mickey's face before dipping it into Mickey's mouth, pushing it in and out. Mickey ran his tongue over the digit, slurping around it before Ian took it back, returning to his vice-like grip on Mickey's wrist. "You bought 'em for you too."

"Fuck off, Gallagher." Mickey groaned, trying to roll out of Ian's grasp. Sure, this shit got him hot, but talking about it out loud was still weird to him. Dirty talk was one thing. He had no issue telling Ian what he wanted in the bedroom. Any embarrassment he may have had over his sex life had dried up and died a long time ago.

But this shit, this was new, unlike even the basket on Valentine's day. He knew he liked to be manhandled. Ian knew that too. But he was crossing into a whole other world with the cuffs. It's something he's been thinking about for years, but never had the nerve to bring it up. There was always that little voice in the back of his head that said 'you may be a faggot, but you don't have to be a deviant faggot that likes to be spanked like a child.' He wriggled more violently, trying to get out from under Ian.

Ian didn't let him up, though, his grip on his wrists tightening. "C'mon, Mick. No more secrets, that's what we said, right?" Ian thrust down gently, coaxing a stuttering sigh out of Mickey.

Mickey nodded, closing his eyes as Ian continued to roll his hips. He'll never understand the power Ian has over him. Just a few words from him, and all Mickey's apprehension just evaporated.

"You bought these cuffs for the same reason you like me to hold you down. Or press you tight against the wall. You love to give up that control. I like it too. Having you begging and writhing under me. Turns me the fuck on."

"Yeah?" Mickey's eyes popped back open, searching Ian's face for any sign of teasing, but all he saw was white hot lust.

"Hell yeah. You're hot as fuck like that, all needy and desperate, letting me hold you down, do whatever I want to you. There's nothing wrong with this shit. Liking what you like don't make you a bitch, remember?" Ian waggled his eyebrows, coaxing a small smile out of Mickey. He sat back, releasing Mickey's wrists. Instead he rested his hands on his hips, rubbing small circles on the skin there. "And this is the best birthday gift I've ever gotten." Ian said, releasing Mickey and sitting up so he could unbutton his shirt. "I wanna share this shit with you. Do things to you, have you do things to me. I bet we share a lot of kinks we've yet to explore together."

That thought went straight to Mickey's dick. He was straining against Ian's thigh now, his cock throbbing, begging for Ian.

Mickey sat up too, his hands reaching for Ian. He slid the shirt from his shoulders and tossed it off
the side of the bed. He then threw his hands up in the air as Ian tugged his t-shirt over his head. Once their bare chest touched, Mickey groaned, pulling Ian back down on top of him as his back hit the mattress.

Ian held himself up with one hand as he undid his pants with the other, shimmying them down his hips and kicking them off, along with his underwear. Once he was nude, he leaned back so Mickey could wriggle out of his own pants, kicking them off and shuffling up the mattress so he could lay his head on the pillow.

Ian hovered over him, his body just far enough so that they weren’t touching at all. Mickey reached for him, but Ian backed up with a chuckle. They stared at each other for a moment, all heaving breaths and heated glances.

"What do you want?" Ian whispered, his eyes alight.

"Fucking kiss me." Mickey growled, surging up and grabbing Ian around the back of the neck, pulling him down to his mouth with a sigh. Ian's mouth was hot against Mickey's, his tongue sliding along his lips and plunging into his mouth over and over. He tasted like beer and cheesecake. Mickey smiled into the kiss. Only Ian could make that taste so intoxicating.

Ian rolled his hips, his hard cock knocking against Mickey's hip, smearing precum along his skin. Mickey shivered, arching his back as Ian tipped his head to run his tongue along his clavicle. He sucked on the muscle of his shoulder, skimming his teeth along the skin.

"Ian." Mickey moaned, arching further, pushing his body as close as he could get, his whole back bowing off the bed.

"Yeah." Ian murmured against his skin. "Yeah, fuck yeah." His mouth found Mickey's again and they made out feverishly, hands grabbing and pulling at each other, desperate to feel every inch of exposed flesh. Ian's skin was hot, tacky with a thin layer of sweat. Mickey pulled back to run his tongue along his chest, lapping at his pecs before taking one of his nipples into his mouth and grinding his teeth down on the nub gently.

Ian's whole body spasmed, his hand flying up off the mattress and latching onto Mickey's thigh.

"Oh shit, yeah Mick. Fuck." Ian groaned, pulling his thigh up to rest against his hip as he rutted against his ass. "You ready?" he asked, reaching for the cuffs.

"Fuck yeah. Do your worst, firecrotch." Mickey huffed, his heart pounding with excitement. He presented his wrists to Ian, maintaining eye contact the whole time. He wanted Ian to know he had no reservations. Ian smiled, wrapping a cuff around one wrist and buckling it. He pulled Mickey's hands up toward the headboard. He'd never been happier to have his metal spindled headboard in his entire life. It was like it was meant to be. He slipped the free cuff through the space between the spindles before securing Mickey's other wrist. He pulled back and took a good look.

Holy fuck.

Mickey tied to their bed naked and ready has to be the sexiest thing he's ever seen in his entire life.

Mickey pulled on the cuffs, testing their strength. He wasn't going anywhere.

"Fuck, Mick. You look so fucking hot." Ian groaned, lowering himself down on top of his body. He slotted his body between Mickey's spread thighs, a hand on either side of his head. He peered down
at his boyfriend, his eyes traveling over his heaving chest, his blown out eyes, the way he licked his dry lips, biting them as he shivered under Ian's weight.

"Tell me what you want. Anything."

Mickey groaned, arching his back again, desperate to feel more of Ian. "I wanna suck your cock." he sighed, his legs kicking up to curl around Ian's calves. "Then I want you to fucking destroy me. Fuck like you mean it, Ian. I'm gonna take it all. Gonna be so good for you."

Those words sent a fire shooting through Ian's whole body. Holy fucking fuck.

"Oh shit, Mick. Yeah, yeah. You are good. So fucking good." Ian sat up, crawling over Mickey's prone form. He laid his hands along the top of the headboard, watching Mickey watching him from below, wrists curled into fists in the cuffs, mouth hanging open, waiting.

Ian felt dizzy with want. He grabbed his cock, pumping it a few times before he guided it to Mickey's waiting mouth.

"Holy shit." Ian moaned as Mickey closed his lips around the head, undulating his tongue. Ian pulled back a little, watching Mickey carefully. His boyfriend gave him a small nod, opening his mouth wider around a cheeky smile.

Ian took his cue and shoved his dick in without hesitation. He threw his head back as he slowly thrust his hips into the wet warmth of Mickey's mouth. God, it was so good.

Mickey did the best he could without the use of his hands. Wrapping his lips around his teeth, he relaxed his throat and let Ian fuck his face. Ian was a moaning, twitching mess. He uncurled one of his hands from the headboard and tangled his fingers in Mickey's hair, pulling the dark locks as he pumped his hips into his waiting mouth, cradling his skull.

Mickey's eyes watered and he fought a gag. Ian was being brutal, but it was hot as fuck. Mickey was painfully hard, leaking all over his stomach. The fact that he was unable to touch himself got him impossibly hotter. He could only ever do this with Ian. He felt so vulnerable, so open and powerless. Giving all the control to his lover. God, it was so sexy.

"Mick, fuck. Your mouth. I love it. Suck my cock so good. You like it? Like it when I fuck your face?"

Mickey couldn't reply, but he hollowed his cheeks and sucked hard, pulling a ragged moan from deep within Ian's chest. Mickey could feel everything. Ian's balls hitting his chin, his fingernails digging into the back of his head, the sweat on his stomach smearing all over his nose. Ian pushed his dick further into his mouth, and he gladly accepted it all.

"Shit, shit." Ian said, thrusting in deep and holding. Mickey couldn't breathe, but he didn't fucking care. All he wanted to do was please Ian.

Ian pulled back, his dick falling from Mickey's mouth. Mickey tipped his head back, gasping for air. He felt dizzy and lightheaded. And so turned on.

"Mickey, fuck. That was amazing." Ian sighed. He backed off, sliding down Mickey's body and capturing his lips in a passionate kiss. Mickey kissed him back hungrily, pulling at his restraints. "Gonna take care of you now. Gonna fuck you so good." Ian grabbed Mickey by the hips and rolled him over, the center link on the cuffs twirling as Mickey was dropped on his stomach facing the mattress.
Mickey lurched forward, his face hitting the bed while his arms were pulled taught over his head. He groaned as his hard on finally got some relief against the sheets.

"Uh uh." Ian chuckled, pulling Mickey up to his knees by his hips. "None of that, cheater."

"C'mon man. I'm dying here." Mickey groaned, wrapping his fingers around the spindles of the headboard. He turned his head to the side, catching a glimpse of Ian kneeling behind him. He had the bottle of lube in one hand and his hard dick in the other. "Need you." he whined, wiggling his ass in desperation.

"Oh, I'm gonna give you everything you need, Mick." Ian said. He dropped the lube on the mattress and grabbed two handfuls of Mickey's ass, kneading the meat of the muscles in his hands, spreading him wide open. Mickey arched his back in anticipation.

Ian didn't disappoint.

He dragged his tongue along Mickey's ass, bottom to top, delighted by the desperate cry Mickey gave in response.

"Mmmm." Ian groaned, his mouth working Mickey's hole relentlessly. He ran his tongue in slow circles before going back to licking long stripes. He pulled back and spit, watching his saliva dribble down Mickey's crack before burying his face in his ass. He pointed his tongue, dipping it in deeply, relishing in the taste of Mickey. He slurped and licked until Mickey was a shivering, begging mess.

Ian pulled back a bit, bringing his hand up and landing a harsh smack to Mickey's ass. Mickey jerked forward, yelping in surprise. Ian smiled deviously, rubbing the pinkening skin in his palm before slapping it again, harder this time. Mickey moaned loud, pushing his ass higher in the air, desperate for whatever Ian wanted to give him.

Ian rubbed the tender flesh once more before dipping his face back down between Mickey's ass cheeks, his tongue slipping and lapping at his clenching hole as his boyfriend writhed in pleasure.

"I'm, Ian. Please. God, Ian. Please. Jesus." Mickey was babbling incoherently, pulling at the cuffs hard, his body quivering in pleasure.

"Yeah, Mick. Fuck. You love it when I eat you out like this. Always gets you so hard. You want more?" Ian breathed, darting his tongue deeper into his boyfriend before biting his ass cheek hard.


Ian smiled, dragging his tongue along Mickey one final time before kneeling back on his haunches. He grabbed up the discarded bottle of lube and coated his fingers. He spread Mickey open with his clean hand before reaching out, circling his fingers around Mickey's wet rim before sliding one in with a smooth push.

"Ahhhh." Mickey sighed, his head hanging low between his shoulders. He let Ian work him any way he wanted to. He let himself drown in the delicious burn of being stretched by that one long finger. Moving his ass back on Ian's hand, he silently begged for more as labored breaths slipped past his chapped lips.

Ian twisted his wrist, adding a second finger. His other hand gliding down the curve of Mickey's ass before slowly sliding up his side, along his rib cage before settling on his shoulder.

Mickey's back arched and he cried out as Ian found his prostate with his probing fingers. "Holy hell." he groaned. "Yeah, fuck. Okay. M'good. C'mon." his hips jerked as he fucked himself back on
Ian's hand.
Ian nods, even though Mickey can't see him. His fingers slip from Mickey's body and immediately grip his own erection.

The time to play and tease is over.

He lines himself up against Mickey's opening and slides in slowly. He doesn't stop pushing until his hips are flush against Mickey's ass. It's easy, after all the foreplay. He stays still for a moment, letting Mickey adjust to being filled up again. He waits for Mickey's tell. He know his body so well, after all this time.

His shoulders slump, just a bit. His back arches and his hips twitch. He's ready.

Ian pulls back and thrusts forward, forcing a harsh exhale from Mickey. A breathy "fuck." slips past his lover's lips as he sets a steady pace.

Ian turns Mickey hard and fast. His hands on his hips as he pistons into his tight body. His eyes travel up Mickey's form. His glorious ass, taking everything Ian's giving him. The way his flesh bounces with every push. The curve of his spine. The way his hands curl around the spindles of the headboard, the black of the cuffs contrasting with his pale skin, tinged pink with exertion. He may have bruises there after.

Ian moans at the thought, fingertips digging into the meat of Mickey's hips, leaving bruises of their own.

The room is filled with the sounds of sex. Mickey's grunting and Ian's heavy breathing. The slapping of their skin as Ian meets Mickey again and again.

Ian leans forward, his body covering Mickey's. He mouths at his shoulders as he fucks him deep. He inhales a long, heavy breath, Mickey's musky scent is heady and intoxicating. He digs his teeth into Mickey's shoulder, biting hard.

"Motherfucker!" Mickey moans, fucking himself back onto Ian's cock. He loses his grip on the headboard, the cuffs keeping him from going far. His face and shoulders hit the mattress, his ass still up in the air. He's powerless, and fully on display for Ian.

Ian leans back, slipping from Mickey's body. Mickey gives a disappointed groan, muffled by the bed sheets as he turns his head to the side, trying to get a glimpse of what's going on behind him.

"Ian, what the --" But he's cut off by Ian grabbing him by the hips and flipping him onto his back again. The cuffs rattle against the headboard as the center link twirls once more.

"Wanna taste ya one more time before we finish. You always taste so fucking good." Ian lifts Mickey's legs and drops them over his shoulders as he settles on his stomach.

Mickey whines openly, his head tilting back as his hands twitch again in their restraints. He'd give anything to touch Ian right now. Run his fingers through his hair, scratch his nails down his back, push his face deeper, harder against him. But he can't. And for whatever twisted reason, that turns Mickey on all the more.

Ian slides his tongue along Mickey's wet, messy hole and Mickey jerks like he's been electrified. His dick jumps, twitching against his stomach as precum dribbles out of the tip steadily. Ian laps and sucks at Mickey, biting his inner thigh. A low growl rumbles in his chest as he continues to reduce Mickey to a whimpering mess. He worked him with this lips and tongue, unable to get enough of that taste.
"Ian, fuck. Gotta stop. I'm gonna come." Mickey hisses, his back arching severely as Ian points his tongue and delves impossibly deeper inside him.

Ian laughs against Mickey's skin before sitting up on his haunches. Mickey's legs are still on his shoulders, so when Ian straightens up, they are straight and pointed toward the ceiling. Ian wraps one hand around Mickey's thigh, using the other to guide him back inside his lover. Mickey groans as Ian bottoms out and immediately resumes his punishing pace.

Ian looks down at Mickey. The sight alone is almost enough to send Ian over the edge. Mickey on his back, arm raised and restrained over his head. His skin flushed pink and shiny with sweat. Hickies and bite marks dotted along the pale expanse of his chest and neck. His hard, leaking cock twitching on his stomach. He has his eyes closed, his bottom lip trapped between his teeth. His face is contorted in what could look like a pained expression. But Ian knows him, and he knows Mickey is blissed the fuck out. So close to coming he can barely breathe.

Ian's hips stutter at the sight of it all. He's close too.

Mickey pries his eyes open slowly, looking up at his lover. His eyes are glazed over, can't focus quite right. He's so lost in the moment, consumed by need.

"God, Ian. Please. I need to come." Mickey cries brokenly. His cock twitches on his stomach again.

"Okay." Ian pants. "Okay." He drops one of Mickey's legs and it falls to the mattress like dead weight. Ian wraps a sure hand around Mickey's dick, but doesn't even have to move it. Mickey immediately spills all over his hand, at the simple contact. He moans loudly, pulling at his cuffs as his body quakes through a powerful release.

"Holy shit. Fucking hot." Ian moans. He drops Mickeys other leg and settles over him, thrusting into him hard a few more times before his orgasm washes over him like a fucking tsunami. He comes hard and long and he feels lightheaded after. His body gives out and he collapses on top of Mickey, who grunts under the weight.

They lay like that for a moment, breathing heavy as their bodies cool down and they come back to themselves.

"Ey, don't you dare pass out on me." Mickey chuckles, knocking his head against Ian's, which was buried in his shoulder. "Let me outta these things first, at least." he continued, rattling the cuffs once more.

Ian chuckled lightly into Mickey's neck before lifting himself up with great effort. He rolled off him and sat next to him on the edge of the bed. He unbuckled one cuff, rubbing Mickey's raw wrist in his hands before placing a tender kiss to his palm before releasing the other hand.

Mickey sighed, feeling warm and sated in that special way only Ian could inspire. Ian stood quickly, stepping out of the room for a moment.

Mickey grabs a cigarette and lights it. He laid there waiting for Ian to return, unable to stop himself from smiling. Sure, it was Ian's birthday, but Mickey couldn't help but feel like he was the one that got the gift tonight.

Ian returned to the room with a warm washcloth, two beers and a bottle of lotion tucked under an arm.

He placed the beers on the table before gently cleaning up the evidence of their interlude off Mickey's skin. He swiped the cloth tenderly down along his stomach and thighs. Mickey huffed and
squirmed when Ian lifted one leg and started wiping down between his cheeks.

"Come the fuck on, Gallagher. I'm not an infant." Mickey groused, but didn't fight. Ian smiled but was smart enough to keep his mouth shut.

Once Mickey was free of all stickiness, Ian handed him a beer and picked up the lotion.

Mickey took a long gulp, eyebrows raised. "What the fuck is that shit for?" he asked, glancing at the lotion.

"Your wrists, dummy. C'mon." Ian squeezed some lotion into his hand and started working it into the tender red flesh of Mickey's wrists. The cuffs were padded, but Mickey had been thrashing and pulling so hard, they were a bit raw.

Besides, Ian liked doing this for Mickey. Taking care of him. Showing him how much he cared. How much he appreciated Mickey giving himself over like that, giving Ian that control, that trust.

But Ian wasn't sure how to say all that. And he's positive Mickey would be unable to accept that truth anyway.

So he did what he could.

He rubbed the lotion into one wrist, then the other. Tender, careful passes of his slick fingers over Mickey's pink skin.

Mickey said nothing. No smart remarks, no teasing. He just switched his beer to the other hand when Ian needed to massage the other wrist. He had this calm, happy look in his eyes. Sated. Content.

Ian finished up, settling back onto the bed next to his boyfriend. He plucked the cigarette from Mickey's fingers and took a drag, feeling loose and happy. He looked over at Mickey.

Mickey took a long gulp of his beer, a little bit of the amber liquid dribbling out of his mouth and down his chin.

"Ah, fuck." he laughed. Ian smiled at him. His hand drifted up, wiping away the trickle of booze before Mickey could even react. How can such a bad ass dude be so fucking cute all the time? Seriously.

"Thank you." Ian said, hand still cupping the side of Mickey's face.

"Didn't we already decide that saying 'thanks' for sex was creepy?" Mickey chuckled. He placed his bottle down on the bedside table and curled up on his side, throwing an arm around Ian's waist. Ian threw an arm around his shoulder, pulling him closer.

"For the birthday shit, you ass." Ian laughed. Mickey rested his head on Ian's chest, so Ian started running his fingers through his hair. Mickey sighed, relaxing further under the touch.

"You don't have to thank me for that, Ian. Wanted to do it. You deserve it. You deserve so much." Mickey tilted his head up so they were eye to eye, his hand sliding up to cup his face. They just stared at each other for a moment before Mickey spoke again. "You deserve the fucking world, Ian. Don't know if I can give it to you, but..." Mickey was cut off by Ian surging forward and kissing him hard.

Mickey gave a small, startled laugh, but melted into the kiss easily. Ian smiled against his lips.
"You give me everything I need, Mick. Everything I could ever want, I have with you. You have to know that. I fucking love you." he kissed him again, his tongue slipping into his mouth as Mickey's hand slid into his hair, pulling gently.

"I love you too, Ian. Happy birthday."

Chapter End Notes

just a note: jack's views on addiction & AA are just that, his views. i know a lot of people who got clean with the help of AA & NA. but i also know a lot of people that did it on their own. i know people how abstain from all substances to stay sober, and i know some who still drink and smoke weed, and can maintain a healthy, happy life. it's not a 'one size fits all thing.' i thought that was important to share. i want this story to be as realistic as it can be, so i'm pulling from shit i've seen in actual life. it's not meant to be anything other than that. one person's opinion based on his life experience.

Jack's birthday gift for Ian:

https://www.etsy.com/listing/595243016/labradorite-phallus-pleasure-wand-dildo?
ga_order=most_relevant&ga_search_type=all&ga_view_type=gallery&ga_search_query=labradorite'
1-1

Mick's gift:

ga_order=most_relevant&ga_search_type=all&ga_view_type=gallery&ga_search_query=leather%201-6
Ian is leaning against the brick facade of an older building downtown. The late June air is heavy with humidity, his light t-shirt sticking to his skin. He adjust the aviator shades he's wearing, pushing them further up the bridge of his nose. His other hand comes up and places his lit cigarette between his lips.

He inhales, leaning his head back against the building as he waits. He's early, as usual. He just got off work on a glorious Friday afternoon. He's got the weekend off for the first time in a long time, and he finally has the free time to use the gift card Mickey got him for his birthday.

He wanted to make sure he had a few days free to heal up a bit before he had to go into work.

His head tilts to the side as he hears someone approaching.

"Hey." he smiles, kicking off the wall flicking his cigarette to the side. He takes two steps forward, arms open, and Jack falls into the embrace easily.

"Hey man. You're earlier than me. Mick's not here yet?" Jack asks, pulling back. Ian returns to his spot holding up the wall, one foot pressed against the brick. Jack turned and mirrored his position, crossing his hands behind his back.

"When is Mickey ever on time for anything?" Ian chuckled.

Jack laughed with him, nodding. "You guys don't mind that I crash your party today?" he asked after a moment.

"You aren't crashing anything, Jack. It's not like we're doing some super emotional couply shit. We're getting ink." Ian said, turning his head to face him a bit better. "You wanted ink too, so we're going all together."

"But wasn't this your birthday present? You guys don't wanna be alone?" Jack asked.

"Nah." Ian shook his head. "We already did all the private birthday celebrations." he waggled his eyebrows, pulling a childish giggle out of the other man.

"Oh, I'm sure. You guys making good use of the labradorite dildo?"
"No." Ian smiled. "Mickey's still scared to death of that thing. Says there's not enough give."

Jack chuckled. "I suppose it could be considered more of a conversation piece."

"What kind of conversations do you think we're having?" Ian laughed.

"Kinky ones?" Jack smiled, not missing a beat. "I'm telling you, get him good and liquored up, and it will be all systems go with that beautiful piece of orgasm art."

Ian was laughing so hard, he didn't see Mickey come up.

"There's not enough booze in the world to get me loose enough for that rock monstrosity." Mickey spat, coming up to stand next to Ian.

"C'mon Mick, don't knock it 'til you try it." Jack laughed.

"No means no, asshole." Mickey said, taking a drag off his cigarette before tossing it aside. "Are we doing this or what?"

"We were waiting for you, prick." Jack said, shoving Mickey with an open palm.

"You should have been in there picking something out." Mickey retorted. "I'm not hanging out here for hours while you flip flop over tribal floral designs or gay pride flags in there."

"Fuck off. And where do you get off mocking MY gayness?" Jack spat, flinging the door open dramatically and storming inside.

"He's such a girl." Mickey laughed, holding the door open so Ian could go inside first.

Ian just laughed.

This was gonna be fun.

Mickey's sitting in a chair, tattoo mag twisted in his hands, trying his best not to giggle outright as Jack whines and struggles not to move under the pressure of the tattoo gun.

His eyes flit over to Ian' who's laying on his back, arms at his sides, while a second tattoo artist works on a piece on his chest.

Mickey had already gone. He'd sat down first, while Ian was helping Jack make a damn decision. (since he obviously couldn't be bothered to think ahead.) Mickey looked down at his new tattoo, a delicate line of Ukrainian letters flowing up his left forearm, starting at his wrist and ending in the crook of his elbow.

Ніхто не заслуговує на покарання за свої думки
It was a phrase he'd heard his mom say a lot, when his she was still around, back when he still had contact with his grandparents. Out of all the shit he could have remembered, this one phrase was the only one he could recall.

No man deserves punishment for his thoughts

It was a proverb, or some random shit like that. He's not even sure it's originally Ukrainian, or who the fuck said it. He just remembers hearing it when he was very young, and remembering it when he first started questioning his sexuality.

He had been so fucking scared. There was no way in hell he could be gay. He remembers staying up late into the night countless times, silently crying, imagining all the brutal ways Terry would torture him if he ever found out he liked dick.

Then this fucking phrase would pop into his head.

He didn't believe it then. He thought he sure as fuck deserved to be punished for his thoughts. He was a disgusting, deviant ass reamer. An abomination. A cock sucker.

There was nothing worse, in the eyes of his father. Not the niggers, not the spics, not the kikes.

No. The faggots were the lowest form of life on the planet. Because none of those other subhumans chose to be what they were. It was just shit luck.

But a fucking queer made the decision to take a dick.

That's what Terry hammered into his skull since he was old enough to listen.

But throughout all those years hiding himself under his father's thumb, this one phrase never left his mind.

No man deserves punishment for his thoughts

And even back then, when he was a terrified, self-loathing, rage-fueled puppet of his father's creation, that one phrase was always whispering in the back of his mind. That tiniest inkling that maybe, just maybe, he wasn't defective. That maybe, just maybe, he didn't deserve to die because of what came to him naturally.

Looking at himself now, and how far he's come, he can say for the first time in his life, that he actually believes that.

It's a big moment for Mickey.

And he can think of nothing better to get inked on him today, as a testament of how far he's come.

The fact that it's in his mother's native language is just the icing on the cake. A small homage to her without being overdone or sentimental.
He's pleased with his choice. A small smile splits his face as he stares down at it.

"Mick, put that bandage back. It's gotta stay on for a couple hours." Ian says from his reclined position across the room.

"Mind your business, firecrotch, I'm doing just fine over here." Mickey bit back, but placed his bandage back, nevertheless.

Ian gave him an unimpressed look before returning his eyes to the ceiling, quietly waiting out his time in the chair.

Mickey smiled despite himself, his eyes traveling from Ian's prone form back to Jack, who's still desperately struggling not to move, a grimace of pain twisting his features.

"You're a pussy." Mickey says, standing to walk over to Jack. "Why are you acting like you're getting a kidney removed right now? The tattoo's not even that big. You're going to be done any minute."

Jack peered up at him, a look of angry defiance on his face. "Fuck you, Mick. I didn't say anything while you were getting yours."

"I also wasn't flinching like a little bitch every two seconds." Mickey chuckled while Jack twitched, right on cue.

"Leave him alone, Mick." Ian sighed. "This is your first tattoo, right Jack?"

"Yeah." Jack said, wincing as the needle dug a little deeper. "I've been wanting one for a while, but money's been tight, if you know what I mean."

Mickey nodded, feeling the smallest bit bad for teasing Jack so much. This tattoo was a big deal to him. A promise to himself that he was giving up his old life, and moving into a new one.

"Why a compass, though?" Mickey asked, as he watched the heavily tatted artist ink an intricate antique compass on the left side of Jack's chest.

"Apparently, a compass tattoo had several meanings. " Jack said, as he tried yet again to not twist away from the pain. "But to me, it symbolized overcoming the hardships of my past, respecting my journey. Paying homage to the hurdles I've overcome, while looking toward the adventure ahead of me. Embracing the bad shit, while looking toward the good shit."

"Pfft, gay." Mickey laughed.

"I sure hope so." Jack replied easily.

Mickey shook his head at his idiot friend before sauntering over to Ian, who was having a much easier time staying still. Mickey looked down at his boyfriend, a soft smile curling on his lips. Ian's eyes sparkled under the warm gaze.

"How's it look?" Ian asked, not wanting to tip his head down while the woman was still working. She moved the gun up and down, wiping away excess ink and blood as she went. Her head was down, totally focused on her work.

"Looks good." Mickey smiled, his heart swelling as he let his eyes travel over Ian's tattoo.

It was a heart. Kinda like Mickey's but not. Instead of an anatomical rendition of the actual heart
muscle, it was an artistic take on a clockwork heart. Intricate spokes and sprockets adorned the interior, gears and springs interwoven into the design.

"Why a clock?" Jack asked, as his artist finished up his work and cleaned the area with disinfectant.

"I dunno." Ian said, eyes on the ceiling. "It's kinda hard to explain."

"I'm sure my tiny brain can process you reasoning." Jack chuckled, finally sitting up and stretching out a bit. Mickey chuckled as he watched Jack's tattooist roll his eyes and pull him back around to face him, trying to affix his bandage.

"I guess I just wanted to have the reminder that time is limited." Ian said, eyes still trained on the ceiling. "We only get so much, and I want to make the most of every second I have left." Ian's eyes wandered over to Mickey.

His meaning was not lost on the other man.

Ian and Mickey had wasted enough time dancing around each other. Fighting each other. Leaving each other.

Ian didn't want to do that anymore. He wanted to stop playing games and make every damn second with his boyfriend count.

This was it. Forever.

"It looks fucking sick." Jack said, standing over Ian's body next to Mickey. He placed a hand on Mickey's shoulder as they both looked down on Ian.

"Yeah, Ian." Mickey agreed softly, his eyes traveling from the tattoo to Ian's face. "Fucking gorgeous."

-----------------------------------------------

The three men made their way back to Ian and Mickey's apartment on the L, standing in a small cluster by the back of the train car.

"Quit pokin' it, you idiot." Mickey mutters, shoving his friend with an open palm. He needs a cigarette. He's such a bitch these days, not used to taking the L anymore. He's accustomed to smoking whenever the fuck he feels like it.

But Matt had some shit he needed to do today around his house, and his own truck was getting detailed, so Mickey was shit outta luck.

He thought for what must have been the millionth time that they needed to get a fucking car.

"It's sore." Jack said, running his fingers over his bandage again. Mickey huffed, grabbing roughly at his wrist and pulling his hand down and away.

"Ow!" Jack yelped, pulling away to cradle his now sore wrist, causing Ian to cover his mouth to muffle his laughing.

"It's sore cuz you keep fucking with it. Stop putting your grimy fingers all over it. It's gonna get
"infected."

"Yes daddy." Jack says slyly, turning his face up and batting his eyelashes at Mickey like an asshole.

"What did I tell you about that shit?" Mickey barked. He was now drawing the attention of the sparsely occupied train.

Wonderful.

"Guys, guys." Ian sighs, sliding up next to Mickey and discreetly putting his hand on his hip. The action calms him immediately. "Can we not fight like children, please?"

Mickey and Jack give him twin apologetic looks, and it makes Ian smile.

"Mickey, get off his case about touching the bandage, and Jack, you may wanna stop that. If you mess up any scab that's forming, you could lose some of the ink and end up with blank spots."

"No shit?" Jack asks, his eyes traveling from Ian's face to his bandaged tattoo and back.

"No shit." Ian confirms.

"Fuck." Jack says, sitting down heavily in one of the plastic chairs.

"Why does he listen to you and not me?" Mickey asks, leaning further into Ian as the train goes around a corner.

"More flies with honey and all that, Mick." Ian laughs.

"Fucking stupid." Mickey says, crossing his arms over his chest before drawing them back down with a hiss. He looks down at his arm, where he's ripped his bandage off a bit. He tucks it back against his skin with gentle fingers.

"Ha." Jack says, pointing an accusing finger at Mickey. "How's it feel, asshole?"

Ian just shakes his head as the two men continue to argue like brothers the whole way home.

-------------------------------------------------------------------

"I can't believe we are doing this again. Do you not recall the last time we tried this? Do I need to remind you how it ended?" Mickey argues as he's wandering around the apartment picking up dirty clothes and random socks. He tucks the laundry under one arm as he continues through the hall and into the bathroom, yelling across the apartment the whole way.

Jack is seated on the sofa with a beer, watching the interaction with rapt attention. Ian is in the kitchen, and Jack is sitting at the perfect angle to see him roll his eyes quite clearly.

Jack hides his smile behind his bottle, patiently waiting for Ian's retort.

He knows there will be one. In three... two...

"Mick, god damn it. That was months ago. Are you saying you still have a problem with my brother?"
Jack smiles wider. If someone had told him months ago that he'd be content to watch two grown gay men bicker like old women, he would have laughed in their face.

But here he is.

The afternoon has been a rousing success if you ask him, and he's sure the evening is only going to improve as the hours go by.

He can't help it, he's excited to finally be invited to the infamous 'game night'. Mickey's been talking about this shit forever, ever since he started hanging around Ian again. Jack has never been invited before, for a myriad of reasons.

First, Ian hated him.

Then Ian liked him okay, but he had his own shit going on.

One time it was just couples. (unfair, if you ask Jack)

Then Ian hated him for a while again.

Jack knows he's not the easiest person to like. He makes a lot of mistakes, but he means well. He's just kind of a fuck up sometimes.

He hopes this last little kerfuffle he's had with Ian will be THE last one. He likes Ian a lot. He likes how Mickey is with Ian. He thinks the three of them make quite a team.

So he's taking this invitation to game night pretty fucking seriously.

He's also a little curious about Ian's other guest. He's been hearing all kinds of tales about this guy for years, and he's ready to make his own assessment, based on real life experience.

"That motherfucker always has something to say." Mickey grumbled, coming back into the room with his hands free. He walked past Jack without a glance and joined Ian in the kitchen. Jack was content to just sit and listen from his spot on the couch.

It couldn't be considered eavesdropping if he wasn't hiding, right?

"Yeah, he does. But you guys buried the hatchet, right? You were fine on my birthday." Ian is rummaging around in the cabinets. Jack can hear him pulling thing out and placing it all on the counter. He selfishly hopes Ian's making that cheesy salsa dip shit he makes.

Jack could live off that stuff.

"We are fine, Gallagher." Mickey concedes with a small shrug. "But that doesn't mean I'm desperate for more face time with the prick. You know we never really got along."

"I know, Mick. But I'd really like it if you guys could get past all this. So we can all hang out more. Lip's doing really good with the drinking. He hasn't been really bad for a while now. He's working on it. Can you just give him a chance?" Jack can hear the pleading tone in his voice, even if his face is hidden by the wall.

Mickey's face, however, is right in his line of sight. Jack watches, smiling, as Mickey's eyes go from hard to soft in a matter of seconds. His shoulders slump and he drops his crossed arms. He tilts his head back dramatically and heaves a heavy sigh. "Fine. Fuck. Best behavior, you asshole."

Jack's smile only grows wider as Ian comes back into view. He grabs Mickey by the hips and backs
him up against the counter. He presses his forehead down against Mickey's as they just stare at each other for a moment, before Ian dips his head down and kisses Mickey firmly but tenderly on the mouth. "Thank you." is all he says.

When Mickey just nods and goes in for another kiss, Jack has to look away.

He's used to bearing witness to these moments of quite adoration between the two men, but he still feels like an interloper. He turns his head and takes another sip of his beer.

Let them have their moment before the real chaos ensues.

---------------------------------------------------------

The three men were seated around the kitchen table when there was a knock at the door. Ian jumps up to get it, leaving Jack and Mickey sitting at the table, two open beers in front of them. Mickey takes a drag off his cigarette, ashing it as he looks over at his friend.

"So, I'm not a hundred percent sure how this is gonna go." Mickey starts, twisting his bottle around on the table with his free hand. "But just watch your mouth around Lip. He's a dick, and he has a tendency to ruin shit when he feels ganged up on or whatever."

"Are you seriously telling me to take it easy on this prick?" Jack balked. "After everything you've told me, with the way he treated you?"

"I wasn't an angel either, Jack." Mickey said, finally taking a sip of his beer. "Ian wants it squashed, so I'm gonna try to do that. So don't feed into it if he tries to bait me into a fight. I don't need you rescuing me from some asshole with a superiority complex. Just ignore him if he gets bitchy."

Jack gave him a disbelieving look, mouth open to respond, but Mickey waved him off.

"Seriously, nothing will piss him off more than seeing us happy and having fun. Who knows, maybe he really does just wanna hang out." Mickey shrugs. "He wasn't all that bad on Ian's birthday. I told you about that, right?"

"Yeah." Jack nods, sipping his own beer slowly. "Some kind of showdown over Ian's issues, right?"

"Yeah." Micky nods. "But Ian was kind of amazing. Never seen him stand up for himself like that before." Mickey can't help the smile that splits his lips, thinking of Ian finally defending himself to his older siblings. "That's when he brought up putting you on the crisis team. You shoulda seen the look on his sister's face. It was epic."

"You think he was serious about that?" Jack asks. He can hear people talking in the front hall, so he lowers his voice a bit. "Cuz you know I would. Do that for Ian."

Mickey smiles at his friend, a warm feeling bubbling in his stomach. "Yeah, Jack, I know. Let's wait and see if Ian brings it up. It's his call."

Jack nods, opening his mouth to speak again, but closes it quickly as Ian comes back into the kitchen, followed by Mandy and Lip.

"What the fuck?" Mickey asks, eyes wide. "Did you assholes carpool or something? Where's
Macy?"

Mandy flops down in an empty chair next to Jack, grabbing up his beer and taking a long sip, earning herself an eye roll from the man. "She's with her parents. Her Gramma is sick. Diabetes or some shit. They're at the hospital."

"Shit." Ian says, walking toward the kitchen to grab a bag of chips. He opens it and pours the chips into a bowl before depositing it back on the table. "That sucks. Is she gonna be okay?"

Mickey kinda tunes out while Ian and his sister talk about her girlfriend's sick nana. His eyes are on Lip as he wanders into the kitchen last. He throws his hoodie over the back of the chair on Jack's other side, his eyes on Mickey's friend the entire time, like he's trying to dissect him with a look. Mickey doesn't like it, and he's immediately on the defense, even though Lip hasn't said anything yet.

Mandy grabs a bag she'd brought with her and puts it on her lap. She pulls out a bottle of Jack and a six pack of beer. "Ian, can you put these in the fridge for me." she hands him the beer and he dutifully stands and puts it away for her. She sticks her hand back in the bag and pulls out a long box and places it on the table.

"Monopoly, Mandy?" Mickey grouses, grabbing up his cigarettes and placing another one between his lips.

Lip has yet to say a word, and it's making Mickey nervous. He lights his smokes and grabs up his beer, watching as his sister opens the game and starts setting it up, with Ian's help.

"Yeah, got a fucking problem?" Mandy asks, not even bothering to look at him. He can hear Jack trying to stifle his laughter on his left, but he ignores it.

"This game takes for fucking ever. That's my problem. I thought you were gonna bring Jenga."

"Yeah, well. I couldn't find it." she shrugs, cutting the money into piles as she starts to set up the bank. "So this is it. We don't have to finish. Whoever's ahead when we get bored or too plastered can be the winner. It's all in fun." she finishes with the money and starts shuffling the cards while everyone else just sits there waiting.

It's not awkward, not really. It's just weird. Usually Ian and Jack can't shut the fuck up. Usually Mandy would be talking his ear off by this point, too. Asking questions about work or Yev, whatever.

But Mickey just sits there, watching Mandy set up the game while Lip sits in his chair with a beer in front of him. He's not drinking it, not really. Just keeps running his hand up and down the bottle, staring off into space.

It's almost like everyone is pointedly ignoring each other, and Mickey doesn't like it. Kind of defeats the purpose of game night, if you ask him. He feels nervous and edgy in his own home, surrounded by his friends, his family. He fucking hates it.

Ian puts one last bowl on the table, pretzels, and finally sits back down, next to Mickey and across from his brother. Lip gives Ian a look Mickey can't decipher.

"You gonna introduce me to your friend, or are you just gonna act like we're all old pals here?" Lip finally says, as they all just sit around quietly drinking while Mandy fucks with the game.
Mickey looks up at that.

This should be interesting.

-----------------------------------------

Jack startles when Ian's brother speaks. It had be dead silent in the kitchen for almost ten minutes, which was fucking weird in and of itself. Ian and Mickey were never quiet, always joking around and fucking with each other, or him. Never mind Mandy. She was a fucking riot at all times, never shy. Jack had noticed the moment they walked in that something was off.

He knows enough to know that shit ain't exactly kosher between Ian's older brother and Mickey's little sister. He knows they used to fuck. He knows Lip is a dick, and Mandy pulled some kind of 'fatal attraction' shit back in the day. But that should all be ancient history by now, shouldn't it?

Jack's not one to hold grudges, or to hang on to old memories. Not the bad ones, anyway. There's enough chaos and upheaval in everyday life as it is, why cling to shit that hurts?

He's always been the kind of guy to focus on the beautiful things in life. Even when his entire existence was predicated on pain and struggle, he still found a way to see the quiet glory in simply being alive.

So he's never been quite sure how to deal with this shit, the anger and resentment that seem to linger around Mickey at all times. Towards his father, of course, towards Ian for a long, long time, towards himself more than anything. And towards this guy. This guy Jack's never met, but feels like he knows already. All his worst qualities, anyway. Any bad shit he's ever done to Mickey or Mandy or Ian, Jack knows it all. But he only knows one side of the story, and he's not the kind of guy to judge a person based on second hand information. He knows what that feels like. He may not like the guy, but he's willing to give the dude a chance to prove him wrong.

He's drawn out of his thoughts when Ian (finally) speaks.

"Lip, this is Jack. I've mentioned him before." Ian smiles at Jack, but Jack can tell it's a little forced. "Jack, this is my brother, Lip."

Jack reaches over, extending his hand to the man next to him. Lip just looks at it for a moment, like he's debating whether or not he wants to lower himself to shaking his hand. He relents, after a moment, gripping Jack's offered hand in a firm, but brief handshake.

"Nice to meet you." Jack says, even though he's not sure he means it. He knows Ian really wants this evening to go smoothly, so he's willing to play along. If Mickey can do it, he sure as fuck can.

"Sure." Lip says dismissively, drawing his hand back and actually wiping it on his jeans. "Heard about you."

Mickey's eyebrows hitch up his forehead, but Jack can see Ian slide his hand along Mickey's wrist where it lays on the table. He's not surprised when Mickey calms instantaneously.

Ian does that to him.

"Heard about you too." Jack says, since two can play this game. Lip narrows his eyes, but says nothing.
"Are we ready to play, or what?" Mandy speaks for the first time in what feels like forever. Jack is grateful for the interruption. He feels kind of dirty under Ian's brother's cold stare. He doesn't like it, and he feels like he doesn't deserve it.

Lip doesn't even know him.

Which is ironic, since Jack was just trying to talk himself out of judging this man based on second hand knowledge. And here's the dude, doing the exact thing Jack was trying to avoid.

Jack knows Lip must have heard some awful shit about him. But he's here tonight, so maybe if Jack makes an effort, Ian's brother will see him as a person, and not just an addict.

"Okay." Jack says brightly. "Who wants to pick a piece first? Lip?" he looks over at Ian's brother expectantly. "You have a preference?"

Lip gives him a look he doesn't quite understand, but says nothing, his eyes going to the tokens spread out on the table.

"What's up with the pieces?" Lip asks, his fingers trailing over the rubber ducky. "I don't remember a duck."

Jack lets himself breathe a little easier, sensing that Ian's brother may just play nice after all.

"They're new." Mandy says, her hand reaching out to grab the small silver cat. "Guess there was a whole big thing. Macy told me."

"That's why there's no thimble." Ian says, nodding to himself.

"I have no idea what you're all talking about." Mickey says, eyeing the pieces before looking over at Ian. "Can't even remember the last time I played this game."

"You're going to be a natural, Mick." Jack can't help but say. "All this game is is one long hustle."

That earns him a smattering of chuckles from Ian and Mandy, and an eye roll from Mickey. He's sees Ian's brother trying not to laugh, and he counts that as the first of his many to-be-determined small victories in the game of winning over Ian's brother.

Jack's nothing if not persistent.

-------------------------------------------

Ian ends up picking the roadster. Mandy picks the kitty (predictably) Mickey picks one of the new pieces, a T Rex, Jack takes the penguin. Lip chooses the top hat, because he's a pretentious douche, and the game is under way.

It's going surprisingly well, as far as Mickey's concerned. He's been more worried than he'd let on when Ian brought up the prospect of his brother coming to game night. He was worried Lip would be drunk. He was worried Lip was gonna start shit with Mandy, like last time. He was worried Lip would just be an asshole in general, make the whole evening awkward and uncomfortable.

But none of that shit has happened, so far anyway.
They are about an hour into the game. Mickey's a natural, just like Jack had predicted. He's buying up properties and building houses and hotels, reveling in collecting from his competition.

It's kinda fun.

He notices that neither Jack nor Lip is drinking that much. No one is, really. Not like the usually would on game night. It wasn't talked about beforehand, and it seems totally unconscious. Almost like everyone is taking it easy out of respect for the rest of the room. It's obvious Lip is trying to behave, so his brother is drinking less than he normally would. Mickey knows Jack is doing his best right now, so he's laying off the booze tonight in solidarity. It's actually kinda nice, the way they take care of each other without even meaning to.

He's glad Lip is going easy tonight, not wanting a scene to break out. That shit takes a toll on Ian, even though he doesn't like to talk about it.

"That my shit. Pay me, bitch." Mickey cheers as Jack lands on Indiana Avenue. It's not a high yield property, but money is money. He holds his hand out expectantly and Jack forks over the cash.

"What's with your arm?" Lip asks out of nowhere. He's got a cigarette between his lips, so the words come out a little mumbled, but Mickey hears him clear enough.

"Oh shit." Ian exclaims. "We forgot to take our bandages off." he looks from Mickey to Jack, and realization hits Mickey then.

Their tattoos.

"Oh." He says, looking down at his arm. "You're right." he pulls the bandage off right after.

"Shit, Mick. You got the tattoo." Mandy says, reaching over to grab his arm and inspect his new ink. Out of the corner of his eye he can see Ian and Jack both stripping their shirts off, pulling their own bandages.

"Holy shit!" Mandy jumps up, running over to Ian and slipping her fingers across his new ink. Ian flinches a little, and she draws her hand back. "Kinda looks like yours, Mick." she says, eyes still fixed on Ian's chest.

"That was kinda the idea." Ian admits, buttoning his shirt back up after his bandage has been tossed. The words give Mickey that fluttery feeling in his gut that only Ian can inspire.

"You guys are so fucking gay." Lip says, sipping his second beer of the night. Although, he doesn't sound condescending, like Mickey expects from him. He sounds mildly amused, if anything.

"Is that news or something?" Jack asks. Lip looks over at him, trying real hard to keep his expression even, but he cracks eventually.

"I guess not." Lip concedes through a smile.

Mickey watches surreptitiously as Jack and Lip make fun of Ian for a few minutes. He rolls the dice, moving his piece around the board, listening to Ian telling them both to fuck off. Telling him that they are not matching tattoos, and to give him a fucking break. It's lighthearted and good natured, and Mickey relaxes a bit.

Jack's got a way of sneaking up on people, burrowing under their skin until they're not sure if or why they ever disliked him at all. He reminds Mickey of Ian in that aspect. Sly motherfucker.
Maybe things won't be fucked up forever.

Jack starts talking about his own tattoo, and the others listen. Lip in particular hangs on to every word about Jack's compass tattoo, and the meaning behind it. About Jack finding his way out of a dark place, about getting his life back on track, about following his inner guide, and all that hippie bullshit Jack is always spouting about his 'recovery'.

Mickey sees the look in Lip's eyes. Respect, and maybe just a little envy. Mixed in there is a little bit of hope, if Mickey's reading him right. Mickey prides himself on his ability to read people, and he can see in Lip just then that his opinions on Jack are changing, if only a little.

Mickey's not sure why he cares what Lip thinks about his friend, but he finds that the idea of Jack being accepted further into his circle brings him some sense of peace. The less conflict he has in his life, the better.

"What about you, Mick?" his sister asks, bringing his attention back to the conversation. "What does that mean?" Mandy reaches across the table and runs her fingers down Mickey's forearm. He doesn't flinch like Ian did. His tattoo is much smaller than Ian's, and doesn't really feel tender at all.

"You don't recognize the language?" Mickey asks, eyebrows raised, teasing tone evident as he raises his third beer of the night to his lips. In the background, Ian is rolling the dice and moving his piece along the board, hooting when he lands on Boardwalk and immediately scoops it up.

His sister grabs his arm again and eyes the tattoo critically. The skin is raised and red still, but the lines and swoops of the letters are clear and crisp.

"Is that...is that fucking Ukrainian?" Mandy whispers, her eyes flitting from Mickey's face to the tattoo and back again.

Mickey shrugs, finally taking his arm back. "Yeah."

"Mick, that's...what does it say?" Mandy asks. Her eyes are soft, like she can tell already he's going to say something that is going to mess her up emotionally.

"Just some shit mom used to say." he shrugged again, acutely aware of everyone's eyes on him all of the sudden. No one is moving, they are all just staring at Mickey, waiting.

He hates being on the spot like this. Hates feeling like he's on display. He bristles a little, out of habit, but breathes it the fuck down.

He didn't do anything wrong. That feeling of exposure is a left over hang up of a life that is nothing but a memory now.

"No man deserves to be punished for his thoughts." Mickey finally answers. "Dunno why, but that shit always stuck." he looks over at Ian, who is staring at him with blatant adoration, and Mickey feels his anxiety trickle away to nothing. He smiles softly at Ian before turning to face his sister. "You're were probably too young to remember, but she used to say that shit all the time, and it stuck with me. Y'know, for reasons."

He grabbed up his beer and brought it to his lips, finishing it off and dropping the empty on the table.

"That's really cool, Mick." Mandy says softly. Mickey knows everyone understands the meaning of his tattoo. He feels no reason to explain it in detail. It's not private, not really. But he also doesn't want to turn game night into an introspection on his own homosexuality and his long, arduous coming out process, or his long-held self hatred. It's been a lengthy journey to get where he is today,
and even though he got the tattoo to commemorate that struggle, he's not really too keen on talking about it right now.

Mickey looks up just in time to see Lip watching him. His face is devoid of all that superior cockiness he always has. He's looking at Mickey like he's actually understanding him for the first time. Mickey looks away, not wanting to get into that shit either right now.

"Roll the dice, Jack. Jesus." he says instead. "We've already been playing this fucking game too long."

Jack chuckles, but grabs up the dice and rolls them, breaking the moment, thankfully.

-----------------------------------------------

Ian is over the damn moon. Game night has gone off without a single hitch. Everyone had been civil. No raised voices, no punches thrown.

It was a god damn miracle. Mickey had kept his promise. Not that he had to try too hard, since his brother had also been oddly cordial all evening.

The game was over now (well, the had predictably quit two hours in, Mickey ahead by miles. He was fucking ruthless.), and everyone was sitting around the table, just shooting the shit before they part for the evening.

Mickey has Ian's glass bowl out, packing it with that high test medical shit he gets these days. (far cry from the shwag Mickey and his brothers used to sell when he was in middle school, before Iggy got real into cultivation. Ian doesn't even remember what bad weed tastes like anymore.) He lights it and takes a long pull off the pipe.

Ian watches as his chest expands, feeling that warmth spreading throughout his body. He loves having people over for game night, but he's ready to get Mickey alone.

Mickey holds the hit for a moment before exhaling smoothly and passing the bowl to Ian.

Ian takes a hit and passes the bowl to Jack, who takes it gratefully. He holds the lighter over the bowl and inhales. He passes it to Lip, coughing a little.

"Did you guys know that doctors are talking about using weed to treat addiction now?" Jack asks, clearing his throat after his little coughing fit.

"Really?" Mandy asks, her eyes all glazed as she clumsily pushes her hand into the chip bowl, stuffing her face. Ian tries not to laugh, but his giggles escape regardless as he reaches across to wipe some crumbs off her chin. She rolls her eyes but says nothing.

"Really." Jack nods. "I mean, it's in the early stages still, but I think it's a great idea. Much better than fucking methadone or suboxone." he pulls a face.

"Y'know." Lip says, addressing Jack for the first time in hours. "THC and CBD can be used for all kinds of illnesses. Not just addiction. Depression, epilepsy, ALS, cancer, fibromialgia."

"I know!" Jack replies, excited. "I'm so glad the government is finally giving up on that fantasy that
weed is a class A narcotic, finally admitting that it has real medicinal purposes.

That one comment starts a long conversation about the war on drugs, Big Pharma and medicinal marijuana. Ian tries to pay attention, but he's pretty stoned, and all he can focus on is how easily things are going all of the sudden.

All of the residual tension that had been palpable when the evening had started has seemed to vanish. Conversation flows easily, even a little friendly teasing.

"Not to sound like an asshole, but you're a lot smarter than I anticipated." Lip says to Jack as he's shrugging his coat on at the end of the evening. "I mean, in my defense, you are friends with Mickey."

"Fuck you, Philip." Mickey says reflexively.

"Well, you're not quite as much of a pompous dick as I thought you were gonna be, but still impressively douchy, so congrats on walking that fine line." Jack smiled sweetly.

"Yeah, you're Mickey's friend, for sure." Lip just shrugged, pulling his brother into a hug. "You got an interesting little stand-in family here, Ian." he whispered quietly by his ear.

"Ha ha." Ian deadpanned, pushing his brother away playfully. He turned to walk him out while Mandy finished saying her goodbyes.

"Seriously, though." Lip said, one hand on the open door, the other on his brother's shoulder. "You're not doing too bad. I don't hate what you have going on here."

Ian knew that was the closest thing to approval he was ever going to get from his brother.

"You too, man." Ian said sincerely. "Thank you for not starting any shit tonight, and you know..." he waved his hand around a little, letting the 'not getting totally shitfaced and starting a fight' hang in the air unsaid.

"Sure thing, little brother. Thanks for inviting me, after what went down the last time you guys asked me over."

"Yeah, don't mention it." Ian said, pulling his brother into one last hug. He couldn't help but hope that maybe this time Lip's shit would stick. He'd been over at the house for hours, watching everyone else get drunk (not sloppy, but still) and had stuck to two beers and a little weed.

Ian's desperate to believe his brother may just be okay this time.

He claps Lip on the shoulder one last time and watches him walk down the hall toward the elevator. When he turns to go back inside, Mandy is standing behind him, her purse slung over her shoulder.

"Well, that was considerably less awful than I anticipated." she said, pulling Ian to her roughly. He collapsed into the embrace, holding her tightly. Mandy always smelled the same. Like nostalgia and home and everything that brought Ian peace. He inhaled deeply, swaying from side to side until Mandy pulled back and laid a little kiss on his cheek.

"That seems to be the consensus." Ian smiles, before sobering. "Thanks for not being awful to Lip." he says, searching his friend's eyes for any trace of discomfort.

"That was all your brother, Ian. He was uncharacteristically well behaved tonight. I had no reason to bring the pain." Mandy smiled. "I'm happy he's seems to be getting his shit together."
"Me too." Ian agrees. "Seems to be going around." he adds, his eyes travelling to Mickey and Jack, still standing in the kitchen.

"Hope it sticks for him too." Mandy says, looking over at the boys as well. "Honestly don't know if Mick could handle that shit again."

Ian nods, but doesn't say anything. He's hopeful for both Jack and Lip. They both deserve the benefit of the doubt.

"The three of you are adorable together, by the way." she smirks. "Like the gay musketeers." she laughs. "The three gaymigos!" she pokes him in the chest with a manicured finger.

"Okay, enough." Ian says, but he's smiling. The idea of Jack being part of his life doesn't scare him anymore. Not at all. "See you soon." he kisses her forehead one last time before gripping her shoulders and turning her around, giving her a gentle shove toward the elevator.

"Be good." she calls over her shoulder.

"Tell Macy we love her, and hope everything works out with her gram." Ian called after her. Mandy turned to face him, continuing down the hall walking backwards.

"Will do, Ian." her face had morphed into an expression of gentle gratitude and love. "Bye." she gave one last wave and was gone.

-------------------------------------------------------------

"Game night is exhausting." Jack whines, flopping down on the couch. "How can I be so tired? All we did was sit around all night?"

Mickey laughed, grabbing up his last beer and sitting next to Jack. "Interacting with people always drains all my energy." he said, sipping his beer. He threw his feet up on the coffee table, stretching out his tired muscles.

"Yeah, I guess." Jack shrugged. "How'd I do, by the way?"

"How'd you do what?" Mickey asked, turning to face his friend.

"With the brother? I mean, it seemed to go okay to me, but I'm not sure."

"Jack, you don't need Lip's approval. If I don't need it, you sure as shit don't need it. Ian's not gonna stop hanging out with you if his brother doesn't like you." Mickey reached over with his free hand and tousled Jack wild hair. "Did I ever tell you Ian used to call you 'Skinny Lip'?"

"What?" Jack gave Mickey an incredulous glare, stealing his beer and taking a sip before handing it back.

"Yeah, back when I first came home. Remember Mandy's divorce party?"

Jack nodded, his eyes glazing over for a moment as he tried to pull up the memory.

"That was the first time Ian ever saw you, and for months after that, he called you 'Skinny Lip.'" Mickey chuckled. "I thought it was a jealously thing. Didn't wanna see you as a person. But now, I
"Okay, Doctor Phil." Jack laughed. He sat up and wiggled around for a moment, trying to pull his cigarettes out without having to get up.

"Just think it's funny." Mickey said, waiting for Jack to light the cigarette before he grabbed it from his fingers, ignoring his friend's protests. "That this is where we are now. Skinny Lip and Actual Lip, having some kinda C-Span debate about drug laws and alternative medicine. Life is fucked up."

Jack laughed, shoving Mickey half-heartedly with his hand. "Put some more ointment on your tattoo tonight before you go to bed."

"That was random, but sure thing, Mom. You must be stoned." Mickey laughed, just as Ian walked back into the room.

"Jack, are you gonna stay tonight?" Ian asked, unbuttoning his shirt and sliding it off his shoulders.

"Depends on what's on the table." Jack replied, smirking slyly.

"Fuck off." Mickey barked, punching his friend in the shoulder hard enough to knock him sideways on the couch.

"Jesus, you jealous little bitch, I was fucking joking." Jack said, rubbing his tender shoulder "Sure, I'll stay. It's late as fuck, and even though I only had a few beers, it's not right to go back to the sober house with alcohol on my breath. That's not fair to the dudes there that have actual sobriety." Jack shrugged, like he didn't care, but Mickey could see something in his eyes. Guilt, maybe, regret?

"You know you're always welcome here, Jack. You can take the spare room. I always keep it made up." Ian says. He walks over to Mickey and extends his hand. "C'mon, I'm tired."

Mickey huffs like he's irritated, but he's not fooling anyone. He grabs Ian's hand and lets himself be pulled up.

"G'night, asshole." he calls over his shoulder as Jack makes his way to the spare room.

"Love you too, you dick." Jack hollers back. "Good night, Ian."

"Good night." Ian chuckles, dragging Mickey the last few steps to their bedroom. He closes the door behind him and starts stripping immediately.

Mickey eyes him as he goes for his own belt, finding no need to hide his desire. "Thought we'd never be alone tonight." he says, pulling his shirt over his head and tossing it to the side. "Fucking want you, man." he comes up behind Ian as he's unbuttoning his belt and smacks his hands away. He stands behind Ian pulling his belt out of the loops and letting it fall to the floor with a clatter. He runs his hands up Ian's sides as his boyfriend unbuttons his pants and steps out of them. Mickey gives him no room, not wanting any space between them. He lets his hands roam along his chest and sides as he mouths at his shoulders and back. He runs his tongue along Ian's shoulder blade, grinning against his skin when Ian's whole body shudders.

His hands continue to slide up and down Ian's chest, gliding over one of his nipples before tracking down and gripping his bulge, pulling gently as he kisses and licks at his neck.

"So fucking sexy." he whispers. " Wanted this for hours. Wanted you." Mickey always gets a little mouthy when he's high. He can't help it, the truth just spills out of him.
Ian turns then, his hands gripping Mickey's hips and pulling them together tightly. Mickey can feel Ian's erection against his hip, and he moans. Ian gets him so hot so fucking fast. Even after all this time.

Ian looks down on him, his eyes dark with want. They just stand there for a moment, in their underwear, breathing harshly.

Finally, Ian dips his head down and captures Mickey's lips in a biting kiss. Mickey groans into it, his eyes falling closed. He lets Ian push him until the back of his legs hit the mattress.

"Lay down and get naked." Ian says, walking over to the nightstand to grab the lube.

Mickey doesn't need to be told twice. He scoots up to the center of the bed and lays back so he can wiggle out of his boxer briefs, tossing them on the floor without further ado.

Ian makes his way back over slowly, his eyes raking over Mickey's naked body, focusing on his hard cock twitching against his stomach before traveling back up to his eyes. Ian's got this look on his face like he's going to devour Mickey whole.

Yes, please.

Ian drops the lube on the bed and crawls over Mickey's body, making sure not to let their naked torsos touch just yet. He dips his head down and runs his tongue along Mickey's neck, nipping softly at his earlobe before going back to lavishing his throat with attention.

"Oh. Fuck." Mickey moans, trying and failing to keep his voice down. He knows for a fact Jack is still awake in the next room. That fucker never sleeps for shit anymore. But he wanted to sleep over, so he's just gonna have to deal with the ramifications of that decision.

Ian stays that way for a while, hovering over Mickey's body, but not touching him. His mouth moves from Mickey's neck to his chest. He pulls one of his nipples into his mouth, rolling his tongue around the nub before biting down on it gently, then not so gently. Mickey arches into the sensation, the pain just amplifying his pleasure. "Ian, Jesus." he whines, his fists curling around the comforter, looking for an anchor.

Ian didn't say anything, just kept up his slow exploration of Mickey's body with his lips and tongue. He sucked a mark into his neck before traveling back down, biting softly at his stomach before running his tongue along his jutting hip bone.

"So sexy like this, laid out beneath me." Ian sighed, gripping Mickey's erection in his hand and pumping it so slowly. "Love you like this. Just waitin' for me." Ian ran his tongue along the slit of Mickey's dick, curling his tongue around the droplet of precum that had dribbled out. "Mmm, tastes so good." he said, dipping his head and taking Mickey into his mouth.

"Ah fuck." Mickey sighed, bucking up into the heat of Ian's mouth. "Ian. Yeah." he knows he's babbling incoherently, but who the fuck cares?

Ian does that to him. Always had.

"C'mon, get naked." Mickey sighs, kicking at Ian's clothed backside with one of his heels. "Want you in me."

"It's okay, Mick. I gotcha. Gonna take care of you." Ian smiled, wrapping his lips around his head once more, rolling his tongue along the ridges. Mickey groaned, twitching with the effort of not fucking up into Ian's mouth.

He wanted to be good for Ian. Let him do whatever he wanted. He got like that sometimes. Not
submissive, not really. Just pliant. Wanting to please. And only ever with Ian.

He was never like this with anyone else.

Ian reached down with the hand that was not wrapped around Mickey's cock and pulled his boxers down. He moved around on the bed to kick them off, never once letting up on the hold his mouth had on Mickey. Mickey tilted his head back, lost in the sensation of Ian swallowing him down. He's not sure how long it goes on for. It's all a jumble of lips and teeth and spit, mixed in with his own moans and swearing. Ian sucks dick like a pro. Always has. Mickey is dangerously close to coming by the time he hears the click of the lube being opened.

"Careful." he mutters. "Don't wanna come yet."

Ian gets the message, backing off. He slides off completely, letting Mickey's dick fall back against his stomach with a wet sound as he goes about coating his fingers with lube.

"Wanna do it like this tonight." he says, resting next to Mickey's prone form, propped up on one elbow.

Mickey drew up his legs, feet planted on the mattress, giving Ian room to play. "You want me on my back?" he asks redundantly, the haze of arousal making it a little hard for him to keep up.

"Yeah. Wanna see you." Ian replied. He scoots as close as possible, his hard dick rubbing against Mickey's hip as he brought his fingers down to circle Mickey's hole. Mickey sighed at the simple contact, relaxing into the touch instantly.

Ian leaned over and kissed Mickey again. Slow and tender passes of his tongue against Mickey's as he breached him with a single finger.

Mickey huffed out a short breath against Ian's mouth, his legs falling further apart as Ian penetrated him. One of Mickey's hand flew up and gripped the back of Ian's head as they made out.

Ian prepped him slower than usual. Adding a second finger after long minutes of playing with him, just nudging his prostate here and there, but never hitting it head on. Mickey writhed underneath him, pulling at his neck and back, trying to get him closer, always closer.

When Ian added a third finger, going back in with more force, Mickey cried out loudly. One of his legs shot up and wrapped around Ian's back, while his other hand also found his head. With both hand buried in Ian's hair, Mickey directed his face back to his, for another sloppy kiss.

"I'm good, man. C'mon. Want you inside me." Mickey mumbled, biting sharply on Ian's bottom lip, drawing a low groan out of his lover.

"Love it when you beg me, Mick." Ian said, withdrawing his fingers. Mickey shivered at the loss, but wasn't left hanging for long. Ian settled on top of him properly, hooking one of his legs under his elbow while the other one remained wrapped around Ian's rib cage. Ian barely had enough room to draw back and line up, Mickey was holding him so close.

He looked down at Mickey, kissing him fiercely once more as he grabbed his dick and settled it at Mickey's entrance. Ian kept their eyes locked as he sunk in slowly. Mickey felt open and vulnerable under Ian's stare, but he wouldn't dare look away.

It seemed to take forever for Ian to bottom out. He just kept pushing in slowly, his eyes threatening to
close at the delicious feeling of Mickey's body stretching to accept him.

Finally, Ian was flush against Mickey's body, buried deep inside him. He huffed a breath across Mickey's face as they stared at each other. Mickey could feel him, hard and twitching inside him.

"Fuck. Mickey." Ian groaned.

"Yeah, you do that." Mickey replied, smirking. He reached up and gripped Ian's ass in the palm of his hand, pulling him hard, pushing him impossibly deeper inside him.

Ian smiled down on him, dipping his head for another kiss just as he pulled out and slid home. Mickey kissed him back desperately, angling his hips up to take the full force of Ian's thrusts.

Their tongues met outside their mouths as their lips worked against each other. Mickey ran his tongue along Ian's lower lip before pulling it into his mouth a biting it gently. Ian moaned into the kiss, lapping his way deeper into Mickey's mouth.

Ian kept it slow. Steady, hard, long strokes hitting the deepest places inside Mickey. Mickey let go of Ian's ass, threading his hands through his hair again, pulling the strands between his fingers every time Ian hit a particularly good spot.

"Mick. God, you take me so good. Love feeling you around me like this. Love being inside you." Ian sighed, dropping Mickey's leg to the mattress with a thud.

Mickey moaned at the words, wrapping both legs around Ian's back, wanting him as deep as possible.

"Love getting fucked by you." he heard himself saying. "That big fucking cock throbbing inside me."

Ian moaned loudly, his hips thrusting faster, more erratically. They were so close, Ian's body laying over Mickey's, propped up on one elbow while his other hand ran down Mickey's side before landing on his raised leg. He gripped his thigh tightly, using the leverage to piston into Mickey's body with increasing ferocity.

Mickey cried out, his back bowing as Ian hit his prostate. Ian stopped thrusting, keeping his cock buried deep inside Mickey, choosing instead to thrust shallowly, sliding his cock back and forth, in and out in tiny, measured increments. The constant pressure on Mickey's prostate had him seeing fucking stars.

"Holy mother of god." Mickey moaned. "Ian, right fucking there." he scraped his fingernails down Ian's back, drawing a sharp hiss out of his boyfriend. "Please. Gotta come. Touch me, fuck."

Ian dropped his hand from Mickey's thigh and wrapped his fingers around his cock instead, which had been twitching against his stomach the entire time. It was slippery with precome, and the tactile reminder of Mickey's arousal had Ian fucking into him almost desperately.

"Fucking love you like this. Beggin' me. You're so fucking hot, Mick." Ian groaned, his hips snapping harshly as he jerked Mickey's cock.

Mickey grabbed Ian by the back of his head, pulling him down for another kiss. It was so sloppy, all tongue, and as Mickey got closer to the edge, it devolved into them just breathing into each other's mouths.

"That's it. Oh, Ian. Fuck." Mickey cried as he spilled out all over Ian's hand. Ian stroked him through
it, and once Mickey lay spent and sated, he drew his hand back to Mickey's thigh. He hitched it up a little higher as he pounded into him, chasing his own end.

It only took a few more hard thrusts before Ian went rigid on top of Mickey and came hard in his ass. He threw his head back, buried to the hilt as his orgasm washed over him. He fucked Mickey through his release, until he himself was left replete.

He pulled out slowly, falling on his back on his side of the bed. He reached over to the nightstand and grabbed up a handful of tissues, handing some to Mickey before going about cleaning himself up. Once they were as clean as they were gonna get, they split a cigarette and turned off the light. Mickey curled into a little ball on his side for Ian to sidle up next to him, arm slung over his waist.

"Thank you for tonight." Ian muttered against Mickey's shoulder. "Love you."

"How many times do I gotta tell ya? Don't thank me. We do this shit for each other. Love you too." he turned his head around, waiting for Ian to kiss him. Their lips met sluggishly, just the barest hint of tongue, before Mickey turned back around and laid his head down on the pillow. "Now go the fuck to sleep."

-------------------------------------------

Jack laid there in the dark, trying really hard not to listen to the epic fuckfest that was going on in the next room.

It was fucking hard, though. Those two were loud a fuck, obviously very passionate. Jack had to talk himself off the 'awkward boner' ledge twice during that shit. There is no way in hell he's going to allow himself to get hard to the sounds of his best friend fucking his boyfriend. It didn't help anything that Jack knew Mickey a little too intimately, and all kinds of nasty images were filtering through his head.

God damn it.

Jack chuckles to himself in the dark, truly perplexed with the sharp left turn his life has taken in the past year.

When he first met Mickey, he had no idea what kind of effect he was going to have on his life. He never could have predicted that he'd end up loving the guy like he does now. Never thought he'd be friends with him outside the joint. Never thought he'd be such a huge factor in his desire to get clean. Never thought he'd even have a friendship like this ever again in his life.

And after Mickey wormed his way into his heart, he sure as fuck never thought he'd have a kind word for Ian. Not after everything Mickey had told him.

He had thought loving Mickey and liking Ian were diametrically opposed.

But look at him now.

Laying in Ian and Mickey's shared apartment, after spending the day getting tattoos and playing fucking board games.
Jack was part of something now. Something beautiful. And he was so fucking grateful.

Those two assholes in there, keeping the whole building awake with the porn-grade ass reaming, had wormed their way under his skin. He was well and truly fucked now. He was never gonna be the same.

Jack has to admit, as the moaning finally stops and he feels himself drifting off to sleep, having those two guys buried under his skin, living in his heart, didn't feel too bad at all.

It actually felt pretty fucking great.

Chapter End Notes

we're getting super close to the end of this fic. i'm still trying to process that emotionally. i've started notes for my next fic, outlining and working out some details, so i'll hopefully start that as soon as this work is completed.

thanks for sticking with me, it's been a wild ride.
Mickey is sweating like a fucking pig. He wipes his forehead with the back of his arm and grips his shovel again.

He should have called out today. Faked a stomach bug. Hell, he should have told Matty he had fucking cancer. Anything to get out of this bullshit.

But he's not that guy anymore. He's responsible now. Unfortunately.

He's over at a house on the south side, not far from his family home, digging a trench for a new fancy-ass retaining wall. The house is old, but Matt's company has been working on it for months, and once this wall is up and the sod is put down, it will be ready to go on the market.

Mickey's actually pretty proud of the work they've done at this place. It will be the first time he's been on a job from start to finish, and it's cool to watch it all come together, to know he had been part something that ended up looking so damn good. With a solid foundation, good bones. He and Matt and the other guys on the crew took something old, dirty and broken, and turned it into something fresh, clean and new.

Matty's gonna make bank on this sale.

He buries his shovel in the dirt again, jamming his foot down on the spade to get it deep enough to heave a heavy shovelful over his shoulder, adding it to the pile behind him.

"Hey Mick." Matt calls, coming around the corner, wiping his hands on his jeans. "You at a place where you can stop for the day? I gotta get up to the supermarket and get some stuff for Lex."

Mickey looks over his shoulder, leaning on his shovel. Huh. What the hell time is it? He's got other shit he needs to do today too, and he really shouldn't be late.

"Quittin' time?" he asks, wiping his brow again with his forearm. It's seriously hot as fucking balls, and if he weren't at work right now, he sure as shit wouldn't be wearing a shirt. The shirt he does have on is soaked through with sweat, clinging to his torso uncomfortably.
"Yeah, I mean, I'm sure you've got shit of your own you need to do today too. Doing something fun for the holiday? Jack said something about you and Ian having big plans?" Matt comes up next to him, eyeing the hole in the ground Mickey's been working on for hours now.

Mickey nods, glancing over at Matt before he throws his shovel to the ground and grabs up his Gatorade that's been sitting in the sun way too long. He takes a gulp of piss-warm cherry flavored water and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, nodding.

"I wouldn't say 'big plans'." Mickey laughed. "But yeah, we're actually going up to Ian's family's house for a good ol' fashioned Gallagher rager. Fireworks, booze, barbecue, the whole nine yards. They've been throwing this party for as long as I can remember. Don't think I've ever actually gone, though." Mickey said, lost for a moment in long ago, hazy memories.

"You have any idea what Jack's gonna be up to tonight? Haven't heard from him today. Lex told him he can't come up to the lake house with us, but he didn't seem too upset. Hope he's not gonna be getting himself into trouble. I felt kinda bad when she put her foot down like that." Matt sighed, turning away and kicking a stray stone across the grass.

Mickey looked across the yard, watching a car drive down the street. Thing are still not going so well between Matt and Lexi. This holiday weekend is yet another one of Matt's attempts to get back on solid ground with his wife. Matt has told Mickey a lot about their struggles over the past few months, more than Mickey wants to know, really. But Matt seems to really need someone to talk to sometimes, so he listens. About couples therapy and long weekends like this one, where Matt and his wife work on rebuilding their relationship, after Jack had inadvertently busted it all to shit.

Mickey ran a hand through his sweaty hair, turning back to face his boss. "Uh, yeah, actually." he shrugged. "He's gonna be with us."

"What?" Matt asked, eyebrows raised.

"Yep." Mickey nodded, taking another sip of his drink before capping it and tossing it into the wheelbarrow next to him so he could pull his cigarettes out, placing one between his lips and lighting it. He took a long drag, enjoying the burn. He blew the smoke above his head, adjusting his shades on the bridge of his nose before continuing. "It's not that big'a deal. Jack and Ian are thick as thieves these days, hell Jack even gets along with Ian's douche bag brother. I'm sure he can hold his own with the rest of the Gallaghers."

"So, those issues you and Ian were having with Jack are really over now?" Matt asked skeptically, eyebrows raised.

Mickey nodded, taking another drag. "I was just as surprised when that shit first happened. But it's crazy, Matty. I can't really explain it, they're like BFF's now, and I'm the third wheel." Mickey chuckled.

"I highly doubt that, Mick." Matt laughed lightly. He bent down and picked up a couple of small spades, throwing them in the wheelbarrow before grabbing the handles and steering toward the truck.

"Okay, maybe not best buddies, but they get along real well. The three of us hang out all the time. I really think Jack helping Ian out during his last episode really changed shit between them." Mickey paused, glancing at his boss. "Did Jack tell you about that? What happened with Ian?" Mickey knows he didn't. It's not really coffee break talk. But Mickey knows how close Jack is with his father, and he's fairly certain Matt knows all about what happened.
Matt nodded, opening the tailgate and grabbing one end of the wheelbarrow. "Take that other end." he said.

Mickey dutifully grabbed the end of the metal bowl and helped Matt lift the bucket into the bed of the truck.

"Yeah, he told me. The edited version, I'm sure, but I'm used to that with Jack. What I do know is that Ian needed some help and Jack was there. Is there more to it?"

"Kindof." Mickey shrugged, walking around to the cab and hopping in the passenger seat, waiting for Matt to slip into the driver's seat before continuing. "He went down to this club and brought Ian home. Cuz of Jack, Ian got to his doctor on time. You know he's bipolar?" Mickey didn't really like talking about Ian's business, but this was Matt for god's sake. Mickey doesn't have many people he confides in, and Matt is one of them.

"Yeah, Jack mentioned it. Not too in depth, but I know enough to understand. All this happened months ago, right?"

"Yeah." Mickey agreed, pulling his seat belt over his chest. "Back in the middle of the winter. The short version is Ian had a bad day, we had a fight, and he took off. He ended up at a bar, and a friend of Jack's saw him there. He called Jack, and Jack went and picked him up. I guess he and Ian had a real long conversation, about them, and me, whatever. Ever since then, they've been good. Better than good, really. I kind of still can't believe it."

"That's good, Mick. I'm really glad things are finally settling down between the three of you. I have to tell you, I was really worried for a while there." Matt said. He glanced over at Mickey briefly before shifting his eyes back to the road. "Y'remember what I said to you before you went away for Valentine's?"

"Yeah, Matty." Mickey rolled his eyes. This again, really?

"You doing that? You putting Ian first? You putting yourself first?" Matt's voice was even, but Mickey could hear the emotion regardless.

"Yeah, man. I am. Me and Ian have talked about all this shit a lot. But I think I got a handle on it, for real this time. When Ian ran off that day, all I could think of was how I was gonna lose him again, y'know?" Mickey sighed, looking out the window. How did Matt always end up pulling all this shit out of him? He never used to talk about his feelings like this.

He kind of misses those days, sometimes.

"That must have been scary for you." Matt says. "That put things into perspective for you?"

"I guess. I didn't really think about it like that, when it was happening. I was just so fucking scared. Then I started blaming myself. Like, if I'd been paying better attention it never would have happened. But Ian's shrink says that's not productive or whatever. So I just started thinking of what I could do to avoid that shit in the future. And I remembered what you said about putting Ian first. So I've been doing that. Making him my priority. Jack's been real understanding, about us not hanging out as much anymore."

"Jack should be understanding. You have your own life, Mickey. And Jack needs to have his." Matt hit his blinker and turned onto a crowded street. "Have you ever had a friend like Jack before, Mickey?" he asked while they idled at a stop light.

"No. Not really." Mickey said, watching a lady walking a huge german shepard cross the street.
"Never really was the friend type."

"I never would have guessed." Matt chuckled. "Just try to remember what I said Mickey. Jack's not going to stop loving you if you build a life with Ian. I know my son, and he's going to be happy for you. You're not going to lose him. You're doing just fine. So keep up the good work. M'proud of you."

Mickey blushed, looking out the window again. "C'mon." he mumbled.

"Don't give me that shit." Matt scoffed. "You're a good guy, Mickey. Ian is lucky to have you, and so is my son. I don't know how many times I have to tell you that before you believe it."

Mickey's not sure he'll ever believe it, but he keeps that to himself.

"So, we got a few more miles before I drop you off." Matt said. "Tell me how your brother's holding up on the baby countdown."

Mickey laughed, then proceeded to tell Matt a story about how Iggy horrified an entire lammas class when his switchblade fell out of his pocket during breathing exercises.

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Jack checked his phone one more time, double checking that he had the right address. There was a lot of noise coming from the back of the house he was standing in front of, but he couldn't make out any words or any voices he recognized.

He should have waited for Mickey. This was a stupid fucking idea. He's already made the decision that he's not going to stay long. Mickey and Ian both invited him, but he still feels like an outsider.

He dropped down on the front step and checked the time on his phone. He was a little early, and he didn't want to go back there alone.

The conversation Jack had with his father earlier in the day is running through his head on loop right now, and Matt's words are doing nothing to ease the tension building in Jack's gut.

His father had called him about an hour earlier, while Jack was back at the sober house, cleaning up after a long day of painting a commercial building downtown. Jack had just gotten out of the shower, wrapping a towel around his waist when his phone started dancing on the bathroom vanity.

He had glanced down, seeing his father's picture, and grabbed it up. "Hey dad."

"Jackie, what's up?" his dad's voice boomed over the line.

"Not much, just got home from work. Just got out of the shower like two seconds ago. Why?"

"Mick told me you're going with him and Ian to that party tonight." Matt said.

Jack rolled his eyes at himself in the mirror, doing his damnedest not to snap at his dad. "Yeah, so? You call to tell me not to drink? We talked about this, dad."

"Yeah, we did. And even though I disagree with you still drinking, that's not why I called. As long as you follow the rules at that house, and give clean urines, I won't get on your case about that shit."
"So why are you calling then?" Jack asked, confused. He figured for sure his father had called to give him a lecture about his continued drinking and pot smoking. He had already had several variations of that conversation with his mother over the past few months.

"Well...." Matt started. "I was just wondering if you were planning on go home tonight."

"Huh?" Jack asked, growing more confused by the minute.

"I was talking to Mick at work today, Jack, and I think it may be a good idea for you to not spend the night at his apartment tonight."

"Dad, what the fuck are you talking about? I haven't even talked to Mick and Ian about it. What difference does it make to you if I spend the night or not?"

"Jack, Mickey and Ian need some time alone. You spend the night almost every weekend. And I'm sure they like having you there, but don't you think it would be a good idea to give them some time together, just the two of them?"

"Dad, where is this coming from?" Jack asked, walking out of the bathroom. None of his roommates were home, so he dropped his towel and wandered over to his bureau, grabbing some underwear and struggling to step into them while he pinched his phone between his shoulder and his head.

"Jack, you're not dumb." Matt sighed. "I think you know exactly what I'm talking about. I know things between you and those boys are much better than it was during your relapse. I know you and Ian are friends now, and I know you did help him out when he was sick, but Mickey and Ian are a couple, Jack. They need to be alone sometimes. That's what grown adults do when they are in committed relationships. I know you don't like to be alone, and I know Mickey fills some kind of void in your life. But if you care about those two men like you say you do, you need to let them be once in a while. It will be good for them, and I think a little time alone would be good for you too. Do you understand what I'm trying to say, son?"

Jack stopped dressing, dropping down onto his bed, resting his head in his hand.

"Are you calling me co-dependent, dad?"

"Jackie," his father sighed again. "I'm not calling you anything. I'm just saying that giving those boys a little space will actually help strengthen your bond with them. Show them that you're strong enough to do some shit on your own. And then the time you DO spend together will be more meaningful, because you all will want to be together. You're not just with them trying to fill the silence in your head."

"Jesus fuck, dad. You've been hitting the therapy couch pretty hard, huh?" Jack laughed weakly. His father's words were cutting him deep.

"Yeah, well, I have this son who's put me through the ringer, so yeah, I get my billable hours in." Matt said. It was meant to come out as a joke, but his voice cracked at the end, and Jack knew he was close to tears.

Jack felt his own throat tighten up, the beginning of tears stinging his eyes. He pulled a pair of clean shorts on, sniffling a little as he struggled to reign in his emotions.

"Okay, dad. I get it." Jack said sadly. "I'll go back to the sober house tonight, let Mick and Ian have some space from me."

"Not from you, Jackie, with each other." Matt said. "I'm not trying to hurt your feelings, not at all. I
want you to be healthy and happy. That's what I want for Mickey too. But you're my son, Jack. And you will never be the amazing, strong, beautiful man you can be if you hide behind your friendship with Mickey instead of facing your own shit."

"Yeah, okay." Jack said. He hadn't thought about it like that, but his father was rarely wrong. Maybe he had been avoiding his own issues by immersing himself in his friendship with Mickey. "I'll go home tonight. Maybe I'll do some yoga." he laughed.

"Oh!" his father's voice perked up. "You doing that again?"

"Yeah, still helps y'know, quiet my mind or whatever. Guided meditations too. I'm a full blown hippie now, dad." Jack chuckled. He leaned back, rummaging around in the pocket of his dirty jeans for his smokes, drawing one out and slipping it between his lips before digging around in the other pocket for his lighter.

"That's good, Jack. That's so good." his father laughed. "Now if we could only get you to quit smoking." he added on as the spark of the lighter traveled over the phone.

Jack had hung up with his father not long after that, but his words were still ringing in his ears. Was he avoiding his own life by spending every free minute with Mickey? He hadn't thought of it at all, but looking back over the past few months, it sure as shit looked that way.

Fuck. Okay.

He's going to have to reevaluate his shit.

He was still lost in thought when a pair of dirty and worn work boots came into view of his downcast eyes.

Mickey. Of course.

He turned his head up, coming face to face with the object of his concern.

"What the fuck're you doing sitting out here?" Mickey asked, eyebrows high on his forehead, his aviator shades propped up on the crown of his head. "Party's around back."

Jack shrugged, leaning back against the step. "Felt kinda weird going back there alone."

Mickey nodded, scratching the back of his head as his eyes traveled toward the back yard. "I get that. Ian just texted me, he's on his way, why don't we go back there and show those Gallaghers we don't scare so easily, huh?" he laughed, offering his friend an extended hand.

Jack smiled up at him, sliding his hand into Mickey's and letting the other man pull him to stand.

"Okay, let's do this."

-----------------------------------------------------------------

Ian was late. What else is new? He's practically running down the sidewalk in his old neighborhood, desperate to get to the party. Mickey and Jack should be there already, and Ian is worried they've been pacing in front of the house the whole time, cursing him for his tardiness.
He had gotten caught up on his way out of the station. He was dressing in the locker room after an early shift. It had been fairly quiet, considering how much of a party day it was. But David, one of his coworkers, caught him on his way out, cornering him in the locker room, showing him pictures of his new baby.

Ian's usually really excited about seeing shit like that, pleased to be included in his coworkers happy life milestones. But he had somewhere to be today, and as cute as pictures of little Madison in her stars and stripes dress was, Ian had shit to do.

Mickey was going to give him hell for being late. He promised he'd be on time, so Mickey and Jack wouldn't be stuck alone with his family.

But he fucked it all up and now he's going to have to deal with the wrath of an angry Milkovich, which was never a pleasant.

He rounded the corner and his family home came in sight down the block. He was shocked, and mildly concerned, to not see Mickey or Jack standing on the street anywhere. Had they blown him off? Gone to the bar or some other festivity?

Shit.

As Ian walked the last few feet to his family home, he could hear fireworks going off in the distance all over the neighborhood. Forth of July was always a big deal around these parts. No amount of gentrification could stifle the party atmosphere of Fourth of July in America, after all.

Ian chuckled at the thought, but sobered immediately when he got to the front of his family home and did not see Mickey or Jack on the porch or front lawn.

What the fuck. They ditched him.

God damn it.

Ian ran a hand through his hair, frustrated, as he dipped his hand into his pocket to grab his phone. He was gonna chew that asshole out.

But just as he went to dial, he heard the unmistakable sound of Mickey's laugh. Loud and real and fucking musical. Ian could pick out that laugh in a crowd of thousands.

He pocketed his phone again and wasted no time walking around to the back yard. What he saw when he got there left him speechless.

There in the back yard were Mickey and Jack, standing in a small circle with Lip and Kev, red solo cups in their hand as Mickey animatedly told a story. His older sister and Vee were seated by the fire pit, whispering conspiratorially while her twins played in a kiddie pool nearby.

No one had noticed him yet, so he took the opportunity to sneak up on Mickey, sliding up behind him silently and slipping his arms around him. Mickey tensed immediately, but didn't lash out. Ian took a moment to relish the fact that his boyfriend didn't swing indiscriminately at sudden contact anymore.

Mickey's head whipped around, his eyes landing on Ian's. "Jesus fuck, Ian. You know better. I almost punched you."

"But you didn't." Ian beamed, turning Mickey around by his shoulders. "You hardly flinched."
"Finally losing those prison reflexes." Lip chuckled.

"Still know how to kick ass, though." Mickey shot back, eyebrows raised. Lip just shrugged, sipping his drink.

"Ian, man. Long time no see." Kev boomed, making his way across the small space to shake Ian's hand. Ian returned the greeting, one of his hands coming up to land on Kev's shoulder. "Happy fourth, dude. You drinking? We got that light beer shit you like. Mick brought some lager." he said, making his way over to a red cooler sitting on the ground.

"Light's fine." Ian said as he greeted his brother with a small hug. He noticed his brother's cup had what looked like soda in it, and allowed himself a moment to be proud of him. He was smart enough not to mention it, though.

"We thought you blew us off." Jack laughed, coming up to Ian and leaning up on his tip toes to pull him into a hug.

"I thought you guys took off." his eyes traveled from Jack to Mickey. "Never thought in a million years that you'd be back here, immersed in the chaos." 

"You should know by now, Ian. I live for chaos." Jack laughed. "This is all pretty tame by my standards."

Ian laughed, shoving Jack with an open palm.

"So, food's gonna be ready soon. You guys go grab a seat at the picnic table, I'm gonna go plate it up," Kev said tipping his head toward the table in the back of the yard.

The men made their way over, Ian getting caught by his sister as he walked by her still seated with Vee. She grabbed his wrist as he walked by, pulling him roughly to stand in front of her as she lurched out of her seat, handing her beer to Vee so she could pull Ian into a tight hug.

Ian could tell she was tipsy already, but he didn't care. He was here with his family, that's what mattered.

"Ian, baby. Looking good." Vee smiled from her seat, her eyes flashing over to her kids before landing back on Ian. "We never see you around here anymore."

"Yeah, I know." Ian said, pulling out of his sister's embrace as she flopped back down in her chair as Kev wandered over with plates for both ladies. "I've been busy."

"I can see that." Fiona said as her eyes traveled over to Mickey and Jack horsing around at the table, throwing slices of tomato at Lip, who was dodging them to the best of his ability.

"How long have they been here?" Ian asked, looking over at his boyfriend and his best friend play fighting at the table a few feet away.

"About forty five minutes." Fiona shrugs, sipping her beer. "I have to admit it. That kid is hilarious." Fiona smiles over at the men as Jack grabs a stray cucumber and slaps it against Mickey's forehead, where it sticks like a bindi until Mickey shakes his head violently, sending it flying across the yard before he punches Jack hard in the arm.

"Yeah, he's a trip." Ian said fondly. His sister raised her eyebrows, but Ian just shrugged, taking his beer when Kev offered it. "He kinda grows on you."
"Is that why you asked him to be on your crisis team?" Fiona asked, oblivious to the fact that Ian did not, in fact, want to discuss his disorder today.

Ian sighed, bringing up a hand to scratch the back of his neck. He couldn't really be mad at her, she was a little bit drunk, and Ian would always be a concern to her. Even if she had her own life now, and wasn't available as much as she used to be, she still cared, and she was still going to worry.

Ian fidgeted a little bit, regardless, pulling on his untucked button up and scratching his head again.

Vee must have noticed his discomfort, standing up suddenly. "Here, baby. Take my seat, I've got to get the girls outta that pool so they can eat." she smiled, walking the few steps it took for her to get to the kiddie pool, smiling over her shoulder as she went.

Ian dropped down in her abandoned chair, waving Mickey off when he shot him a curious glance.

He looked back over at his sister, reaching across the space between them, wiggling his fingers at her. She smiled at him, taking his hand and swinging it a little in the open space between them.

"It's not that I don't want or need your help anymore, Fiona." Ian said, watching his sister's face carefully. "I just think you were right, y'know, about us all having our own lives now. We're not kids anymore, and I need to be responsible for my health. And I want to respect your life too. You have so much good shit going for you, with your apartment and the diner. I know you're busy. I don't see any harm in expanding my circle a little bit. I don't think a bigger safety net is a bad idea at all, do you?"

"No, of course not, Ian." Fiona said, squeezing his hand. "I guess I just felt like you maybe thought I let you down. Like you felt like you couldn't count on me anymore."

"Not at all." Ian insisted. "I will always need you in my life, Fiona."

Fiona gave Ian a watery smile before leaning over the space and pulling him into a hug. "You're doing good, Ian. I'm happy for you."

"I'm happy too, Fi." Ian said, eyes wandering from his sister to his boyfriend and back. "I'm happy for all of us."

-------------------------------

"So, are the rumors true?" Lip asked, mouth full of potato salad.

"Jesus fuck, Philip!" Mickey spat. "Chew with your mouth closed, you animal. Does no one in your family have any god damn manners?"

Lip gave Mickey a cocky smirk, potatoes all over his chin. "Are you really giving me shit right now? You spent your entire teen years looking like one of the garbage pail kids."

Mickey just shrugged, taking a sip of his beer.

"What rumor?" Jack asked, flopping down next to Lip with a plate full of food, after taking a trip to the grill to load up. Ian was right behind him, bringing a plate for him and Mickey.

"I told you I could feed myself, asshole. I'm not five years old." Mickey grumbled, taking the plate
regardless.

"What rumor??" Jack insisted, throwing a carrot at Mickey's head to get him to shut up.

"That Mickey's brother is having a kid." Lip said.


"Well excuse me, I knew I hadn't been keeping up with my Milkovich Monthly Newsletter." Lip replied sarcastically.

"Why do you give a shit?" Mickey asked back.

"Is it so hard to believe I'm interested in what's happening with your brother?" Lip replied. "This pains me dearly to say, but we're practically family now." Lip shivered dramatically as he spoke.

Mickey laughed at that, glancing over at Ian just in time to catch the dreamy look in his eyes.

Mickey shrugged again, finally looking over at Lip. "Tessa's due at the beginning of August, so yeah, 'ready to pop' is a pretty much the only way I can describe it."

"Was she super psyched with the nursery?" Jack asked, interjecting himself into the conversation with ease. "I've been meaning to get down there, but with work and shit, I've been swamped."

"Oh, shit, man." Mickey laughed, grabbing up his beer and taking a long satisfying pull from it. "She was fucking crying. At first I thought we fucked up. I could never read a chick's emotions to save my life."

"That's not a gay thing, dude. No man can do that shit." Lip laughed.

"So, she liked the crib?" Jack asked, eyes bright.

"Yeah, man. She loved it. Your dad really came through."

"I thought you guys would like it. I asked Mom if you could have it. She was so excited, but you should know, she wants pictures once the little critter makes an appearance."

Mickey chuckled, rolling his eyes. "I don't think pictures will be in short supply when that shit goes down."

"So, that means the baby is going to be born right around your birthday, Mick." Ian said, the thought occurring to him for the first time. How did he miss that?

"Yep." Mickey smiled.

Ian smiled back, excited. Tessa having a baby was going to be so great. It's been quite a while since he's been around a baby. Frannie is like a whole tiny person now, and Ian misses being around infants. Maybe it's because he grew up with so many siblings, but he's just always loved babies.

"So we're gonna have another bad ass Leo Milkovich. Interesting." Jack mused.

"Who the fuck said we're gonna call him Leo?" Mickey asked, confused.

"Leo, Mick. The zodiac sign? YOUR zodiac sign." Jack said, eyebrows raised. "Tell me you don't know your own zodiac sign?"
"What do I look like? The Psychic Friends Network? Why the fuck would I know my zodiac sign?"

"I'm a Taurus." Ian offered.

"I can see that. You're certainly bull-headed." Jack giggled.

"I'm an Aires." Lip supplied. Mickey frowned.

"And I'm an Aquarius." Jack beamed. "See, Mick. Everyone knows their zodiac."

The conversation devolved then into the men picking apart each other's horoscope traits and teasing each other over their quirks and habits.

A while later, Kev wandered over, beer in hand. "I need the assistance of two able-bodied men." he said.

"Uh, I don't think it's that kind of party." Jack smirked, tipping his head back to stare at Kev over the back of his chair, upside down.

"Man- what the fuck? No!" Kev balked, while everyone else cracked up. "Mick, tell your boy that was a one time thing!"

"What now? How the hell would I know that?" Mickey's eyebrows shot up. He looked over at Ian. "What the fuck is he talking about?"

"Kev used to bar-tend at the Fairy Tale," Ian laughed. "Let dudes blow him for money."

"You what?" Mickey choked out, his wide eyes finding Kev's crimson face. "You did not!"

"That is neither here nor there. I just need someone to help me bring over the fireworks." Kev said, his face turning scarlet as the four men stared at him, slack faced. "Fuck you guys." he said. "Like you never needed money."

"Okay, okay." Mickey laughed. "I just, I can't get that image out of my head." Mickey laughed, shaking his head back and forth as if it would rid him of the image. "Get the fuck up, Philip. Let's go get some explosives."

"They've been gone for a minute." Jack said, handing Ian another small branch.

"They're probably smoking." Ian shrugged, taking the offered stick and adding it to the pile. "Kev doesn't smoke weed in front of his kids." he added, his eyes flicking to the twins as they ran around the yard.

"Well, fuck." Jack laughed. "I shoulda helped 'em."

Ian laughed back. "We got a bud in the car, we can hit it on the way home. You coming over tonight?"

Jack shook his head, remembering his father's words clearly. "Nah, I think I'm gonna go back to the sober house, call this dude I've been talking to on grinder." It was a lie, but Jack knew Ian would be
suspicious if he wanted to go home for no good reason. He was in fact chatting with a dude named Eli on Grindr, but he had no intentions of hooking up with him that night. He knew the guy was at some stupid frat party for the holiday. But Ian didn't need to know any of that.

"Good on you, kid." Ian smiled, taking more offered sticks and arranging them in the fire pit. "Hand me the lighter?"

Jack passed it over and Ian started trying to light the fire.

"So, uh, I wanted to ask you something." Ian said slowly, his eyes fixed on the small fire he was nurturing. He tossed in a couple more twigs, leaning over the tiny blaze to blow on the flames.

"Sure, Ian. What's up?" Jack replied, sipping his second beer of the night.

"How much do you know about probation?"

"Jesus Christ, Kev. You've got a god damn arsenal here. What are you planning on doing, burning down the whole neighborhood?" Mickey chuckled, tossing a few more roman candles into the cardboard box on the couch.

"Nah, I just like to blow shit up. That's a normal thing for a dude, Mick. Don't act like you don't like it too." Kev said back, tossing some larger cylinders into the box along with a few boxes of sparklers for the kids. Lip had stayed out front, grabbing another box of fireworks from under the stairs.

"I never said I didn't like it." Mickey replied, gathering up the last of the explosives before picking up the box and heading toward the door.

"So, how's the kid doing?" Kev asked, leading the way out of the house and back toward the back yard. Lip had already made his way over, and was now spreading his goods all over the picnic table.

"You mean Yev?" Mickey asked, a little surprised. Kev hadn't asked about Yevgeny in a long time.

"Yeah, man. I mean, is that okay? I know you don't talk about him a lot. I didn't mean to overstep." Kev backpedaled quickly.

"Nah, it's all good man." Mickey waved him off with his free hand, balancing the box on his hip precariously with the other. He stopped on the side of the house, not wanting to have this particular conversation in front of everyone else. Kev turned when he noticed Mickey stopped walking, confusion written all over his face. "I miss him." Mickey said simply. "I mean, we talk all the fucking time, right? But it's just not the same." Mickey sighed, leaning up against the porch. "I mean, I was never around that much to begin with, anyway. I went to jail before he was even two years old. Then I took off to Mexico. So it's not like I know what I'm missing or anything." Mickey said, trying to keep his voice even. He'd only had three beers, so there is no way in hell he's gonna get all weepy talking about his kid. "But it's like, now that I'm around, and he's in my life, kinda, I wanna be there for all his shit, y'know? Like, he did this play, I guess, at school. Svet sent me some pictures. Kid was a monkey or some shit. But I didn't get to see it. I only saw pictures. I don't get to hang out with him, and it kinda bums me out...." Mickey trailed off awkwardly, running his fingers over his mouth before gripping the box with both hands. "But he's doing real good, and that's what matters." he added on when he saw Kev's face. He bristled at the sympathy he could see in his eyes, walking
around him and making his way back to the party.

"That's real good, Mickey." Kev called after him, trying to keep up with his fast strides. "He's a good kid, we miss him around here too." he clapped Mickey on the shoulder as they walked through the fence into the back yard.

"But Svet actually said she might let the little fucker visit some time soon, so there's that." Mickey added on as an after thought. He and Svet had only spoken about it in passing, no real plans had been made yet, but Mickey couldn't help but hope it would actually happen.

"No shit?" Kev asked, pleased. "That's awesome, Mick. Real awesome." Kev beamed, his whole face lighting up.

Mickey nodded, a small smile splitting his lips. The idea of spending more time with his son was not something he'd put much thought into, not wanting to get his hopes up. But now that the opportunity may be there, he can admit, he's pretty fucking excited. He rounds the corner and as his eyes caught on Ian, his smile widened exponentially. His boyfriend was sitting in a folding chair near the fire pit, face lit up by the dancing flames, talking animatedly with Jack and Lip. His hands were flying erratically and he had a huge smile on his face.

Ian's smile was the most beautiful thing Mickey ever seen.

"Daddy's got the fireworks!" Jemma hollered, drawing the attention of everyone in the yard.

"C'mon, Mick, let's explode these fuckers." Kev laughed as they were surrounded by excited people.

Mickey smiled back, nodding, but his eyes were still on Ian. Mickey can't get over the sharp left turn his life has taken. When he first started fucking around with Ian, he knew shit was never going to be the same, but never in his most bizarre fever dreams did he ever anticipate this shit.

It had never been a fairy tale, and they'd gone through more than their fair share of bullshit, but looking back now, he wouldn't change a god damn thing. For the first time in his life, he is well and truly happy. The thought makes his smile grow even bigger as he flops down in the empty seat next to Ian.

"So then we picked him up and threw him down the stairs. You wouldn't believe the sound his head made when it hit the pavement." Lip laughed. Mickey had come into the story halfway through, but he was positive they were talking about Frank.

"Which time?" he asked, earning himself a questioning look from Jack.

"This shit happened more than once?" Jack balked.

"You are so suburban, Jack." Mickey chuckled, sipping his beer.

Jack gave him an unimpressed glare, but said nothing.

"We're talking about the time he pawned all the TVs?" Mickey asked, turning to Ian.

"Nah, the time he stole all our copper pipe." Ian laughed, sipping his own beer. He and Jack had decided to have three each at the party, so he was savoring this one.

"You have got to be kidding me." Jack said, slack-jawed.

"You're right, Mickey." Lip said casually. "This kid is real fucking suburban."
Jack scowled at Lip, throwing his empty beer can at his head. It hit his forehead with a metallic thud and landed in the grass.

"Was that really necessary?" Lip deadpanned, wiping a few stray drops of beer off his face, grimacing.

"I'm pretty sure it was." Jack replied. Ian and Mickey nodded along, further irritating Lip. He stood quickly, throwing up two middle fingers at the men before stalking over toward Kev, who was just finishing up setting up the fireworks.

Ian, Mickey and Jack sat there, in a small circle, watching Lip and Kev light the fireworks one by one. Fiona and Vee were seated at the picnic table, each holding a delighted little girl in their lap, their happy faces lit up again and again by the exploding lights in the sky. Mickey tilted his head back, soaking up the display. It was pretty impressive for an impromptu back yard thing.

He let his eyes travel from the brilliant colors above, to the man seated on his left. Ian had his head tilted back as well, a small smile on his lips. His whole face was illuminated by the bursts of color. Blue, green, and red, in quick succession. Ian's expression was full of childlike wonder. He looked gorgeous. Mickey acts without thinking. He leaned over in his chair, laying one hand on Ian's knee and using the other to grip him under the chin, tilting his face down. Mickey met him in the middle, mouth open, ready. He's never been one for public displays of affection, but they're safe in the Gallagher's back yard, surrounded by family and friends.

Ian looks a little shocked at first, but his smile only grows as Mickey kisses him. Ian's lips are soft, a little dry, but feel perfect against Mickey's. Mickey can't hold his grin as he presses his lips to Ian's over and over, his tongue darting out to swipe over Ian's bottom lip before plunging into his mouth.

"Awe, how sweet." Jack swoons in the background. Mickey doesn't even acknowledge him.

"Come the fuck on with the gay PDA." Lip adds, because he always has to say something. He's standing off to the side, arms crossed over his chest.

Mickey keeps kissing Ian, but takes his hand off his knee so he can flip Lip off over his shoulder.

Mickey thinks that sitting here, kissing Ian under a sky of brilliant explosive color is one of the most beautiful moments of his life.

He knows that makes him so fucking gay. And he loves every second of it.

---------------------------------------------------------

"Thanks so much for coming, you guys." Fiona says, making her way down the line, hugging each of the three men as they gather their things to head home for the night. Mickey shakes Kev's hand as he and Vee make their way back to their house for the night after saying goodbye to everyone else.

"Hey, uh, lemme know how it goes with the little man, huh? We've been wondering about him." Kev looks nervous again, in the florescent spot light illuminating the yard. Mickey nods, giving his hand one last shake.

"Sure thing, man. See ya around." Mickey agrees.
Kev nods again and he and his wife make their way around to the street, each carrying a sleeping toddler in their arms.

"So, is someone good to drive?" Fiona asks after she released Ian from her grip.

"They've had like four beers between the three of them, Fiona. I'm sure anyone of them is fine to drive." Lip laughs. "You, on the other hand, are cut off." he adds, taking her mostly empty beer from her and dropping it in the trash.

Fiona giggles. "Yeah, I guess I'm pretty hammered." she agrees, then frowns. "What am I supposed to do with all this left over booze? This has never happened before."

Ian laughs at that as he starts to lead Mickey and Jack back towards the front of the house. "Save it for next time, Fi." he calls over his shoulder. He waves one last time, and Fiona and Lip wave back as they make their way up the back steps.

Ian gets to the truck first, standing by the driver's side door waiting. Mickey and Jack follow a few steps behind.

"Gimme the keys, Mick."

"Why? I'm not drunk." Mickey replies, leaning on the bumper next to Ian. Jack stands by the passenger door, waiting out this little pissing contest.

"Neither am I. But someone has to roll the joint, and I know you are super picky about that shit." Ian says easily.

Mickey cocks his head to the side, thinking. "I'm not picky."

"How about a perfectionist? Does that work better for you?" Jack laughs.

"You have fuck all to say about this, you can't even roll." Mickey said back, still holding his hand out for the keys.

"C'mon, Mick. I wanna drive. You always drive. Lemme this one time. You roll the joint, we'll smoke up with Jack, then we can go home and do whatever you want." Ian says, licking his lips. He takes one small step, getting into Mickey's personal space, but not touching him. Not yet.

"Anything I want?" Mickey asks quietly. In the low light of the streetlamps Ian can see Mickey's eyes go wide. He swallows hard and Ian watches his adam's apple bob with it. Ian licks his own lips again, unconsciously.

"Anything."

"Guys! I'm getting eaten alive here. Why are there mosquito in the city? I'm gonna get malaria!" Jack wails, his arms flailing out around his head as he smacks the back of his neck with an open palm.

"God, Jack." Mickey sighs. "You are a giant gay cock-blocking child. Get in the damn truck. Ian's driving." he tosses the keys to his boyfriend, taking a moment to appreciate the hungry look in his eye before going around to the passenger side. "You're in the back, Cauldwell, don't even think about getting up front."

"My dad owns this truck." Jack whines, dutifully climbing into the back seat anyway.

"Exactly. And he let me use it. So that means I call the shots." Mickey barks, but he's smiling. Jack
rolls his eyes as he pulls his seat belt across his chest.

The three men get situated and Ian turns the engine over and pulls away from the curb. He weaves his way off the street and towards Jack's house. Mickey rolls the joint quickly with deft fingers, bringing it to his lips and lighting it. He takes a long drag before passing it to Ian.

"So you're really not gonna come over tonight?" Ian asks, coughing a bit before passing the joint backwards to Jack.

"Nah. You guys have me over all the time." Jack replies, taking his hit and passing the weed back to Mickey.

Mickey's already feeling buzzed. He didn't drink too much. Few beers, couple shots, and now this weed. But it's enough to have him feeling light and loose and warm. His hand crosses the small space between the seats and lands on Ian's thigh. His fingers dig into the meat of his leg, feeling the strong muscle contract under his touch. Ian lets out a small sigh, head tilting back into the headrest a little as Mickey continues to squeeze and release his leg. He takes one last drag off the joint and ashes it in the tray, passing it to Ian once more.

"We don't mind." Ian replies easily. "We like having you around."

That warms Mickey's heart. Not just how Ian includes Jack in their life now, but how Ian is always referring to himself and Mickey as 'us' or 'we' - like they are a unit. A team.

Mickey must be high. He giggles a little.

"I know. And I love hanging out with you guys. But I wanna maybe go see this dude, and I bet you guys would like a nice long night all alone, huh?" Jack says, taking another hit and holding it, his voice coming out strained when he speaks again. "Not that I don't love listening to you guys fuck, but it makes me feel like the worst kind of perv."

Mickey bursts out laughing at that, turning in his seat to smack Jack in the head with the hand that was just gently caressing Ian's leg. "You are the worst kind of perv."

"Okay, okay." Ian says, gripping Mickey by his shoulder and turning him back around in his seat. "Face forward, or next time Jack's riding up front."

Mickey gives him a glare, but he can't hold onto it, his face breaking out in a stupid smile and he laughs. He grabs the joint from Jack, taking one last hit before stubbing it out in the ashtray.


"Alright, alright. Fuck." Mickey yells, his hand flying out to flick the radio knob. "Just shut the fuck up."

The music fills the cab and at first Mickey doesn't recognize the song. But then he does.

It's one of the songs Mandy played on New Years. That band she loves so much, that hippie 311 shit. Jack and Ian are obviously into it, since they both start belting out the lyrics as soon as the tune comes on.

"Passin' the kind bud. Kickin' back in the sand in the sun.
To be alive is lovin', where the shore meets the sea man
I'm hummin! I'm hummin!"
Jack bellows the lyrics out, swinging his arms wide, grooving in his seat. He leans forward, in between the two men and sings out as loud as his voice will allow, Ian going right along.

"Like I said it before, I'll say it once more,  
Knew you would make me feel so good, want to do you right. Can't get enough,  
This is the stuff life's about and it trips me out, want to do you right.  
I want to do you right."

Ian smiles in the dark of the cab, his hand reaching out to grip Mickey's leg as he faces him, singing to him.

"Bright mornings, days when I want so much, I want nothing.  
Just this life and no more.  
All come within this world there's only one for me.  
He's waiting. I'll soon come."

He waggles his eyebrows like an idiot and Mickey smiles at him, he can't help it. He feels like he's caught in some kind of movie. He must be stoned, because he never has thoughts like that, but he can't help it. Jack and Ian are just radiating happiness and joy, lost in the moment and Mickey couldn't love either of them more if he tried. He feels lucky for the millionth time that night, and he just can't deal with it. Not at all.

A thought occurs to Mickey's drug-hazed mind in that moment. This is the first time his poltergeist truck has given him a good feeling. He actually agrees with the truck this time. This is the stuff life's about, and it does in fact trip him out.

He laughs again, can't help it. He's agreeing with his truck. Life is so fucking weird sometimes.

There is a lull in the singing as the song goes through an instrumental, they're stopped at a red light and Ian leans over and kisses Mickey's neck softly. His lips part and his tongue darts out, running along Mickey's throat and ending by his ear, where he continues to sing to him, softly this time.

"Like I said it before, I'll say it once more,  
Knew you would make me feel so good, want to do you right. Can't get enough,  
This is the stuff life's about and it trips me out, want to do you right.  
I want to do you right."

He punctuates the end of the song by biting down on Mickey's earlobe, and Mickey has to bite his lip really hard to keep from moaning out loud. Ian chuckles under his breath, driving the last few streets and pulling up in front of Jack's building.

"I love that song." Jack sighs.

"Think the truck is trying to tell me something." Mickey admits. He knows he's high, if he's actually going to acknowledge the truck's seemingly supernatural powers.

"Huh? Tell you what?" Jack asks, not moving to get out of the truck just yet.

"I dunno." Mickey shrugs, feeling stupid all of the sudden. "Like, the truck is always playing music that fits what's going on in my life right at the moment, and that song just kinda got me thinking." he said, feeling dumber by the second. "Never mind, I'm high." he said, shaking his head and moving to exit the vehicle.

"No, Mickey." Jack said, his hand landing on his shoulder. "I totally believe that shit. Synchronicity or whatever. I've read about it."
"Oh, then it must be true." Mickey replied sarcastically, earning himself a palm to the face. His hand flew out and he slapped Jack back. They began to tussle over the front seat.

"Okay, enough." Ian said, getting out of the car and walking toward Jack's front stoop. The other two men followed.

Jack grabbed Ian and pulled him to his chest, wrapping his arms around him. "Thanks for asking me along tonight, I had fun." he said, before tucking his head against Ian's ear and whispering. "I think Mick and the truck are right, you guys will have your toes in the sand soon enough. I'll let you know what I figure out." he pulled back and gave Ian a wink, who smiled back at him. "Truck's smarter than it looks." he added on before turning to Mickey, who was standing a few feet away, waiting.

"Thanks for bringing me along, Mick. Good times for sure." he turned back to Ian. "Kid, your family is a fucking trip."

Ian laughed, leaning against the truck. "You fit right in."

Jack smiled at that, looking proud. "I hope so." he admits, a contemplative look on his face. "Okay, g'night." he pulled Mickey close to him, wrapping his arms around him tight. "See you soon, okay?"

"Sure thing." Mickey nodded, pulling away. "And if you go after that fucking frat boy tonight, make sure he wraps it up. College dudes are notorious whores."

"Who said anything about him doing the fucking?" Jack laughed, walking up the steps. "Versatile, Mick. Look it up." he blew a kiss toward the two men and walked in the house, not looking back.

"Jesus." Ian laughed, pulling open the driver's side door and sliding back into the seat.

"I know. I always need a recovery period after hanging out with that prick." Mickey said, sliding into his seat and slamming the door behind him. "Take me home, Gallagher."

"It would be my pleasure." Ian smiled, pulling away from the curb.

---------------------------------------------

Ian unlocked the door and walked inside, Mickey close behind him. Mickey shuts the door and is in the process of twisting the deadbolt when Ian latches onto his back. He shoves his face into Mickey's neck and plasters his body against Mickey's back, shoving him up against the door.

"Want you." Ian mutters, biting gently at Mickey's neck. His lips part and his tongue darts out to sooth the indentation of his teeth in Mickey's muscle.

Mickey groans, his forehead banging against the wood of the door. His whole body goes loose against Ian as his boyfriend grinds against his ass. Mickey arches his back, just a little, feeling the outline of Ian's hardening cock against his ass. He can't suppress the shuddering breath that slips past his lips.

"Yeah?" he asks, dumbly. Always gets so stupid around Ian's cock. That shit never changed.

"Yeah, fuck yeah." Ian replies, nipping at Mickey's earlobe like he had minutes before in the car. "Can't get enough." he laughs. If he's quoting the song or not, Mickey doesn't know, but he laughs
anyway.

He's pretty stoned, so maybe it's not even funny. Who knows. He pushes his ass out hard, sending Ian back a few steps with the force of it. He turns around and stalks toward him, predatory.

"Sure as fuck hope you can't get enough." Mickey smirks. "Cuz I got plans for your giant ginger ass tonight." he grabs Ian by his belt and starts dragging him back toward the bedroom.

Ian goes willingly, pulling his shirt over his head and dropping it somewhere in the hallway. He's on Mickey again before they even make it across the threshold of their bedroom. He wraps his arms around Mickey's waist, his face back in his neck, lips open, tasting Mickey's skin. Ian huffs a breath along the newly formed bruise he's created, the contrasting sensation making Mickey shiver.

Mickey turns in Ian's arms once they are at the foot of the bed. He tilts his head up and Ian doesn't waste a second, he's kissing him hard as soon as they lock eyes. Ian's tongue is soft and warm in his mouth, but this kiss is rough. Mickey smiles as Ian nips at his bottom lip, his hands gripping his hips hard. Ian pulls back just enough to pull Mickey's shirt up over his head and toss it over his shoulder. He drops to his knees in front of his boyfriend, the hollow sound of his kneecaps hitting the wood floor echoing through the room. Ian's fingers fumble with Mickey's belt, pulling it free and letting it drop to the floor with a clatter before going back to unzip his jeans. He pulls them down over Mickey's ass and to the floor, letting the other man step out of them before his hands are back on him. He runs his fingertips down his muscular thighs before dragging them back up to cup his ass. He rests his face against Mickey's crotch, his hot breath fanning over his hard cock, making Mickey shiver once again.

"Ian." he groans, one of his hands gripping his hair hard. He pulls Ian's head back so they are eye to eye again. "Don't tease."

Ian gives him a playful glare, but doesn't say anything. He tucks his fingertips into the top of Mickey's boxers and pulls them down slowly. Mickey's cock springs free and Ian smiles up at him again. Mickey kicks the underwear across the floor, hands still buried in Ian's hair. He flexes his fingers, pulling and releasing the red locks as Ian mouths at his dick, lips and tongue barely touching him. Mickey sighs, head tilted back as Ian closes his mouth around the head of his cock.

"Fuck."

Ian doesn't acknowledge him, totally consumed with his task. He bobs his head, taking a little more into his mouth with each pass. He has one hand wrapped around the base of Mickey's cock, the other still running absentmindedly up and down his thigh. Mickey bucks forward, desperate for more of that wet suction.

Ian sucks him off vigorously, his hands leaving Mickey's body to work his own zipper. Once his cock is free, he settles better on his knees and gives Mickey all he's got. His tongue swirls around the tip before he bobs his head back down to the base, keeping Mickey deep in his throat as he swallow around him. Mickey is hot and hard in his mouth, and Ian loves it. He moans around him as his mouth and tongue work him. He pulls back, gripping Mickey's dick in one hand as he licks him from base to tip, over and over before closing his lips around the head and deep-throating him again. Fuck, Mickey's losing his damn mind. Ian works his cock like he owns it.

He kinda does.

"Shit." Mickey gasps, hands holding Ian's head down. He feels Ian's throat constrict around his dick and he feels like he may come right then. "Fuck, Ian. Get up here." he groans, regretfully stepping back so his dick falls out of Ian's mouth. Ian sways on his knees, bereft for a moment, eyes still
closed. When he manages to open them again, Mickey is seated on the edge of the bed, had wrapped around his hard on. He's not stroking it, just holding it, waiting.

"Whadaya want tonight, tough guy?" Mickey asks, quirking an eyebrow at his boyfriend, who has yet to get off his knees.

Ian blinks, trying to focus. He shakes his head, moving to stand. He steadies himself against Mickey's body, sagging against him, catching his breath. "It's what you want tonight, remember?" he breathes against Mickey's neck. His lips part and his mouth finds Mickey's neck again, earning him an blissful sigh from his boyfriend. He strips his jeans quickly before crawling onto the bed, straddling Mickey's waist.

"Oh yeah, that's right. Anything I want, huh, Gallagher?" Mickey's voice is dripping with shameless want, and it makes Ian painfully hard. He wraps his hands around Mickey's torso, pulling their bodies together tightly.

"Anything. " he agrees readily. He would do whatever Mickey wanted right now. Give him anything he wanted.

"How about a flip fuck?" Mickey asks lowly, not moving to look at Ian. He keeps Ian's face tucked into his neck with a hand at the base of his skull, almost like he's scared to look at him.

Ian doesn't want that.

He pulls back and finds Mickey's eyes with his own. His own hand coming up to mirror Mickey's, running gently through the thick black strands.

"Yeah, fuck. I want that." Ian agrees eagerly. The idea makes his whole body tingle.

Mickey's eyes light up, a shot of heat flowing down his limbs. "You do?" he asks, always having to make sure they are on the same page.

Ian nods again and again, slipping free from Mickey's hold and sitting on the edge of the mattress. He pulls his boxers down throws them to the floor before inching his way up to the center of the mattress, stroking his cock lazily. "Yeah, I do." he nods again. "But I wanna finish inside you." he adds on, looking up at Mickey. "Can we do that?"

"Fuck yeah we can." Mickey smiles, getting onto his knees on the mattress and crawling toward Ian. He hovered over him, a hand on either side of his face, dipping down so their noses were millimeters apart. "You wanna do it like last time? Or you wanna do the other thing?" Mickey asks, eyes dancing with mischief as he closed the distance and ran his tongue over Ian's bottom lip. Ian groaned, his whole body going tight. Mickey had never been a tease, but he'd mastered the art over the past few months.

Ian lay totally still underneath him, breathing harshly. "The other thing." he practically moaned as Mickey just barely brushed their hard cocks together before moving back to hovering over his quivering body. "Please, Mick. Let's do it that way." he wasn't above begging.

Mickey nodded, excited and happy that Ian had chose option B. It was his preference also, but he always left it up to Ian when they did this. He let his full weight rest atop Ian's body for a moment, letting his boyfriend feel how hard he was for him. Ian moaned, hands moving on their own accord. But before he could grip Mickey, he was up and away. He sat on the edge of the bed and opened the second drawer in the nightstand. Ian huffed out an expectant breath, using all his willpower to lay still and wait for Mickey to come back to him.
Mickey found what he was looking for, turning back around and laying next to Ian on the mattress.

"Mick, kiss me." Ian begged, his hand flying up to Mickey's head and pulling him into a biting kiss. Mickey eagerly reciprocated, dropping the object to the bed with a muted thud as he rolled over on top of Ian. He pushed his tongue into his mouth, moaning and desperate. Ian's hand roamed down his body gripping his ass tight. The bite of Ian's fingernails in his cheeks made Mickey's breath hitch.

He was ready to get the fuck on with this.

He grabbed Ian by the shoulders and rolled them so Ian was on top. "Get to it, Gallagher, or I'm gonna come like this." he said, spreading his legs out wide underneath his boyfriend.

Ian pushed up onto his hands and knees, grabbing the plug and the lube Mickey had just dropped on the blanket.

"Did you have fun tonight?" Ian asked randomly as he slicked up three fingers and started swirling them around Mickey's hole.

"Huh?" Mickey asked, immediately pulled out his lustful head space by Ian's arbitrary question.

"Did you have fun tonight?" Ian repeated innocently as he pushed two fingers past Mickey's rim and started fingering him.

"Fuck." Mickey gasped, willing his body to relax. His head shot back and his hips started pumping on their own accord. "Yeah, sure. It was fun." he replied, unsure what the fuck that had to do with anything at the moment.

"You like the fireworks?" Ian continued, adding more lube and working his hand faster. His other hand caressing Mickey's stomach and chest. He pushed his fingers in deep, fanning them out before jabbing forward, grazing Mickey's prostate.

"Oh shit." Mickey moaned, bucking into the sensation. "Ian, what the fuck? Fireworks? Yeah, they were okay. --- Oh god, don't stop." he whined, his hands flying up to curl into the bed sheets.

"Just curious." Ian smiled dirtily as he pulled his fingers out and grabbed up the plug, lubing it up and placing the blunt end against Mickey's entrance. Ian slid the toy inside Mickey, before pulling it free again. Twirling and prodding, letting it slip out to press against his perineum before dipping it back inside. He did it over and over, just teasing him. Mickey groaned, his whole body aching to be filled. His eyes rolled back as Ian twisted the plug, slipping it deeper inside his lover. Mickey sucked in a sharp breath as the widest part of the toy breached him. Ian pulled it out slightly before pressing it in further. Back and forth, twisting the toy a final time before applying just enough pressure for it to slip into place. Mickey moaned, feeling stretched and full. "Oh, fuck."

"I'm glad you liked the display earlier, cuz I'm about to give you some real fireworks." Ian replied slyly, crawling up Mickey body to straddle his waist. He put the lube in Mickey's hand and settled a little straighter on top of him.

"You are the corniest motherfucker." Mickey groused, rolling his eyes as he slicked up his fingers. "I can't believe I let your dorky ass fuck me." he added as he slipped his fingers around Ian's back and started circling his rim. He grinned when Ian's breath hitched.

"What does it say about you, if you're about to fuck my dork ass?" Ian asked, eyes bright. He waggled his eyebrows and swayed his ass on top of Mickey, earning himself another eye roll.

"Shut the fuck up before all the sexy wears off." Mickey smiled, pulling Ian's mouth back to his as
his finger breached Ian's hole.

"Oh god, Mick." Ian sighed into the kiss, hips pushing down, leaning into the intrusion. He's not a bottom. Not even versatile, really. But once in a blue moon, there was nothing he wanted more than Mickey inside him.

Mickey prepped him quickly, feeling like he was on the cusp of coming already. He had to get this show on the road before he blew his load all over his stomach like a teenager.

"Yeah, Mick. fuck." Ian groaned, grinding their cocks together as Mickey worked his ass open. He tipped his head down, silently begging for another kiss. Mickey complied, their tongues dancing together as Ian fucked himself on Mickey's fingers.

Mickey writhed underneath Ian, his cock weeping against his stomach and his ass clenching around the toy inside him. Jesus, he needed Ian now. Any way he could get him.

"I'm ready, c'mon." Ian moaned, mouthing and sucking at Mickey's neck. Mickey grinned at Ian's eagerness, his fingers slipping from his body as his boyfriend sat up straight on top of him. "Gonna ride you, Mick." he said, reaching behind himself and grabbing Mickey cock. He grabbed the lube off the bed and slathered it all over Mickey's dick before positioning it at his entrance and sinking down in one slow motion.

"Oh my..." Mickey moaned, his hands flying up to Ian's waist to steady him as his boyfriend started rolling his hips slowly. Ian doesn't do this a lot. He bottoms rarely, and rides Mickey even less, so Mickey's going to make the most of it.

Ian's head is thrown back, the nails on his right hand scratching down Mickey's chest he steadies himself with his other hand on Mickey's leg. What a fucking sight to see. He bucks on Mickey's lap, using his thighs to lift his ass up before dropping himself back down. Ian cries out as Mickey suddenly sits up, wrapping an arm around Ian's waist as the move together.

Ian grins as Mickey kisses him, content for the moment to just grind down onto Mickey's lap. His cock is trapped between their stomachs as Ian moves back and forth on top of Mickey. The slide is delicious and Ian can't get close enough. He wraps both arms around Mickey's shoulders as he rolls his hips on top of him.

"God Mick, feel so full." Ian sighs, tilting his head back so Mickey can sink his teeth into his shoulder. "You feel so good inside me." he groans, his hips stuttering as the head of Mickey's cock brushes against his prostate.

"Ian, we gotta switch." Mickey says through a harsh breath. "I wanna come with you inside me. Please."

Ian moans at the sound of Mickey's wrecked voice. This whole scene is so fucking hot, Ian's surprised he's even lasted this long. He nods, sitting up on his knees with a groan as Mickey slips from his ass. He leans forward, crowding Mickey back onto his back and sliding his hand down his body.

Mickey's torso is slick with sweat and it feels so fucking sexy. Ian's fingers find the end of the toy and he pushes on it gently before gripping the base.

Mickey's body goes rigid with pleasure before relaxing again. He exhales heavily as he feels the plug slip free. He closes his eyes and spreads his legs wide as Ian settles between them. He needs to come. His body is aching for release.
Ian hooks one of Mickey's legs over his shoulder, leaving him open and ready for him. He grips his elevated thigh tightly with one hand and uses the other to guide himself home. There is little resistance, thanks to the plug, but Mickey still feels hot and tight around him.

"Jesus, fuck." Mickey moans, his back arching off the bed. "C'mon, Ian. Fuckin' give it to me. Need to come."

Ian surges forward, burying himself inside his boyfriend.

This is it. This is what he wanted.

Ian fucks Mickey hard. They are both so close, have been fucking so long, that it hardly takes any time to get them there.

Mickey's head is back, arms up over his head, twisted in the sheets as Ian pounds into him. Ian still feels open, his ass slick with lube, and the thought that Mickey was just there, inside him, spurs him on even more. He pounds into Mickey's ass mercilessly, one hand on his hip and the other still gripping the thigh up against his shoulder.

Ian watches, totally enraptured, as his boyfriend's eyes roll back in his head and he reaches a shaking hand up to wrap around his own cock, which had been throbbing against his stomach moments before. He runs his fingers through a small puddle of precum that had accumulated on his stomach, using it to jerk his own cock.

It's one of the hottest things Ian's ever seen.

"Yeah, Mick." Ian grunted, his hips snapping forward. "You gonna come? Come all over yourself for me?"

"Yeah, fuck. Ian. Don't fucking stop." Mickey cried out, his hand flying on his cock as he pushed his ass into Ian's thrusts. "Oh shit!" he cried out, body thrumming with pleasure as Ian pegged his prostate. "Right there, Ian. Fuck, I'm gonna come."

"Fucking do it." Ian growled, desperately struggling for control. Mickey had to go first.

Mickey moaned loudly, his body going taut as he came all over himself, painting his chest and hand with the evidence of his pleasure.

"God, yes." Ian cried out, his hips snapping forward violently as he watched Mickey come undone. He surged forward a few more times before stilling deep inside his lover, filling him up.

Ian collapsed on top of Mickey, face tucked into his neck, heedless of the mess between them.

Mickey let him lay like that for a moment as they both tried to catch their breath. Ian sighed as he felt Mickey's hand come up and card through his sweaty hair.

After Ian's heart stopped galloping in his chest, he pulled out, earning himself a wince from his boyfriend. He fell onto his back next to Mickey and pulled him to his chest with an arm around his shoulder.

Mickey laid his head on Ian's chest as his breathing slowly returned to normal.

"So?" Ian asked after a beat of silence.

"So what?" Mickey asked groggily.
"Did you see fireworks?"

"Jesus, Ian. Seriously?" Mickey laughed burrowing his head deeper into Ian's chest. He'd have to get up and clean their mess before he passed out, but he just wanted to lay there a moment longer.

"Yeah, seriously." Ian said. Mickey could hear him smiling, felt his lips close against his temple in a tender kiss.

"Sure thing, Gallagher, your dick makes me see fireworks." Mickey deadpanned, desperately trying to hold in his smile.

He failed.

Ian laughed, wrapping his other arm around Mickey's back and pulling him into a hug.

"I had fun tonight." Ian murmured, releasing Mickey so he could reach off the end of the bed and grab a discarded t shirt to clean them up. He worked quickly, wiping them both down as best he could while Mickey grabbed a cigarette of the nightstand for them to share.

"You always have fun." Mickey replied tiredly, spreading his legs so Ian could get in between them with the balled up shirt. "Ah, that tickles." he said, swatting Ian's hand away. Ian rolled his eyes and continued his task until he was satisfied, tossing the shirt back to the floor before plucking the offered cigarette from Mickey's fingers. He took a long drag before passing it back. "I do." he replied. "I always have fun with you."

"Same." Mickey said, smiling. "But I'm pretty sure Jack lied to us tonight about having a grinder date." he said, taking the cigarette back and pulling deeply from it.

"How do you know?" Ian asked, moving to turn off the light after Mickey put out the butt in the ashtray.

"Once you know him as long as I do, you know his tells." Mickey replied as the room was plunged into darkness. Ian found him again easily, pulling Mickey's back to his chest and wrapping him in his arms.

Ian didn't reply. He was suddenly worried about his plan. If Jack couldn't keep shit from Mickey, his secret would never be kept. The whole thing would blow up in his face if Jack couldn't keep his damn cool in front of Mickey.

"Well, I guess we'll just have to wait and see if he brings it up." Ian murmured into the darkness, pulling Mickey closer to him, hoping he would drop the subject.

"Mmmhmm." Mickey hummed into Ian's chest. Ian could tell he was on the cusp of sleep, and allowed himself a quiet huff of relief.

Ian listened to Mickey breathing as he drifted off to sleep. Ian, on the other hand, was wide awake, his mind running wild with plans and ideas.

If he could pull this off, it would be a miracle. A bad ass, amazing miracle.

If he could pull it off.

He laid their in the dark, holding Mickey close, willing his excited smile down, until sleep finally found him.
"I can't believe we pulled this shit off." Jack mused, looking over the paperwork and print outs Ian had spread all over the kitchen table. They were at Mandy's house. Macy was at a roller derby match, and Mickey was shooting pool with Iggy, so it was just the three of them.

"He's gonna flip his fucking lid when he finds out." Mandy giggled, placing two cups of steaming hot coffee in front of the men.

"You don't think he's gonna be mad?" Ian asked nervously. He grabbed up his coffee and took a sip, hissing when he burned his tongue. "Shit."

"Coffee is usually hot, Ian." Jack laughed, passing him a paper napkin to sop up the puddle he'd spilled onto the table.

"Really, Jack? I knew I was forgetting something." Ian replied sarcastically.

"Really." Jack nodded, smiling. "Now tell me, why on earth would our little Mickey be angry about this? I'd kill to have a guy that would do this for my birthday."

Mandy nodded, placing her hand over Ian's which was twitching on the table. "It's awesome, Ian. He's gonna more than love it. You worry too much."

"But I didn't even ask him. I went behind his back and did all this shit." Ian sighed, feeling doubt creeping into his bones. "We don't keep secrets, not anymore."

"This." Jack said, pointing to the paperwork on the table. "Is not a secret, Ian. It's an amazing motherfucking surprise, and Mickey's gonna be so fucking happy." Jack looked to Mandy for confirmation, and she nodded again, smiling wide.

"I know my brother, Ian." she said. "And if he were a proper gay man, this shit would bring him to tears. But we're talking about Mick here, so I'm guessing all your going to get is an array of impressive facial tics."

Ian laughed, feeling a tiny bit more at ease. He'd never done anything like this before, and he was so damn scared he missed the mark.
"What about the second half of the surprise?" Jack asked eagerly. He loved surprises. He was super psyched to get in on the ground floor with this one. He couldn't wait to see the look on Mickey's face when all was revealed.

"It's all set up." Ian nodded, taking a much more careful sip of his coffee. He actually blew on it like a bitch, not eager to burn himself again. He ran his tongue over the blister forming on his lip and frowned. "It should be all set for the party on Friday."

"You know, I know we said this at your birthday party, Ian, but I don't think I've ever celebrated this much in my whole life. I can't remember doing anything for Mick's birthday ever." Mandy said, reaching for Ian's cigarettes and pulling one out. "The three of us are splitting this." she said, lighting the smoke and taking a drag.

"Well, there's no reason not to celebrate now." Jack replied, sipping his coffee. "Things are better than ever for all of us." he waved his hand around the table in a sweeping motion. "Life is fucking sweet, and we're gonna make the most of it from now on, right?"

Ian and Mandy nodded, the three of them smiling at each other.

"So, let's talk about how we're gonna get Mick down there without tipping our hand." Mandy said, the three of them leaning in conspiratorially.

They were off on a whole new mission.

"Corner pocket." Mickey called out, leaning against the pool table and taking his shot. His stick shot out and hit the cue ball, which slammed into one of his striped balls and sent it flying toward the corner pocket. Mickey threw his hand up victoriously when he sunk the ball, pointing at his pouting brother and laughing before grabbing up his beer and chugging half of it.

"Dick." Iggy muttered glumly. "You're supposed to let me win."

"Why the fuck would I do that?" Mickey asked, walking around the table to take another shot.

"Because I'm about to be a father?"

"Nah." Mickey shook his head, leaning over again and taking another shot. "You're possible upcoming fatherhood does not trump my actual birthday."

"It's not even your birthday yet, asshole." Iggy reminded him. "That shit's not for three more days."


"Technically, it's three days. It's only Wednesday, and that shit is Saturday." Iggy countered. "What are your plans, anyway?" Iggy asked, pleased with himself for sounding so casual. Ian would skin him alive if he sucked up the surprise. But Iggy was a Milkovich, and keeping a straight face while lying was ingrained in their DNA.

"Not much." Mickey shrugged. "Just hanging out at the house with Ian, I guess. Get drunk, have
crazy amounts of super gay sex."

"Come on!" Iggy groaned, shoving his brother with the hand not holding his pool cue. "I may not
give a shit that you're gay, but I don't wanna hear about it every time we hang out."

Mickey chuckled, walking around the table after missing his last shot. His brother leaned over the
table, lining up his cue. "How come Ginger Dick gets a crazy fucking party for his birthday and you
don't?" he asked, well aware that he was treading dangerously close to exposing himself. But he was
fucking curious as to why Mickey always wanted to give Gallagher the world, but never expected
anything in return.

Mickey grabbed his beer off the end of the pool table, tipping it back against his lips until it was
empty. He wiped his mouth with his bare arm and glared at his brother, who handed him another
beer with a glare of his own.

"I don't need that shit, Igg. Never did. Besides, since when is the day I was brought into this shit life
anything to celebrate?"

Iggy gave him an unimpressed glare, his pool cue shooting out and hitting the white ball into his
target, shanking it wide. "God damn it." he groaned, banging his cue against his head a few times,
eliciting a laugh from his brother. Iggy then turned to him, pointing at him with his beer bottle.
"Don't start that shit with me, Mick." he said.

Mickey leaned up against the table, looking at his brother curiously. "What?"

"That 'I don't deserve good shit' shit." Iggy said hotly. "When are you gonna give that old garbage
up?Tessa has a word for it." Iggy said, scratching his head for a moment, deep in thought. "Self
deprecating!" he said, pointing victoriously. "That shit is so you."

"Self-whaticating?" Mickey asked, walking around the table, getting ready to sink the 8 ball and end
this massacre.

"Self deprecating. It means like talking shit about yourself all the time. Making fun of yourself." Iggy
whooped, hand in the air triumphantly, like an idiot who had just answered the last question on a pop
quiz right.

"What, you wanna gold star?" Mickey laughed, sinking the ball and picking up his beer. He decided
to ignore the fact that his brother just implied that he had no self worth.

"Nah, just admit that I'm not a total dumbass." Iggy said, waggling his eyebrows.

"Never said you were dumb, Igg." Mickey said, his tone turning serious.

Iggy beamed at him, opening his mouth to say something else, when his phone went off in his
pocket. He placed his half full beer on the end of the pool table and fumbled around in the pocket of
his jeans until he had the phone in his hand.

"Hey, what's....." he started, but cut off halfway through his greeting. His whole face went pale, and
the pool cue fell from his hand and landed on the floor with a clatter.

Mickey's face screwed up in confusion, taking a step toward his brother. "Igg?"

Iggy looked up at Mickey, wide-eyed and terrified. "We gotta go."
"Well, I guess we've done all we can for now." Mandy said, gathering all the papers into a pile and slipping them into a green plastic folder. "You talked to them yet? They on board?"

Ian nodded, taking the folder out of Mandy's hand and sliding it back in it's hiding place behind a framed poster on the wall. "Yeah, of course. They're really excited."

"I believe that." Jack smiled, from his spot at the table. "I wish...." he started, but was cut off my the shrill ringing of Ian's phone.

Ian grabbed the device off the kitchen table and swiped his finger across the screen. "It's Mick." he said, "Probably wants to know what we want for dinner." Ian said. Mickey always picked up takeout for dinner on Thursday night.

"Hey Mick. Mandy and Jack are over. We're thinking chinese."

"No time for that shit." Mickey's harried voice traveled over the line. "You guys gotta get to Rush."

"Rush Memorial?" Ian gasped, his eyes darting up to Mandy and Jack, who were now standing stiffly by the kitchen island "Why? Are you hurt?" Ian's blood ran cold, his face going numb.

What now?

"No, no." Mickey breathed out a nervous laugh. "Tessa's gone into labor."

"No shit?" Ian said, relief washing over him, followed immediately by excitement.

"No shit. Me and Igg are on our way right now. Tessa's already there. She was shopping with her mom."

"Oh, thank god. I was afraid she was alone." Ian said, walking through the house to grab up his coat and cigarettes. "Get your shit together, guys." he called out to his confused friends as he flew through the house.

"We gotta a new Milkovich to meet."

---

"I can't do this, Mick." Iggy cried as the ran through the halls of the hospital on their way to the maternity ward. Iggy's face was pale, a thin sheen of sweat visible on his neck.

"Yes you fucking can." Mickey said as he stopped in front of a bank of elevators. He scanned the plaque by the buttons, seeing the maternity ward on the third floor and hitting the button to summon the elevator a little harder than necessary. "If I can have kid, anyone can. You're gonna do just fine."

"You weren't even there when Yev was born." Iggy said, unthinking. Mickey flinched, but let it slide. Iggy was freaking out, he didn't mean it as a dig.

"No, I wasn't." he replied, just as the doors slid open. Mickey walked in, dragging his brother in
along side him by his arm. "But you are going in there, you are gonna hold your chick's hand, do all that breathing shit with her, and then cut that fucking cord. You're gonna do all that shit."

"I can't." Iggy moaned, leaning up against the wall of the elevator. "I don't know what the fuck I'm doing."

"You don't need to know. Just stand there. She just needs you near her. The doctors will do the heavy lifting, and tell you when it's time to step in." Mickey soothed. He reached out across the space and settled a hand on his brother's shoulder. "This is your fucking kid, Iggy. This is the biggest fucking thing you've ever done."

"What if I fuck it up?" Iggy asked, his eyes searching his brother's face. Mickey knew he wasn't only talking about the delivery.

"You won't." Mickey assured, meaning it. "You're gonna do fucking great."

The doors slid open and the two men walked onto the floor. Mickey took up the lead, stalking over to the small reception area, giving the woman at the desk Tessa's name.

"Oh." she smiled knowingly. Mickey eyed her curiously. "No need to worry."

Ian was sitting on the El with Mandy and Jack, on their way to Rush Memorial. His leg was bouncing erratically. He was freaking out like he was having a baby.

"Are we gonna miss it?" Jack asked. He admittedly knew next to nothing about babies.

"I doubt it." Ian replied, still twitching. "First time babies can take a while."

Just then, his phone vibrated in his hand. Ian almost dropped it in his haste to answer. "Mick? What's going on? We're on our way."

"Don't fucking bother." Mickey's voice sounded strange. An odd mix between irritated and amused.

"Oh." Ian said, understanding before Mickey even explained. "They're sending her home?"

"Yeah, how'd you know?"

"I was just tell Mandy and Jack, first time labors are tricky. Is she even dilated?"

"Ian, fucking gross." Mickey spat over the line. "All I know is it ain't time yet. They're sending her home. Meet us at the house on Trumball."

"Okay." Ian said, and Mickey was gone.

"What?" Jack asked.

"False alarm."
Mickey pulled up in front of his family home, glad to get out of the truck. Tessa was irritated and in pain, and taking up most of the seat. His brother was squished up against his side so close, he was having a hard time getting the truck into park.

"This is bullshit." Tessa whined for the what had to be the fiftieth time. "I want this thing OUT."

Mickey ducked his head down, so no one would see the traitorous smile trying to break out on his face. He knew it wasn't funny that Tess was in pain, but she was never grumpy. Not even in the latest stages of her pregnancy, when she was swollen and moody the whole time. She'd been a trooper up until this very moment.

But now, she was legitimately losing her shit.

Mickey would never know what it was like to be pregnant, but looking at his brother's girlfriend right now, he's pretty sure it sucks, like a lot.

Mickey elbowed his brother in the gut, just enough to move him out of the way so he could park the truck, opening the door without further ado. Iggy followed right after, running around the front of the truck comically fast and opening the passenger door so he could help Tess out.

"I can fucking do it." she spat, batting his hand away. Mickey turned quickly, finding the other side of the street fascinating all of the sudden. If Tess saw him laughing right now, he's fairly certain she'd rip his balls off.

"I know babe." Iggy placated. "Just wanted to help." he looked to his brother, helpless.

Mickey shrugged, eyebrows raised.

"I don't need your help." she growled. "This is all your fault anyway." she pushed him weakly and hobbled up the sidewalk toward the steps.

Iggy hung his head like a naughty child, following closely behind her, hands out to catch her if she stumbled.

Mickey did smile then.

This kid was a Milkovich for sure. Not even here yet, and already causing chaos.

--------------------------------------------------------

Ian opened the door to the Milkovich house, curious as to what he would find inside.

He wasn't sure what he was expecting to walk into, but this was certainly not on the list.

Tessa was laid out on the couch, a gallon bucket on the floor nearby. She had a wet washcloth on her forehead. Mickey was seated by the head of the sofa, rubbing her shoulders with a sour look on his face. Iggy was seated in another chair a few feet away, rubbing Tessa's feet which were sitting in his lap.
When they trio heard the door open, their heads all whipped around in comical synchronicity.

"Oh, thank fuck." Mickey sighed, standing up. "Take over this shit, I've got fucking finger cramps." he threw his swollen hands in Ian's face, cocking his head toward the couch.

Ian smiled, and sat down without question, taking up Mickey's abandoned post. Jack and Mandy wandered into the kitchen, no doubt in search of a hiding place. Mickey followed them.

"Beer. Now." he said to his sister, who dutifully opened the fridge and handed him a bottle. He twisted off the cap and immediately downed half the bottle. "How many of those are in there? I think it's gonna be a long night."

---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Jack knew he should probably go back to the sober house. He knew this wasn't his family. This wasn't his anything. He was used to feeling like an outsider, even in his own family. He had never really fit in anywhere. But being friends with Mickey had changed how he saw himself. He felt included, like he really belonged with Mickey and their shared friends. Most of the time.

This was not one of those times.

He fidgeted in the kitchen, standing off to the side as Mandy and Ian whispered furiously, heads close together.

He should probably go.

Yeah, he was gonna go.

He took a step toward the living room, moving to grab his hoodie.

"Jack, what the fuck are you doing?" Mandy said, voice hushed. "Sit the fuck down."

Jack eyed her curiously. "I was gonna go home?" he said it like a question, suddenly unsure of his own mind.

Milковичи had that effect on him.

"No you are not. We need to figure this shit out."

Jack sat obediently, still unsure what the fuck was going on. "Huh?" he asked dumbly.

Ian leaned over, poking his head into the living room. Tess was passed out on the couch, her hand on her stomach. Iggy and Mickey were playing Call of Duty, television on mute, both their eyes flicking over to Tessa's sleeping form periodically.

Once Ian was sure no one was paying them any mind, he looked back at Jack, thrumming his fingers on the table.

"Should we call it off?" Ian asked, running his hand through his hair. He is so dumb. How could he not see this shit coming? Tess was due like two days after Mickey's birthday, he should have anticipated her being in labor right around the time all his plans were supposed to go down.

He's fucking idiot.
"What? Fuck no." Jack said, admittedly a little too loudly. Mandy and Ian gave him twin death-glares, and he clammed right up. He dipped his head down, continuing in a harsh whisper. "You've spent months planning this shit. Did you even ask Tess what she would want? You really think she'd want you to blow your whole plan to shit on the off chance that the kid decides to make an appearance on or around the date of your surprise?"

"Well, no." Ian admitted, his head hanging low. "I just don't wanna take away from the baby."

"The baby doesn't know shit, a baby's not going to get offended, Ian. And who says it's even gonna be on the same day?" Jack said, trying his best to be reassuring. Ian would hate himself if he shut shit down now.

"Ask Tess." Jack said, bringing a hand up to sit on Ian's shoulder. "It's her opinion that matters, right?"

"He's right, Ian." Mandy said, her face relaxing. "Ask Tess, and we'll go from there."

Ian nodded, not really feeling any better.

----------------------------------------------------------------

Ian was gonna ask Tess. As soon as he could get her away from the Milkovich brothers who were flanking her like a pair of pit bull guard dogs.

He sat in the kitchen with Mandy and Jack, playing Uno while they all waited for the littlest Milkovich to decide if they were going to make an appearance any time soon. It was getting late, and everyone would have to go home for the night if nothing was gonna happen with the baby.

"Mick, come smoke with me." Iggy said, dropping his game controller to the coffee table and moving to stand. Tessa moved her legs so Iggy could get by, adjusting her swollen stomach so she could lay down on the couch after Mickey and Iggy made their way to the front porch.

Once the front door was closed behind them, and they were out of earshot, Ian jumped up and dropped himself next to Tessa's feet on the couch.

"You guys gonna head out soon?" Tessa asked tiredly. "I don't think shit is happening tonight."

"Yeah, I think we should. You need to rest." Ian said, eyeing her stomach before glancing back to her face. "But, um, I just wanted to ask you something first."

Tessa raised her eyebrows, moving to sit up a little more. Ian waved her off and she flopped back down onto the cushions with a huff.

"What's up?" she asked, her hand running up and down her swollen stomach.

"Do you think we should call off the party?" Ian asked. No need to beat around the bush.

"Why the hell would you do that? We've been planning it for weeks?" Tess asked, her eyes travelling toward the front porch, where Mickey was hidden on the other side of the wall.

"Cuz you're gonna pop any day." Ian said glumly. "I didn't think about the baby when we were planning this shit. What if you go into labor, and everyone is there?"
"Ian." Tess sighed, her hand leaving her stomach to settle on Ian's hand. "Don't change your plans for me. I'm gonna be bummed if I can't make it, but it's Mickey's birthday, and you've been planning this shit for so long. It means a lot to you, and I know it's gonna make Mickey so fucking happy. Please, don't throw that all away on the off chance that my labor may coincide with the party."

Ian looked over at her, his uncertainty written all over his face.

"I mean, what are the odds that the kid's gonna show up at the same exact moment as this party, huh? Slim to none, right?" she smiled kindly, and Ian's unease settled just a little bit.

Although Ian couldn't help but think, none of them had ever had much luck in the timing department.

But it was a little late for all that now. Tess was giving him the go-ahead, and Ian was gonna take her at her word.

He leaned over and pulled her gently into his arms. "Thanks Tess." he whispered into her hair. He pulled back slightly and their eyes met. "I still hope you can make it, though."

She gave him a warm smile, pulling away to lay back down. "Yeah, well, if this little monster would make up their mind, we wouldn't have to wonder."

Ian laughed, standing just as Mickey and Iggy wandered back inside. The warm August breeze filtered through the open door, tickling the hairs on the back of Ian's neck.

"You guys wanna get going?" Mickey asked, walking up to Ian and placing a hand on the small of his back. The simple touch sent shock waves down Ian's spine.

Would he ever get used to this? Would being with Mickey ever feel ordinary? He wasn't sure.

Ian smiled down at him, leaning in for a kiss, which was readily reciprocated. That was something else he was sure he'd never get used to. Openly affectionate Mickey.

God, when did Ian get so soft?

Better question, when did he get so fucking lucky?

"Yeah, let's go."

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

No baby.

Two damn days, and no baby.

Mickey doesn't remember it being like this when Yevgeny was born. Admittedly, he wasn't around much in the weeks leading up to his birth. He was running around with Ian, staying at the Gallagher house, hiding from his shit storm of a life.

But he does not remember Svetlana being in some strange kind of limbo-labor for days on end. He'd remember that, right?

Mickey wonders for the hundredth time if the kid's gonna actually show up on his birthday.

Mickey's birthday was the next day, and no one had said shit about it. Not that he cared.
He didn't.

Everyone in his life was in full on baby mode, and that was just fine by him. Really.

He'd never made a big deal out of his birthday. No one did in his family. Not even Ian had done anything for him in previous years, besides some earth shattering head the year before he ran away and everything went to shit.

Jack had kind of thrown him a jail party that one year. And he had drunk karaoke with Lauren and Javier in Mexico.

So he had a handful of nice birthday memories.

No need to be upset that this year was slipping through the cracks.

He wasn't sad. He wasn't disappointed. He wasn't jealous of Ian's birthday parties. Not the one with his family, and not the one Mickey had thrown for him. He was happy to do that for Ian, and didn't expect anything in return.

He was used to fading into the background.

And these days, Baby Milkovich was sucking up the spotlight.

So, Mickey was happy to take a back seat in the chaos of all that is going on.

Really. He is.

Mickey is sitting in on a plywood sub-floor in a huge bathroom on the North side. He's just about finished for the day. It's just him and Matt again. It's just him and Matt most days now. Usually, he and Matt will hit up one job site, while Benji and the other guys hit up another. Twice the work, twice the money. Mickey doesn't really think too much about why he's always with Matt and not the other crew. He just works and goes home.

Like right now. He's in the middle of some stupid mosaic tile bullshit. Tiny little ceramic pieces that he has to slather with mastic and stick to the wall where the shower will be. It's painstaking work, and it's really annoying, but the finished product is pretty fucking cool. It's probably one of the only remotely artistic things he does these days.

He can see the pattern coming into being now. A big blue swirl in the center of the white tile wall. It's gonna look pretty amazing when it's done.

"Hey Mick. You almost ready to call it a day?" Matt asks, walking into the room as he wipes his hands on his jeans. He'd been down in the basement, fucking with the plumbing for the bathroom they were working on.

"Sure." Mickey said, dropping his trowel into the five gallon bucket sitting on the floor, and capping the mastic. "I can pick this shit up tomorrow."

"No you will not." Matt said sternly, causing Mickey to tip his head back and stare at him.

"Why the fuck not? Tomorrow is Friday. We work every fucking Friday." Mickey rolled onto his hands and knees, hefting himself up off the floor and dusting his dirty knees off with his palms. "You pay me on Friday, you better believe I'm gonna be here," he laughed.

Matt just gave him another curious look, reaching into his back pocket and handing over an

Mickey just stared at him for a moment, his eyes travelling from Matt's face to the envelope. Mickey reached out hesitantly, his fingers plucking the envelope from his hand.

"Open it." Matt laughed when Mickey just stared at it a moment too long.

Mickey glanced over at his boss one last time before ripping into the envelope. It was a fucking birthday card.

Something simple, signed by Matt and Lexi both. Inside the card was his paycheck.

Two hundred dollars heavy.

"Matt, this is like twelve hours too much, and my hourly wage is too high." Mickey said, confused. "You gotta talk to Benji about his accounting skills." Mickey was confused.

"Benji didn't get it wrong, Mick." Matt laughed. "It's called a bonus, and a raise."

"A what? Why? For my birthday? Matt, I wanna earn that shit." Mickey said, still confused, and now a little embarrassed too. He didn't want Matt's charity or pity. He wanted to be paid on his merit.

"Mickey, shut the fuck up. The bonus is for your birthday. Two hundred dollars is not that much, and I'm glad to give it to you. The raise you fucking earned. You are an amazing worker. You're a fast learner, you're reliable, and you're flexible. You earned that shit. So now, you make seventeen dollars an hour. You keep going like this, and I'll have you leading your own crew by the end of next year."

Mickey stood there, in the torn out bathroom, totally at sea. He was floored, yet again, by Matt's kindness and faith in him.

He wondered randomly, if this is what having a father felt like.

"Any news about Tessa or the baby?" Matt asked, changing the subject when he noticed Mickey's discomfort.

"Nah." Mickey shook his head, walking out of the bathroom and into the living area. "She just won't give it up. I don't know if that kid will ever be born."

"Oh, he'll come." Matt chuckled. "Probably when you guys least expect it."

Mickey was comfortable as fuck. He was drifting in and out of consciousness, cocooned within a bundle of blankets on the bed he shared with Ian. He had no idea what time it was, having gotten home from Iggy and Tessa's place late the previous night.

The whole thing was getting a little ridiculous. He felt bad for Tessa. The kid was pretty much torturing her at this point. A Milkovich through and through, the kid was not giving up it's comfy digs without a fight. Poor Tess had been to the hospital twice, but nothing had come from either visit.
So over the past few days Mickey and his little family had developed some kind of routine. Mandy and Iggy had both taken the past two days off work, and had spent that time holed up at the Milkovich house, catering to Tessa's every need. Then, after work, Ian, Mickey and sometimes even Macy and Jack would stop by and take over so Mandy and Iggy could get some rest, shower, whatever.

Tessa was confined to bed now. Unable to take the pain and stress the baby was putting on her body, she had just been laying there, uncomfortable and irritated.

Mickey doesn't know how she's surviving it. She's one bad ass chick, that's for damn sure.

Mickey stirs a little more, blinking slowly against the light filtering through the open curtains. He wonders sleepily why the black out curtains aren't pulled. He rolls over, seeking out Ian's warmth in his half conscious state. When he's met with nothing but cold sheets, his eye snap open.

Huh. He and Ian are both off from work. He figured Ian would wake him up with birthday sex. That's what he'd done for Ian, and Mickey had anticipated his boyfriend returning the favor. Looks like he was mistaken. He ignores the pang of disappointment trying to bubble up in his stomach and rolls onto his back.

"Ian? Where are you?" he calls out, bringing a hand up to his face, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes with his fingers. He listens, but hears no reply. Weird. He rolls to his side and sits up, setting his bare feet on the cold wood floor. He snags a pair of boxers off the floor from the night before and tugs them up his legs.

Scratching the back of his head, he wanders out of the bedroom and into the hallway. "Ian?"

He stopped dead when he hit the living room.

Ian was in the kitchen, make a lot of noise, and a serious mess. The coffee table was covered with a breakfast bonanza. A plate of pancakes took center stage, surrounded by a plate of scrambled eggs and one overflowing with bacon and sausage. There was a smaller plate with buttered toast stacked high on it, and bowl filled with crispy hash browns.

Mickey's mouth watered as he took in the display. His man had really outdone himself.

"Jesus." he whispered, dropping down on the couch and reaching over the table. He grabbed up a piece of bacon and stuffed it in his mouth, almost moaning out loud as the salty flavor burst along his tongue. Ian was one hell of a cook, and his bacon was always fucking perfect.

"Good morning." Ian said, walking out of the kitchen and handing Mickey a cup of steaming coffee. Mickey took the offered cup and tilted his head up to thank Ian for all this. He opened his mouth, but no words came out. Ian was right fucking there, inches away from his face. So close, Mickey went cross-eyed trying to focus on his face.

"Happy birthday, Mick." Ian whispered, slow grin splitting his lips. He leaned in, closing the minuscule distance between then and kissing Mickey's still parted lips.

Mickey smiled into the kiss, one hand coming up to cup the back of Ian's head, holding him in place as their lips moved against each other. Ian grabbed the coffee cup from Mickey's hand, blindly placing it on the table without breaking the kiss. Mickey's newly free hand shot up and gripped Ian's neck, pulling him down to straddle Mickey's hips.

Ian grinned, tipping his head to the side for a better angle, swiping his tongue along Mickey's bottom
lip before dipping it into his mouth.

Mickey hummed, kissing back harder, his hand dropping down to Ian's hips, pulling him back and forth on his lap, creating some delicious friction between them.

"You were gone when I woke up." Mickey murmured against Ian's mouth. "Wanted in on some of that hot birthday sex."

Ian pulled back, smiling, as he reluctantly slid off Mickey's lap and stood up, handing Mickey back his coffee cup before grabbing his own and dropping down next to him on the couch. "I wanted to make you a birthday breakfast. There's only one opportunity for that. Birthday sex, however, can happen all damn day." he said, waggling his eyebrows suggestively.

"Better believe it." Mickey chuckled, finally taking a sip of his coffee. Perfect. He took another long sip before setting it down on the table and picking up his plate. He tore into the pancakes, making a mess and not giving a shit. He had to take a shower after anyway.

Ian sat next to him, quietly eating his own breakfast, stealing not so subtle glances at Mickey the entire time.

"What?" Mickey finally asked, shoving another piece of pancake in his mouth. God, they were so fucking good. He was gonna get fat if Ian kept feeding him like this.

"Just waiting for you to finish eating." Ian replied cryptically, an enigmatic smile on his face.

"What the fuck for?" Mickey asked as he chomped down the last piece of bacon and set the plate on the coffee table, still eyeing his boyfriend suspiciously.

"For this." Ian said, pouncing on a clearly surprised Mickey. Mickey huffed a laugh out as Ian shoved him backwards on the couch.

Mickey grinned as Ian plastered himself to his chest, hands flying up into his hair. The kiss was rough and biting, nothing like the tender make out session they had just engaged in. Mickey was pressed up against the back of the couch, Ian half on top of him as they made out sloppily. Ian's hand slid down his body, resting on his hip and pulling him forward, their groins touched and sent an electric shock down Mickey's spine.

"Fuck." he cursed as Ian's mouth moved to his neck, his lips gentle as he sucked a mark onto the column of his throat. Mickey tipped his head back, giving Ian more space to bite and suck.

"Tell me what you want, Mick." Ian whispered, voice low and quite, his mouth hovering centimeters from his ear. His tongue curled around Mickey's earlobe, his teeth nipping.

"Shit." Mickey sighed, hips bucking up, seeking friction. Ian pulled his pelvis back, denying Mickey what he wanted.

"Tell me."

Mickey groaned, his hand curling around the back of Ian's neck, pulling him down for another kiss. Ian let it happen, pushing his tongue roughly into Mickey's open mouth a few times before he pulled back completely.

"C'mon, Mick. It's your birthday. What'daya want?" Ian asked, his fingers splaying across Mickey's chest. Mickey arched into the touch, aching for more.
"We should take a shower." he said, pulling himself out of his horny head space long enough to gaze up at his boyfriend. Ian was staring down at him, predatory glint in his green eyes. Mickey loved that look.

"Shower it is, then."

----------------------------------------------------

"Tell me again why we need to be doing this shit so god damn early? This party's not for hours and hours." Jack whined, dropping his travel mug down on the bar top and throwing himself onto a sticky bar stool.

"Why is everything so sticky?" he grimaced, wiping his hand on his sweatshirt.

"Are you calling my bar dirty?" Kev asked, wandering out of the backroom with a box of cleaning supplies in his hands. He dropped the box on the bar in front of Jack. "Cuz that's why your skinny ass is here. To clean this shit hole up before the party tonight." Kev gave him a pointed look, crossing his arms over his chest. "Mandy, Jack's about to get himself a shiner."

Jack laughed, not at all scared of Ian and Mickey's giant friend. This dude was 90% teddy bear and 10% fluffernutter. Jack's fairly certain he could take him in a brawl, even with the six inch height difference. Not that he ever would. It'd be like kicking a puppy.

He put his hands up regardless, placating. "Nah, dude. I'm here to help. That was the deal." he smiled, grabbing up his coffee and taking a sip. Jack liked Kev a lot. He liked everyone he'd met through Mickey.

He could hear Mandy laughing somewhere in the back well before she came back into view. She had a mop in one hand a a bucket in the other.

"Thanks Kev, for letting us have the party here. I'm sure Mick will be way more comfortable here than dancing at some fruity club in Boystown."

"I don't know, Mick can get down when the mood strikes." Jack laughed, taking the bucket out of Mandy's hands and walking over to the industrial sink. He dumped in some Clorox and turned on the hot water, filling the bucket. "You know, he does this really cool thing with his hips..."

"Jack, shut the fuck up." Mandy barked. Jack chuckled. Milkovichs are so easy to rile up.

"Seriously, dude. Nobody wants to know about Mickey's hip tricks." Kev agreed, grabbing up a rag and tossing it to Mandy. "Now the deal is, you guys clean the place, top to bottom, and you can party here. Beer outta the tap I can cover, but liquor is gonna have to be paid for, but I can cut you a deal. I don't have food here, so if you get the munchies you gotta take care of that yourself. Don't burn the place down, and no fucking fist fights." he turned to Mandy, pointing a stern finger in her face.

"Oh fuck off, Kev. This is the Alibi, fist fights are the least of your fucking problems."

Kev seemed to consider her words before nodding. "Okay, yeah. But don't get blood all over the place like last time. Mickey thinks I forgot about that, I didn't." he smiles as he says it, so Jack thinks it can't be all that bad.
He'll have to ask Mickey about that later, sounds like it would be an interesting story.

"Yeah, yeah." Mandy waves him off. She sprays some cleanser on the counter and starts wiping at it with a rag. "Get outta here, we got it covered. Right, Jack?" she looks over at him, eyebrows raised.

"Yep." Jack nods, glancing over at Kev with a smile on his face. He makes a show of ringing out the mop and dropping it onto the floor with a wet splat. He starts moving the mop back and forth, eyes still on Kev as he works.

"Okay, fine. See you guys later. I'll be back for the party, but I don't know if Vee's gonna come." Kev says, waving as he walks out the door and onto the street.

Once he's gone, Jack drops the mop back in the bucket and slides back onto his bar stool. Mandy laughs, coming to stand across from him behind the bar.

Jack opens his travel mug, tipping it toward Mandy. "Hey barkeep, if you're gonna make me work for free, you may as well Irish up my coffee." he smiled, waving his cup in her face.

"Jesus, Jack." Mandy laughed, pouring a shot of whiskey into his glass. "I can see why you and my brother get along so well."

The water is hot. So hot that steam is billowing over the curtain and filling the bathroom. Borderline scalding water pours over Mickey's back, stinging his skin, but he barely feels it. He's plastered up against the wall, hands splayed out on the tile in front of him. His arms buckle and his face hits the wet tile.

He can't bring himself to care. He spreads his legs as wide as the tub basin will allow, arching his back as Ian's tongue dips a little deeper inside him. He groans, feeling Ian's fingers flex on his ass, pulling him further apart, to get deeper inside.

"Ian, jesus fuck." he moans, reaching a shaky hand behind him to fist in Ian's wet hair. Ian hums against his ass, tongue flicking out again, snaking lower.

Mickey bangs his head against the tile, surrendering to the pleasure.

Ian pulls back, breathing heavy, and sinks his teeth into Mickey's left ass cheek. He smiles at the small gasp he gets in return. He lays a dirty, open mouth kiss to Mickey's asshole before pulling back and sitting on his knees. He grabs a tube of lube from the tub ledge (that he may or may not keep in the bathroom for just such occasions.) and slicks up two fingers, doing his best to not let it all get washed down the drain as water falls all around him.

"Mickey, you are so fucking sexy." he says, looking up at Mickey. He clenches his eyes shut, to keep the water out, but he can still see Mickey just fine. Naked, body taut, muscles clenching as he waits for Ian to make a move.

Ian's not going to make him wait. It is his birthday after all.

But just as Ian slides his slick fingers up against Mickey's hole, they are interrupted by the shrill sound of Mickey's cell phone ringing on the bathroom vanity.
The sounds of Gwar fill the bathroom, mingling with the pattering sound of water falling.

"Fuck." Mickey sighs, standing up a little straighter. "That's Igg."

Ian chuckles from his spot kneeling behind Mickey. "You have 'sick of you' as your ringtone for your brother?"

Mickey laughs too. "Have you ever listened to the lyrics? I mean, it fits, right?"

Ian laughs again, nodding a little. "You think it's about the baby?" Ian asks, feeling a little excitement mixed oddly with disappointment. They may not get their birthday shower sex after all.

"Dunno. Gonna hafta find out." Mickey said, moving to turn the water off.

"Hey, hey, relax." Ian says, grabbing Mickey's hips and using them to turn him around. Once Mickey is facing him and away from the water, Ian leans in, kissing the dip of his hip. "Let's at least get you off, then we can call him back and find out what's going on."

Mickey looks down at him, hesitating. His eyes shoot over to the sink, where his phone has stopped ringing, but he knows there's a voicemail on there he should hear ASAP.

But he's hard, and so is Ian, and it's his god damn birthday.

He'll be quick. It won't take much.

"You still owe me a brutal fucking, Gallagher." Mickey said, authoritative. He tips his hips forward, the head of his cock sliding across Ian's parted lips.

Ian smiles up at him, grabbing his dick in one hand and his hip in the other. "You better fucking believe it." he replies, mirroring Mickey's earlier words as he closes his lips around the head of his dick.

Mickey shudders as the wet warmth of Ian's mouth engulfs his hard cock. He sighs, steadying himself with a hand on the shower wall, while the other finds it's usual place twisted in Ian's wet hair.

Ian bobs his head, one hand still clenched at Mickey's hip, the other going straight to his own erection, pulling at himself as he sucks Mickey off.

"Oh my...." Mickey chokes, thrusting his hips forward as Ian deep-throats him. "Yeah, fuck. Ian."

Ian would smile if he had the space, but given the circumstances, he just sucks harder. He pulls Mickey deeper into his mouth with the hand gripping his hip.

Mickey's dick fits perfectly in his mouth. Ian marvels at that fact as he slides his lips up and down the shaft. His tongue glides over the ridges, swirling around the head before constricting tight as he pulls him deeper.

His fingers will leave bruises on Mickey's hip, and that thought gets him even hotter. He pulls at his erection, thumbing at the tip before sliding back down slowly to pull at his balls.

Mickey's dick fits perfectly in his mouth. Ian marvels at that fact as he slides his lips up and down the shaft. His tongue glides over the ridges, swirling around the head before constricting tight as he pulls him deeper.

A overwhelming feeling of 'mine' saturates Ian's mind and he pulls Mickey forward with a painfully hard grip on his hip. Mickey gets the memo, fucking Ian's face with hard thrusts. The hand in his hair is pulling so tight now that it would fucking hurt if he wasn't so turned on.
Ian moans around Mickey's throbbing cock, feeling it slamming into the back of his throat. He can hear sharp little gasps of pleasure slipping out of Mickey's lips. He knows Mickey has no idea he's making those sounds, so totally lost in Ian that nothing else matters.

It doesn't take long to get Mickey where he needs to go. He feels like he's been on the edge since he woke up, and Ian's mouth is fucking magical.

"Oh shit." he gasps, hands tangling impossibly harder in Ian's hair as he comes hard down his throat. Ian works him through it with his mouth, pulling on his own cock still.

Once Mickey is spent, he pulled back, his dick slipping from Ian's mouth. Ian leaned his head against Mickey's thigh as he works himself toward orgasm. Mickey's hand, still tangled up in Ian's hair, pulls his head back sharply.

Ian stares up at him, water dripping into his squinted eyes as he jerks off.

"So fucking hot on your knees for me, Ian." Mickey says, fingers flexing in Ian's red strands. That little sting of pain seems to do the trick, and Ian comes with a muted moan.

Mickey smiles at him, reaching for his hand and helping him stand back up.

"Happy birthday, Mick." Ian says, grabbing him by his shoulders and spinning him around so he can wash his hair for him.

"It's certainly started off happy enough." Mickey laughs, tilting his head back so Ian can scrub his scalp for him.

Their post coital cleaning ritual is interrupted by Mickey's phone ringing again.

"Shit." Mickey says, dipping his head under the water to rinse the last of the shampoo out. "That's Igg again. Something has to be up." he grabs the soap and washes his body quickly and efficiently, rinsing off before Ian even has a chance to finish washing his own hair. He shakes his hair out and pushes the shower curtain back, stepping out and leaving Ian alone in the shower.

Ian steps under the water and continues cleaning himself off. He can hear Mickey on the other side of the curtain. He hears the soft sound of Mickey grabbing a towel off the rack, his wet footsteps across the tile floor. The beeping of his phone as he checks his voicemail.

The next thing he hears gives him pause. He stops washing himself, cloth pressed against his abdomen as a sharp "Fuck." slips past Mickey's lips.

"Mick?"

"Get out of the shower." Mickey says. He says nothing else, and Ian can feel his anxiety building. He rinses off quickly, throwing the curtain back and stepping out of the shower. He grabs a towel and wraps it around his waist. He doesn't bother drying off any further, leaving the bathroom and heading straight to the bedroom.

He finds Mickey there, already half dressed in worn jeans. He's pulling a black t shirt over his head, his back to Ian.

"Mick, what..."

"Tess is having the baby. We gotta go."
Jack’s not sure how he keeps finding himself in situations like this. Involved in family matters. A family that is, admittedly, not his.

But here he is anyway.

Mandy had gotten the call just as they were finishing up cleaning the bar. He hadn't bothered to look up. It really wasn't any of his business, what Mandy had going on. He was here for a reason, to clean up this shit hole bar so they could party here later.

He was actually really excited. He'd been to a fair share of parties with his group of friends at this point. But this was different. This was Mickey's birthday. And even though Jack has known Mickey for years now, he's never been able to celebrate his birthday with him outside of prison walls. And although things are a lot different now, between them, and in life in general, he knows one thing for sure: Mickey deserves the best fucking birthday they can give him.

He's been friends with Mickey for a long time now, and he's heard pretty much every sad, shitty, terrifying story the man has to tell. He knows that Mickey's life had been shit since the day he was born, and he knows that Mickey has spent most of his life hating himself and feeling hated. Unworthy of anything but contempt.

He knows it's not like that anymore, but Jack is a firm believer in positive reinforcement. So he's gonna spend all the time he can assuring Mickey of how fucking awesome he is, and how much he deserves good things in life.

This party is just a small part of that plan.

But once that phone rings, and Jack sees Mandy's face morph form fear to elation, he knows. He knows that the baby is coming, or has come, and maybe things have all gone sideways again.

Maybe there will be no party now.

Maybe there will be no positive reinforcement.

Maybe all this was for nothing, and Mickey will get forgotten again.

No, fuck that. Jack will talk to Ian, and they'll figure something out. Jack's positive Ian will agree with him on this. Baby or no baby, the show must go on.

"Jack, we gotta go." Mandy says urgently, grabbing her purse and the keys to the bar Kev had left them.

Jack nods, not saying anything. Ian will certainly be at the hospital, and they can figure out their next move from there.
Ian's nervous. He berates himself for the hundredth time for not seeing this shit coming.

When Tess had first started having labor pains, days ago now, he'd thought the baby would come and they'd have time to coo and coddle it before the party day came.

Then, nothing happened, and he stupidly thought the baby wouldn't come until after the party. They'd all have time to recover from their hangovers, and the baby would come at a more convenient time.

Now, he's standing in the hallway of Rush Memorial, watching Iggy pacing up and down the hallway, sitting next to his clueless boyfriend, wondering if everything is ruined now.

They certainly can't have a party while Tess is in labor. That's unfair to her, not to mention Iggy. It's his brother's party, after all.

Ian watches Mickey as he surreptitiously watches Iggy. He's got a small smile on his lips, pride evident in his eyes. Ian smiles too. His hand reaches out on it's own accord and he slips his fingers between Mickey's.

Mickey stiffens at first, out of habit, but relaxes almost instantly. Ian's grin widens.

They both just sit there for a while, waiting.

The door flings open and a doctor walks out. He's got a clipboard in his hand and his eyes scan the three men in the hallway.

"Ignatious Milkovich?" he asks, obviously trying to suppress a smile.

Iggy raises his hand like an imbecile, and Ian can not hold in his chuckle. Mickey elbows him in the ribs but he's smiling too.

"Come with me." the doctor says and walks back the way he came.

Iggy gives Ian and Mickey a terrified glance before turning to follow the doctor without another word.

They sit there silently for just a moment before the elevator opens and Ian's phone goes off at the same time.

Ian shifts back, lifting his hips a bit to get to his phone just as Jack and Mandy wander down the hall. Ian looks at his phone.

Svetlana.

Shit.

Jack and Mandy are talking fast over each other, Mickey is telling them both to shut the fuck up.

"One at a time, fuck." Mickey spits, standing. Ian takes the opportunity of the chaos to slip down the hall. He walks fast until he is by the stairwell. He opens the door and slips inside, standing by the stairs as he finally answers the call.

"Hey Svet."

"Orange boy." Svetlana's curt voice startles him, even though he knew it was her.
"What's up? We still good?"

"I do not know. You tell me. Mandy tells me baby comes today. We are already here. If you do no wish to do this..."

"No!" Ian cuts her off quickly. He can hear he amused huff of breath over the line, clear as if she were standing in front of him, irritated smile on her face. "We're good, it's fine. Please. Don't..."

"Fine, fine. Is fine. Just wanted to make sure."

"I'm sure. It's on. Please, just... let's keep it the way we planned. Please."

"Okay. But if this blows off in your face." Svetlana says.

"Blows up." Ian laughs, feeling a tiny bit better.

"Whatever, is not important. Is your fault if all goes to shit. Not mine."

"I take full responsibility." Ian replies.

"Good." she says, and then she's gone.

-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

"Happy birthday, Mick." Jack smiles, pulling Mickey into a hug before Mickey can even greet them. He can hear Mandy repeating the sentiment, but his head is buried in Mickey's shoulder, so it all sounds muffled and far away.

Mickey pulls back and steps away, arms crossed over his chest.

"Where the fuck were you guys, and why are you getting here at the same time?" Mickey asks, curious. Mandy and Jack hanging out is the last thing he needs. Jack and Ian are already gay best friends, he doesn't need his sister swooping in and pushing him further out of his own small circle of friends.

"Uh, well. I...." Jack stutters. Mickey is already preparing himself to call Jack out on his shitty lying when his sister jumps in.

"Jack and I were shopping for sex toys." she says, totally straight faced. "Since you are too much of a pussy to talk vibrators with your sister, and Ian was busy giving your cranky ass birthday dick, I'm quite certain."

Mickey didn't know what he was more disgusted by, his sister talking about him taking it up the ass, or the idea of his best friend and his sister shopping for fucking dildos. His face pulled into and ugly grimace and he threw his hands up in the air.

"God damn it, Mandy." he groused.

Jack smiled. He would never get over how flustered Mickey got talking about sex. It was a little ridiculous, seeing as Jack knew for a fact he was a total pervert. It was always just so damn cute, watching his face go tomato red, his eyebrows spazzing along his hair line. Jack was also mildly impressed with Mandy's diversion tactic.
Mickey didn't ask again what they had been doing.

Ian came up not too long after that, and the four of them sat down in a row of plastic chairs that were bolted to the floor along the wall.

It was quiet for a while, everyone immersed in their phones as they waited for news about the baby.

After about twenty minutes, Jack couldn't take it any more. He stood up. Everyone stopped what they were doing, their head turning up all at once, looking up at him, various devices forgotten in all their hands.

"Coffee," he said, by way of explanation. "Ian, you're paying."

Ian nods, a flash of recognition barely visible in his eyes before he clears his expression and stands.
He puts a gentle hand on Mickey's shoulder, feeling the tension curling there.

"Coffee, babe?" he asks.

Mickey scowls. "Don't fucking call me that. And yes, please."

Ian grins, not at all offended. He'll call Mickey whatever he wants, and Mickey will let him. They both know that. He gazes over to Mandy, eyebrows raised expectantly.

"Just a green tea, please." she says, smiling.

"God, when did you turn into such a fucking hipster?" Mickey groused. "I'm going to have to speak to Macy about this shit. You're barely a Milkovich anymore."

"You say that like it's a bad thing," Mandy replies, still smiling.

Ian and Jack leave them to argue amongst themselves some more. They take the elevator down to the cafeteria.

"So, are we still gonna do this?" Jack asks as they pay for their drinks and wander over to the condiment table.

"Of course we are. Jesus, you guys are the worst. First Svet, now you. We already talked to Tess. She said not to worry."

"You talked to Svetlana?" Jack asked. He was sure he was wearing a ridiculously shocked expression, by the way Ian laughed.

"Yeah, we talk. She's actually here already."

"She scares the hell outta me." Jack admitted. He added some sugar to his coffee, stirring it.

"Yeah, she has that affect on people."

"I think she hates me." Jack said lowly, not looking at Ian. They grabbed up their drinks and made their way out of the cafeteria.

"Don't take it personally." Ian said. "She doesn't like many people, and she's mean, even to the people she loves."

"You think it's a Russian thing?" Jack laughs.
"I don't know." Ian chuckles. "But she's here, and that must mean she doesn't hate us, right?"

"I think it means she doesn't hate Mick, maybe?" Jack replies, hitting the button and sending them up.

"I think what it means most of all is that Yev loves his dad, and Svetlana wants to foster that love." Ian said, his mind going to long ago memories of Yevgeny as a baby. How the fuck did time go by so fast?

"Yeah, I think you're right." Jack agrees.

The rest of the ride up is silent.

----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

"So, you're really not going to do anything for your birthday?" Mandy asked, feigning ignorance to the best of her ability. She knows she's a good liar, but this whole thing is a bit much, even for her. Ian's birthday party was kind of thrown together at the last minute, but this shit has been planned for weeks. Keeping it all from her brother has been harder than she anticipated.

But it's all coming to an end, one way or another.

"Eh, fuck that." Mickey says, feigning his own disinterest. He knew that this may happen. The baby coming on his birthday. He's not mad. It may actually be cool, sharing a birthday with the little bugger.

"Come on, Mick. You don't think Ian has ANYTHING planned?" she goads, treading a precarious line.

"If he did, I'd know. He's the worst at keeping secrets, you and Cauldwell definitely in a tie at close second. So if something was up, I'm sure one of you woulda let the cat outta the bag by now."

Mandy nods, hiding her smile. Let him stay in the dark. It'll be more fun this way.

Just then, Ian and Jack wander back over. Jack hands out the drinks and they all go back to sitting quietly.

Mickey is about halfway done his coffee when Iggy busts through the double doors, elated smile on his face. He's covered in sweat, like he's the one who'd been in labor.

Everyone stares at him, waiting. It feels like it goes on forever, this awkward standoff. Mickey's not even sure if he's breathing or not.

Waiting. Wondering.

"It's a fucking girl!" Iggy screams.

That's what does it.

Mickey jumps to his feet, pulling his brother to him in a crushing hug. He can hear Mandy, Ian and Jack whooping and hollering in the background, but he's so consumed with his brother, it's all just noise.

Iggy pulls back, his face wet with tears. "What am I gonna do with a girl?" he asks, dumbfounded. Mickey's not sure if it's a serious question or not, but his answer is the same regardless.

"We're gonna have to teach her to throw a punch a lot sooner than if she were a boy."

The brothers erupt into laughter, falling into each others arms again.

"A girl. God damn."

--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Jack stands off to the side, feeling that strange, creeping feeling of not belonging again. He wonders as he watches Tessa holding her daughter, if this feeling will ever go away. Will he ever stop feeling like he's spying on someone else's private moments when he's here in these situations, with these people he calls his friends?

He's torn out of his thoughts by Ian's voice, full of awe and wonder. "Tess, she's gorgeous."

And she is. The baby looks a lot like Mick and Mandy, actually. Much more so than Iggy or even Tess for that matter. Dark wisps of black hair are matted down against her pointed pink head. (Mandy tells him the cone-head look will go away after a while. Jack doesn't want to ponder too hard about the logistics of birth, so he tries to let that thought go.)

Tessa cuddles the infant closer. She looks worn out and ragged, but so fucking happy. Her eyes are wet and her hair is a tangled mess of knots on top of her head, but her face is blissed out. She runs a shaky hand down the side of her daughter's face and the baby's eyes shoot open for a split second before closing again. Jack remembers, somewhere in the very back of his mind, that babies don't open their eyes right away.

But that one split second was enough for Jack to see the sharp, deep blue of the baby's eyes.

Just like Mickey's.

Jack also remembers that sometimes, baby's eyes change after they are born, but looking around the room and seeing so many blue eyes, he's certain that this child will keep her light irises.

The baby is damn beautiful.

Mandy steps up, hands out and Tessa gently passes over the child.

"Holy shit." Mandy whispers, her eyes flicking from the baby to Iggy. "You had something to do with this?" she asks in disbelief.

"I know, right?" Iggy replies, sounding equally shocked.

Jack stifles a laugh as he watches Ian and Mickey flank Mandy on both sides. Ian's hand comes up slowly, running his fingers across the crown of the baby's head.

"God, Mick, look at her." he says softly, eyes trained on the tiny infant.

"I know." Mickey replies, much more quietly than Jack has ever heard him speak. He looks over at
his brother and Tess. "Good job, guys."

Tess smiles at him, her hand reaching out for Iggy. Iggy steps closer, grasping her hand tightly as he just watches his family coo over his daughter.

"What's her name?" Jack asks, because he's dying to know and no one else has said anything yet.

Tessa looked up at Jack, her face illuminated with a pure love he'd never quite seen before. She looked around the room before her eyes landed on Iggy. She gives him a small nod, then immediately tips her face up to gaze at her sleepy baby some more.

"Uh, well. We decided on something a little different." he hedges.

"Different how?" Mickey asks, his fingers tracing the side of the baby's face lovingly. Jack has never seen Mickey so gentle before.

"We couldn't pick just one name." Tessa says, leaning back into her mountain of pillows. "Or just two."

"Huh?" Mandy asks, her eyes flick up for a second before going back to the baby.

"Her name is Katya Aleksandria Ulia Milkovich." Iggy says, unable to contain the smile on his face.

"After mom." Mandy whispers.

"And you." Iggy says, looking at his sister. "And you." he says to Mickey.

Jack stands there, a little surprised. Looks like he's not the only one, by the impressive array of shocked faces throughout the room.

"Mick, isn't Ulia your mom's middle name?" Ian asks, trying to remember the headstone he'd seen all those months ago.

"Yeah." Mickey says quietly. "It is. But it's also Mandy's middle name," he looks over at his sister, who's blushing like crazy now.

"How did I not know that?" Ian asked, completely surprised.

"Nobody really knows except family. I don't get arrested like these assholes, so it's not public record." she smiles. "And you never asked."

Ian feels his face getting hot. How could he have never known this shit? He feels like a shitty friend.

"So, they baby has your mom's name, and both you guy's middle names?" Jack asks, feeling like the slowest asshole on the planet. He does not mention that he and Mickey almost share a middle name. It's not important.

"I think that's really cool." Ian says, tickling under the baby's chin with his index finger. "Hello there, Katya Aleksandria Ulia Milkovich." he can't help but giggle. It's quite a mouthful.

The baby's eyes open and her face scrunches up in what could be construed as a frown. Her tiny eyebrow twitches, and Ian can't contain his smile.

She's a Milkovich, that's for certain.
About an hour later, Tessa is tired. Her and the baby need to rest. It makes sense. Mickey can't believe the little thing came on his birthday.

He feels kinda happy about it. That something so awesome could happen on a day he's never really been too happy about.

But it's been a long day, and he's ready to get out of there.

"I'm gonna piss and then we can go home." he says, moving to stand.

He sees what looks like genuine panic cross Ian's face for a split second, but it's gone before he can register it.

"We were gonna hit up the Alibi, Mick." Mandy says, her eyes still trained on the baby sleeping in the little bassinet by the bed. "Lemme at least buy you a shot for your birthday. You kinda got lost in the shuffle of all this shit today."

"It's nothing, I keep tellin' you guys that." and he means it, mostly. He leans down to grab his hoodie, but Ian's hand wraps around his wrist, holding him in place.

"Let your sister buy you a drink for your birthday, Mick." Ian says, trying desperately to keep his tone casual, teasing.

"I could use one." Jack says, grabbing his own hoodie and slipping it on his shoulders. "So, we doing this? You can't say no to all of us on your own birthday Mick." Jack smiles at his friend. "We just wanna celebrate your life, come on!" he sings, arms waving above his head for a nanosecond, earning himself a grimace from Mickey.

"Fine. Stop singing and I'll go." he says, shoving Jack away lightly.

"Oh, I'm just getting started."

Mickey rolls his eyes, but he's smiling.

He doesn't notice the relieved look on Ian's face, or the twin smiles that Mandy and Jack are sporting.

They say their goodbyes, spending an inordinate amount of time ogling the baby. Ian snaps a million pictures in the moments before they walk out the door, promising to send them to everyone when he has the time.

As they are riding the elevator down to the lobby, Mickey can't help but think that even if this one drink is all he gets for his birthday, this day will be one to remember forever.

Chapter End Notes

we ventured into "the odyssey" length with this fic, and i appreciate anyone who's stuck
around this long, but we're actually coming up on the end now, only a couple more chapters to go.

it's pretty devastating, but i just wanted to thank anyone that took the time to read this story. it means the world to me that anyone would be interested in what i have to say.

i'm going to miss this little universe, jack especially. i didn't know i was gonna get so attached when i created him, but he kinda grows on you.

anyway, thanks again, we're on the homestretch now....
Mickey's birthday's not quite over yet, and he's got some more surprises awaiting him.

Mickey is worn out. He's not really sure if he's in the mood to go to the bar. The arrival of his niece took up a good portion of the day, and the late afternoon sun is blinding him as he steers the truck away from the hospital and toward the Alibi.

But, it's still his birthday, and getting a little tipsy with his people doesn't sound too bad. It actually sounds pretty damn nice. He doesn't have much in the way of plans. He is cautiously optimistic that he may hear from Yevgeny in the next few hours. And he's sure L and Javi will hit him up before the day is through.

Besides those two things, he's got all he needs in the truck right now. His sister, Jack and Ian. It would be awesome if he could hang with Iggy today, but Mickey has a sinking suspicion his brother is going to be quite scarce for the next few months. With good reason. That baby, god, Mickey still can't believe it. He's looking forward to watching his brother stumble through fatherhood. Little Katya is going to put him through the ringer.

The truck is oddly silent. Ian, Mandy and Jack are all on their phones, typing away furiously, not looking up at all. Mickey eyes them suspiciously, his face pinched into an irritated scowl.

What the fuck.

He reaches out and flicks the knob on the radio, tired of listening to nothing but breathing and the digital beep of phone buttons being pushed.

The sound of the Black Eyed Peas filled the space and Mickey groaned. "Oh fuck no." he spat, hand reaching out to twist the knob again.

That seems to be the trick to pull his passengers out of their collective coma.

"NO!" Jack yelped from the back seat, lurching forward to smack Mickey's hand away. "Leave it."

Mickey gave Jack a scathing glare in the rear-view mirror. "What the fuck? You don't even like this shit."

"I think the truck has a feeling." Jack said cryptically. Mickey face creased in confusion, as all the other occupants of the truck burst into laughter, and started fucking singing....

"I've got a FEELING....." Jack bellowed, leaning forward again, so his face was between Ian and Mickey's shoulders. "That tonight's gonna be a good night!"

Mickey shook his head, surrounded on all sides by loud, off key singing.
Mandy was bouncing in the back seat, laughing maniacally. "I know that we'll have a ball, If we get
down, and go out, and just lose it all..."

Ian was laughing breathlessly. He and Mickey had experienced the truck’s bizarre way of playing
songs that fit their circumstances before. He recalls a few times now, but most of those instances had
been sad moments.

Looks like tonight, the truck wants to party.

The fact that Mickey's in the dark, and surely thinks they are all losing their minds makes it just that
much funnier. He leans over, laying his head on Mickey's shoulder as he drives. Mickey looks down,
giving Ian a clearly confused look.

Ian gives him a stunner smile, and starts singing himself.

He starts fist pumping the air, belting out lyrics, thinking of what Mickey's face is gonna look like
when they finally make it to the bar.

"Tonight's that night, Hey! Let's live it up. I got my money, let's spend it up. Go out and smash it
Like, Oh my God! Jump out that sofa, Let's kick it off!" Ian is laughing so hard, he can barely make
out the words.

Mickey just shakes his head. The song goes on, and he can't keep the smile off his face, the jubilant
mood of his companions flowing over him against his will. He grins at his crazy boyfriend as he
spins around in his seat so he and Jack can duet some of the chorus together.

He's surrounded by cheesy idiots on all sides. And he loves every minute of it.

Maybe the truck's onto something. Tonight just may be a good night, after all.

-------------------------------------------

The street in front of the Alibi is full of cars. It is Friday night, but this is the Alibi we're talking
about. Mickey's brow furrows as he finds a spot along the other side of the street.

"What's this bullshit?" he asks, confused. "Kev doing two-for-ones or some shit?"

Ian shrugs, his eyes finding Jack's in the rear-view. "Dunno."

"Well, you guys wanna skip it? I don't feel like fighting off a bunch of dirty union bricklayers to get
to the bar."

"NO!!" his three companions scream in unison.

Mickey startles, eyebrows shooting up to his hairline. "Okay, fuck." he says, hand coming up,
placating. "Jesus, fine. You guys are acting fucking weird today. It's my god damn birthday, but let's
do whatever the fuck you guys wanna do."

Jack shoots Ian another look in the mirror. Ian just shrugs again. Mickey throws the truck in park and
kills the engine, slipping out of the car before anyone else can speak.

"Shit." Jack whispers. "I hope he doesn't kick our asses for this."
"You and me both." Ian sighs, getting out of the truck and jogging to catch up with his irritated boyfriend. Jack and Mandy scramble out as well, and the three of them make it to the door just in time for Mickey to open it.

A raucous chorus of "HAPPY BIRTHDAY!!" shakes the walls as Mickey stops dead in the doorway of the Alibi. He comes to such a short stop, Ian, Jack and Mandy all collide with him like an old slapstick comedy. The force of the hit send them all careening into the bar.

Mickey rights himself, standing in shock as his eyes take in the bar.

It's not like Ian's party. There are no balloons, no streamers, no inflated dicks to be seen. But there is Matt and Benji. Kev and Vee. Fiona and Debbie and Carl. He looks toward the pool table and he sees Svetlana.

And his son.

His son is standing there, smiling at him. Yevgeny puts his arms out, running full steam towards his father.

Mickey drops to one knee in the middle of the bar, arms open. The little man falls into his embrace. It kinda feels like coming home. Mickey wraps his arms around his son and stands back up, cradling him to his chest. He can feel his eyes stinging, but he breaths the emotion down. This is not the time or the place to lose his shit like a pussy.

But he's just so damn happy. It feels like it's been forever since he's seen his son. Skype just doesn't cut it.

"Hey buddy." he whispers into his hair.

"Happy birthday, Daddy." Yevgeny says. He pulls his face away and smiles at Mickey. "Were you surprised? Uncle Ian said it was a surprise. Did we getcha?"

Mickey turned, his son still in his arms, to see Ian standing by the doorway, arms crossed over his chest, a nervous smile on his face. Ian raises his eyebrows, a silent question.

'Too much?'

Mickey shakes his head. No, it's not too much at all.

It's fucking amazing.

"Oh they got me alright." Mickey laughed. "So surprised. You guys did a great job." he smiles, dropping a kiss to his son's head before setting him back down on the floor.

Ian has crossed the bar, sliding his arms around Mickey's waist from behind. "You're not pissed, are you?"

Mickey turns in Ian's arms, a warm, genuine smile on his face. He shakes his head, bringing a hand up and curling his fingers into Ian's hair. He pulls his head down and kisses him firmly on the mouth.

"Can't believe you did this." he whispered against his lips.

"Oh, Mick, you ain't seen nothing yet." Ian laughs, bringing their mouths together again.
Jack wanders up to the bar, where his father and one of his workers, Benji are sitting on a pair of stools, shooting the shit with Kev and his wife. Jack comes up behind his father, squeezing his shoulders as he slides into the empty seat next to him.

"Hey Kev." Jack greets the man behind the bar with a small wave. "Can I get a beer, whatever your giving away..." he smiles.

"Don't remind me." Kev moaned sullenly, filling a pint glass and sliding it over to Jack.

"Hey kid." Matt says, turning in his seat. He leans over and wraps Jack up in a hug. Matt doesn't really hug Jack all that much, but he's been doing it more and more lately. Jack starts to wonder if that means anything, but dismisses the thought when his father releases him with a smile.

Kev comes back with two more beers, one for Matt and Benji each. Jack raises his glass.

"To Mick." he says, smiling. His eyes find Mickey across the room, standing with Ian, Svetlana and Yevgeny.

"To Mick." the men reply in unison.

"So that's his boy?" Matt asks, following Jack's eyes.

"Yeah, that's him." Jack says, watching Mickey laugh, his face lit up with the most gorgeous smile Jack has ever seen on his face.

Mickey looks so fucking happy. So free. Jack feels like his heart is going to explode. He's so god damn proud of his friend, so grateful he has him in his life.

Sometimes Jack has a hard time reconciling the man he knows now with the closed off asshole he met in jail. When Jack had first met Mickey he was certain the other man was going to kick his ass six ways to Sunday. He took a chance, goading him like he did, teasing him, hitting on him. Never in a million years did he think Mickey would take him up on his almost-not-really indecent proposal. Jack liked to live dangerously, back then. And the way he saw it then, he'd either get a quick orgasm for his troubles, or a trip to the infirmary. But he took the chance. Cuz why the fuck not?

Now, after all the shit they've been through together, Jack thinks propositioning Mickey was probably one of the best things he ever did.

It fucking changed his whole life.

"Cute kid." Matt says, his eyes still on Mickey and Yevgeny. "Looks a lot like Mick."

Jack nods, not really listening anymore. He's so caught up in watching Mickey and Yevgeny. He knows Mickey's been wanting to see his son for a long time now, and seeing it happen in front of him gives him a warm tingly feeling in his chest.

This party was a great idea. Jack decides in that moment that he doesn't want to get too drunk that night. He wants to remember every moment of this evening.

He knows that's probably a big deal, for his 'recovery' or whatever. But it just feels right. It's not even
a hard decision to make.

There's another thing that changed dramatically once Mickey came into his life. Jack wants to be present again. He can't remember the last time he wanted to participate in his own life. But now, he can't imagine it any other way. He's happy.

He knows it's not all Mickey's doing, Jack has done a lot of work on himself, mending bridges and admitting some ugly truths about himself. But he's going to give credit where credit's due, and Mickey has a lot to do with the turnabout Jack's life has made. Having that ride or die friendship is something Jack's never experienced before. He wonders as he takes a sip of his beer, if he'd known Mickey sooner, maybe he'd never have gotten so mixed up in heroin to begin with.

Jack shakes his head. He needs to calm the fuck down. He's not even buzzed, and he's going down an emotional rabbit hole.

Loving Mickey has turned him into such a pussy.

He kinda loves it.

Mickey can't stop smiling. He literally can not stop his face from hitching up at the corners. No one has ever done anything like this for him in all his life. He can't believe he was actually feeling sorry for himself a few hours ago, thinking his birthday was forgotten in all the baby chaos.

He feels like an asshole, but he can't be bothered to care. Not when he's surrounded by friends and family, people who love and respect him. People who came together to celebrate him.

It's surreal.

The party is in full swing now. The music is up loud, people are milling about, chatting and drinking, eating food Mandy pulled out from the back. Mickey is standing by the bar, watching Yevgeny playing with Kev and Vee's twins. They had found an old game of twister in the supply closet, and the kids are going at it hard. Yevgeny is bent over backwards, hands splayed out on either side of his body, a wide grin on his face.

"So, tell me about the baby," Fiona says, sliding up next to him, beer in hand. Mickey looks over at her, then his eyes search for Ian instinctively. He's over at the jukebox with Jack, arguing good naturedly over Billy Joel or Elton John.

Looks like he's on his own.

"Uh, she had a girl," he said, swiping his thumb over his upper lip. "Katya. Like my mom." he adds on quietly.

Fiona's face softens, a small smile on her face. "You know, I never really thought about you having a mom," she says. She takes a sip of her wine, eyes so focused on Mickey, he feels a little awkward. "I mean, I knew you had to have one, I just never thought about her. It was always just Terry and you kids."

"Yeah, well, she died a long time ago." Mickey says, bringing his bottle to his lips and taking a long
drink. "Guess Iggy and Tess just wanted to remember her."

"Do you? Remember her, I mean?" Fiona asks. Mickey's confused. What the hell is Fiona playing at?

"Um, yeah, I do. She was a good woman." Mickey said. It was true. His mom was a good woman, even if her last years were shaky. But that was all Terry's fault.

"It's really nice that your brother and his girl are honoring your mom that way. God knows Monica never did anything worth remembering."

"But isn't Debbie's kid named after Frank?" Mickey asked, eyes going to Debbie, who is now dancing with Jack and Ian. The decided on Billy Joel, it seems.

"Yeah." Fiona laughed. "You got a point there."

The conversation flowed easier after that. Mickey showed Fiona some pictures of Katya, which she cooed and babbled over for quite a while. They talked about Yev and their respective work situations. Mickey knew where it was all headed, however. It always came back to the same thing with Fiona.

"How's he doing?" she asked, motioning toward her brother, who was now waltzing around the bar with Jack. The rest of the room was gathered around in a circle, hooping and hollering at them, laughing.

Mickey smiled unconsciously, gazing at Ian with so much love in his heart. It felt like a physical thing, his love for Ian, taking up all the space in his chest.

"He's doing real good." Mickey said, not bothering to turn back to Fiona. He couldn't look away now if he tried. Ian had a hand on Jack's waist, their other hands clasped together as they glided across the available space. They had twin blinding smiles on their faces, laughing at some joke no one else could hear. "He's fucking amazing."

"That good, Mickey." Fiona said, placing a hand on his shoulder. He did look over then. Her eyes were soft, her lips pulled up into a barely there grin. "I'm glad he found you again. You're good for him."

Mickey's mouth dropped open, unsure of what to say. In all the years he's known Fiona, he was never confused about how she felt about him. She didn't like him. She tolerated him, most of the time, for the sake of her brother. There had been times, in their long and colorful collective past, when she downright hated him. Sometimes he deserved her ire, other times he didn't.

Mickey knew she had always only been looking out for her brother. Mickey was a grade A asshole for most of his youth, and she had no reason to like him. But he can admit to himself that when he came back from Mexico, and he and Ian started up again, he was certain Fiona would never look beyond his past, never see the man he is now.

But he was wrong. And that makes him ridiculously happy.

"We're good for each other." Mickey replies, giving Ian's older sister a grin before his eyes are drawn back to Ian.

He can't look away.

------------------------------------------------------------
Ian is standing off to the side, against the wall, by the jukebox. The night is going so well. He looks around the room, his face aching from all the smiling he's doing. Honestly, he's relieved. Ian had been nervous.

With Katya's unexpected appearance earlier in the day, he'd been worried all his plans would go to shit. But standing here, in the packed Alibi, watching Mickey and Jack trying to teach Yevgeny how to play pool, he feels satisfaction deep in his bones.

"Nah, kid." Mickey chuckles, moving Yevgeny's fingers down the cue again. "You gotta grip it like this. See?"

"Yeah, okay. Lemme." the boy takes the cue and flicks it out haphazardly, flinging it across the table. Jack dodges it at the last minute, the stick whizzing by his head.

"Whoa, easy there, killer." Jack laughed, running a hand through his messy hair. "Not the face, okay?" he leans down and picks up the cue, handing it back to Mickey with an amused smile on his face.

Ian laughs, feeling a little like an interloper, creeping on them from across the room. So he pushes off the wall, closing the distance. He slides up next to his boyfriend, unable to not touch him any longer. He wraps himself around Mickey, arms slung low around his waist, chin resting on his shoulder.

"Who's winning?" he asks, planting a tiny kiss behind Mickey's ear.

"The kid." Mickey replies, his free hand coming up to scrub the back of Ian's neck. Mickey leans his back against Ian's chest, and Ian can't stop the quiet groan that slips past his lips. He buries his face in Mickey's neck, inhaling deeply. He blushes a little, surprised by his own neediness. He just couldn't stand off to the side and watch Mickey anymore. He had to be next to him, had to be touching him. "Yev's a pool shark, huh buddy?" Mickey says, handing the cue back to his son and watching as Jack comes over and tries to show him the proper way to shoot. Again.

"See, you gotta lean over, a little. Line it up with the cue ball. That's the white one, remember?" he asks, looking over his shoulder to see if Yevgeny's paying attention.

He's not. He's abandoned his post next to Jack and wandered over to his father. Jack straightens up again, turning fully to take in the scene before him.

Ian is still standing behind Mickey, head on his shoulder as they talk quietly. Yevgeny has come up and latched onto Mickey's leg. Both arms wrapped tightly around Mickey's thigh, his head tilted up, gazing at his father and Ian lovingly. Mickey has one hand on Ian's wrist, which is still wrapped around his middle, and the other resting on his son's head. The three of them are in their own little world.

Jack thinks quick. He pulls his phone out of the pocket of his jeans, swiping the screen discreetly, and snapping a picture. This is a moment he doesn't want to forget.

"You really didn't have to do all this." Mickey reiterates for the hundredth time. "It's not that big a
deal." he can feel his face get hot, fucking blushing like a girl. But he can't help it. This is so outside his comfort zone.

He wonders if this is how Ian felt, when he threw him his party. It's a strange mixture of happiness and shy awkwardness. He wants to swim in the feeling, while simultaneously hiding under a rock.

He goes with the floaty happy feeling. It's nice to be the center of attention for once. It's nice for people to notice him for something other than his criminal record or his shitty reputation (that's he's still trying to live down, good luck with that.)

"Yeah, we really did." Matt says as he takes a seat at the table.

Ian and Jack had moved all the tables to the center of the bar, so everyone could sit together while they ate cake and Mickey opened his gifts. (Mickey openly balked at the small pile of presents. Never in his life had he gotten a birthday gift, besides a bottle of Jack once every few years from his sister.)

Seated around the table were all his friends and family. Matt and Jack on one side, Ian and Mandy on the other. Macy had shown up about an hour ago, all smiles and hugs. Then there was Kev, dopey grin on his face, passing out more free beer. (it's a birthday miracle, that's what that is) Svetlana and Yev sit across from him, Yev on his knees with his hands folded over the table, like he doesn't want to miss a thing. Carl and Debbie on the far side, deep in conversation while Benji grabs a cake from the fridge and sets it in the middle of the table.

"Okay, so here's how this is gonna go." Mandy says, standing up. She had a drink in her hand, and she was wobbly on her feet. Mickey smiled watching Macy put a hand on her hip to steady her. That girl really loved his sister. "I saw this on Youtube, and I wanna do it. Ian said I could, so fuck you if you think it's dumb."

Well that was quite an introduction. Mickey's sure whatever is going to follow is not going to be cool at all.

"We are all gonna go around and tell Mick why we love him, then give him our gift." she smiled, pleased with herself. Like it was the best idea she ever had.

Mickey disagrees. He thinks it's a stupid fucking idea. He can feel his face heating up already, and no one has even spoken yet.

"Mandy, no." he says, gripping his beer tightly in his hand. He brings it to his mouth, gulping down a big sip before he speaks again. "You don't need to do all that."

"Oh, dear brother, but we do." Mandy retorts, ruffling his hair with her free hand. He bats her away, blushing more.

Milkovichs don't fucking blush. God damn it.

"Okay then!" she says, I'll go first." she grabs up a small box from the table and hands it to Mickey. Mickey eyes her warily, then scans the room. Everyone is staring at him expectantly. He takes a deep breath, willing away his stupid nerves, and grabs the package roughly from his sister. She just beams at him, eyes dancing with trademark Milkovich mischief. She speaks as he starts tearing into the package.

"Mick, we did not grow up in a house that encouraged family bonding. It was every man for himself, dog eat dog every fucking day. But you were always there for me. Not a lot of people know how much you took care of me growing up. You used to get in Terry's way when he was gunnin' for me.
You took so many beatings so that I didn't have to. I knew you were a good person long before you did. I am so glad you finally figured that shit out." she smiled, face lighting up with open affection. "I am so happy for you. The life you have now, you have it because you made it. You cut a few corners." that got a few laughs from the group. "And you were a dick a lot of the time." she eyed Ian while she said that. "But you grew the fuck up, and I am so proud to see you being the man you were always meant to be." she said, her eyes welling up with tears. "A bad ass dude that takes no shit, unless of course it's from the bad ass dude you bang."

Mickey's face twisted up in an embarrassed grimace. "Mandy, what the fuck?"

She smiled again. "What? Tell me it's not true?"

Mickey ignored the laughing still going on around him and looked down at the box in his hand. It was a small cylindrical object, camo green. "What the fuck is this?" he asked, confused.

"It's a travel flask, Mick. It's called a Flasklight, or something." Mandy said, still smiling. She took the box out of his hand and opened it. Inside was a long, army green cylinder. She held it up for his inspection before taking it apart.

The flask had a bunch of pieces, which she set out on the table in front of him. "So, this top part is a compass, this long part here is where you put the booze, then this little piece at the bottom holds two collapsible cups and a bottle opener, and this bottom part is a flashlight. Pretty cool, right?" she asked, laying all the parts out for Mickey’s inspection.

He grabbed up one of the cups, opening it up. It looked like it would hold about two shots. He eyed the gift, impressed.

"Yeah, it's pretty fucking cool. God knows everyone needs a flask. But I'm not sure how much use I'll get outta the compass. I mean, I don't get lost on the south side."

The room filled with a smattering of chuckles, but Mickey was genuinely confused. What the hell did he need a travel flask for? He didn't fucking travel.

"Okay, us next." Debbie says, walking up to the table with three small packages in her hand. They were wrapped identically in black paper with white skulls on it.

"Where the fuck did you get that paper?" Ian laughed. He was standing directly behind Mickey's chair, hands wrapped around his shoulders, squeezing the muscles every once in a while.

"I have my sources." Fiona smiled. She stood off to the side, flanked by Carl and Debbie. They all eyed Mickey, waiting patiently for him to open their gifts. "Open mine first, it's the big one."

"You gotta say the thing." Jack reminded Fiona, who pinkened a little under his glare. "That's part of it."

Mickey wanted to tell Jack to shut the fuck up. That he didn't need anyone saying nice shit about him, whether they meant it or not. But Ian was nodding, giving his sister a look, and she caved easily before Mickey could even open his mouth.

"Mickey, we go a long way back." Fiona said, bringing her glass to her lips and taking a sip of her drink before continuing. "To say that I was shocked when I found out about you and Ian would be a massive understatement. To say I was happy about it would be a bold-faced lie." she gave Ian a small smile. "But I was wrong."

Mickey shot her an incredulous stare, but she continued undeterred. "You guys were a mess for a
long time. You hurt each other, danced around each other, shit all over each other. There were times I wanted to fucking stab you, you hurt my brother so much.” she paused, taking a deep breath before speaking again. "But when the chips were down, you were there for him, even if I didn't always agree with the way you went about it. It was clear that you loved him. When you came back from your Mexican sabbatical, I was worried you were going to drag him down. But you have done nothing but lift him up. You guys are amazing together, and I'm genuinely happy you found each other again. Happy birthday, Mickey."

Mickey gave Fiona a small smile. Never in a million years did he expect to be getting a gift of any kind from her, never mind that heartfelt monologue. He never expected for them to be friendly. He has to admit, he kinda likes it. She's not so bad when she's not shitting all over him every two seconds.

He rips into the package, handing Jack the wrapping paper to toss into a trash bag he's got at his feet. He slides the top off the box and looks inside. It's a sweatshirt.

Huh.

He pulls the garment out of the box and holds it up for inspection. It's an Adidas hoodie. Black with three white stripes down both arms. It's the zip up kind, not a pullover. He wonders if Fiona actually remembers that he hates pullovers, or if it's just a happy coincidence.

"I didn't know what to get you." she says, nervously playing with the stem of her wine glass. "But you can't go wrong with a hoodie, right?"

"It's awesome, Fiona." Mickey smiles. "Thank you."

Fiona smiles a little wider, clearly relieved. "You're welcome."

"Come on." Carl says, pushing the smaller boxes toward Mickey. "Let's get to the good shit."

Mickey eyes him quizzically, grabbing up one of the boxes. He rips it open and looks inside. "You have got to be kidding me." he laughed.

"What?" Carl asked. "It's for work." he smiled devilishly.

Mickey grabbed up the knife, swinging it this way and that until the blade was up and out. It was a nice knife. Red handle, sharp, one-sided blade. He smiled at Carl, opening his mouth to thank him, but he was cut off by his boyfriend.

"What the fuck, Carl?" Ian spat. "You got him a fucking butterfly knife?"

"What?" Carl asked, shrugging his shoulders.

"He's on fucking probation is what." Ian spat, going for the knife. Mickey was too fast, shoving it in his pocket and sticking his tongue out like a child. "You heard him, Gallagher, it's for work."

Ian rolled his eyes before shooting his younger brother a death glare.

"If that makes you mad, you're gonna skin me alive," Debbie laughed. "But I'm gonna speak for Carl and me both, since he's a damn idiot and forgot that part."

"Did not." Carl replied, bringing his beer to his lips. "I just know you're a sentimental ass who loves giving speeches."
Debbie punched her brother in the arm hard enough to make him wince. He brought his hand up, rubbing at the tender muscle as Debbie turned toward Mickey, a soft smile on her face.

"Mickey, you have been around since we were just kids. You were always cool with us, including us in conversations... and other stuff."

"Stuff you shouldn't have been included in." Fiona piped in, but her tone was playful.

Debbie rolled her eyes anyway. "You've just always been there, and me and Carl both hope you stick around this time. You're definitely Ian's coolest boyfriend."

"Yeah, seriously." Carl agreed. "You remember that one asshole with the...."

"Carl, enough." Fiona interjected, her eyes hard.

"Yeah, sure, sorry." Carl said, hands up. "Go on, open it." he motioned to the gift still in Mickey's hand.

"Thanks." Mickey said, feeling more and more exposed. He had been surprised enough by this whole party. Whatever they were trying to pull with these emotional tributes was really fucking him up. He didn't know how to take the praise or the kind words. It made him feel awkward and uncomfortable while simultaneously warming him to his very core.

It was a confusing feeling. He didn't know what to do with it.

So he swallowed it down, ripping into Debbie's gift.

"Holy shit." he whispered, his eyebrows shooting up to his forehead. He locked eyes with Debbie, who's got a silly, shit eating grin on her face.

"I have the same set." she said.

"Debbie!" Ian barked. "What the fuck? Brass fucking knuckles? What is it with you two?" He pointed an accusing finger at Debbie and Carl. "You WANT him to go back to jail? You WANT him to catch as assault charge? Another attempted murder??"

"Hey, hey." Mickey said, a gentle hand coming up to rest on Ian's forearm. "It's all good, Gallagher. It's not like I don't have a set already. No harm, no foul." he said, slipping the cool metal onto his fingers, flexing them and making a fist, feeling the familiarity of the weapon.

Felt good.

"But these are way nicer than my last pair." he said, nodding his thanks to Debbie.

And they were a lot nicer than his last pair. The ones he'd had when he still lived with Iggy were nasty old things, tarnished brass, with nicks and scratches on them from years of use busting heads. These were gorgeous.

They were real brass, that's the first thing Mickey noticed, none of that plated bullshit you see in shittier sets. The next thing he saw was the fact that two skulls were cut into the palm area of the set. The design almost reminded him of The Punisher, and that was fucking cool in Mickey's book. "These are fucking sweet, thanks." he said, giving Carl and Debbie a genuine smile. They both nodded, pleased with his response.

He could hear Fiona whispering furiously about the perils of gifting weapons to a felon on probation,
but he couldn't be bothered to care.

Next thing he knew, his son was bounding over to him. He smiled, his arms open. Yevgeny plowed into him, crawling up clumsily to be held. Mickey settled his son easier on his lap.

"Mine next!" Yevgeny yelped, leaning over the table with his whole body to pull a small wrapped package closer to them, thrusting into Mickey's hand with a blinding smile on his tiny face.

Mickey gave him a warm smile back, his arm wrapping tighter around his waist. He can't believe Svetlana brought Yevgeny down here for this. He was so damn happy, he owed her a sincere thank you, although he probably wouldn't give her one, since she wouldn't be receptive to such an open display of affection from him. It just wasn't how it was between them.

He ripped the package open, his jaw going slack when he saw what was inside. His eyes snapped up to Svetlana, standing a few feet off to the side, her arms crossed over her chest. She gave him a little glare, which morphed into a soft smile.

It was a framed 8x10 photo.

Mickey hasn't ever seen this photo. It looks like it's from a few months after Yevgeny was born. Back when Ian was staying at his old house, before the bipolar fucked everything up. The photo was him and Ian, standing in the living room, in front of that big window with the giant crack in the glass. Ian is holding Yevgeny, his eyes trained on Mickey. Mickey has one hand on Ian's shoulder, the other one is grasped inside Yevgeny tiny clapping fist.

Ian and Mickey are both smiling so wide, uninhibited.

Fucking happy.

"Holy shit." Mickey says, his eyes going to Svetlana again. She has that tiny smirk on her face, like she knows she's putting him through an serious emotional ambush at the moment.

Wonderful. Like he wasn't feeling overexposed and raw already.

"Do ya like it?" Yevgeny asked eagerly, swiping the picture from Mickey's shaking hands. "Daddy-Mickey, look! That's you and Uncle Ian and me as a tiny baby. Momma says this was a super long time ago."

"It was buddy." Mickey says. He feels Ian's hand on his shoulder again. "Wow, Mick." he says. Mickey turns his head, and Ian's face is right there. He presses his lips to Mickey's slack mouth, certainly able to feel the heavy emotions wafting off him. "Feels like another life, huh?"

Mickey nodded like an idiot, placing the photo on the table in the pile of open gifts.

"It's amazing buddy. Thank you." Mickey said, hugging Yevgeny tightly before he jumped off his lap and ran to his mother.

"A reminder of happy times, and the promise of more to come." Svetlana said. Mickey tipped his chin in thanks, but said nothing, afraid his voice would waiver and give away his weakness.

"Alright, who's left?" Mandy asked, directing the party back to the matter at hand. Mickey was grateful, feeling vulnerable in a way he didn't exactly like.

He was kinda ready for this to all be over. He appreciated the sentiment, but he still wasn't the type to accept gifts graciously.
"Me and Dad are the only ones left besides Ian." Jack said, dropping into an empty seat on Mickey's left. Matt came up behind him, a hand on Jack's shoulder, a small smile on his face.

"Matty, you gave me a gift already." Mickey said, trying to push the box back towards Matt.

"Mickey, don't be an ass." Matt laughed, pushing the box back towards him a little roughly. Matt took a long pull off his beer, smiling. "Take the fucking gift."

Mickey rolled his eyes, but took the box back. Thankfully this was the last gift on the table. Mickey assumed the party was Ian's gift to him, it was more than enough.

Jack stood up, like an asshole, laying a hand on Mickey's shoulder while he looked down into his face.

"Mick, when we met, we were both in a pretty dark place." Jack started, his face split with a wide smile. "But you made jail tolerable. I never thought I'd make a friend for life behind bars, but I can honestly say getting bunked with you was one of the best things that ever happened to me." he paused, trying to control his emotions. Shit, he's acting like a fucking girl right now. "Being your friend makes me a better person. I fucking love you, and I am lucky that you tolerate me."

"Jack, fuck off." Mickey barked, pushing him off his shoulder. "Don't tolerate shit, we're fucking friends, you asshole."

"So sweet to me." Jack teased. "Open the fucking box, asshat."

Mickey smiled as he opened the box, staring at it confused as he looked up at Matt and Jack. "What the fuck, guys?" he asked, thoroughly perplexed.

"It's a tablet, Mick. And a wireless speaker." Matt said, like Mickey was a damn imbecile.

"I know that, Matt." Mickey rolled his eyes. "What the fuck do I need that shit for? Do I look like a tech type guy to either of you?"

Jack beamed, his whole face lighting up. "Turn it on." he said.

Mickey gave him a quizzical look. "Right now?"

"May be a good idea, Mick." Ian said, leaning down so he could slip his arms around his chest and lay his chin on Mickey's shoulder.

"What? I don't get it." Mickey said. Jack huffed a tiny breath through his teeth, he walked back over to Mickey and pressed the button himself. The tablet whirred to life, the blank home screen popping up.

"Huh." Jack said, a cryptic smile on his face "What's this?" he reached over and pushed the only icon on the screen.

Skype.

The program loaded, and suddenly there were two faces staring back at him. A voice he hadn't heard in way too long traveling through Mickey's brand new Bluetooth speaker.

"Mickey? Is that you?" Javier's joyful voice filled the room, causing Mickey's heart to beat painfully fast in his chest. "Feliz cumpleaños, amigo."

"Javi? Is that you? Holy shit." Mickey whispered, feeling his eyes stinging. It had been so long since
he'd heard Javier's voice, never mind seen his face. He and Lauren had been traveling so much over the past few months, connecting with them had been next to impossible.

"Yeah, it is. L is here with me." Javier said, turning his phone slightly bring Lauren into frame.

"Mickey-baby!" she squealed. "We miss you so much!"

"I miss you guys too. A lot." Mickey said, nodding his head. His eyes flicked over to Jack and Matt, standing close together with twin smiles on their faces.

"Well, we're going to fix that soon, aren't we?" Javier asked, pulling Lauren close to him with an arm around her shoulders.

Mickey's face fell, saddened a little. "I wish." he said. "I don't know when I'll be able to come down there. Money's tight, and my PO...."

"Oh, Diablo Rojo!" Javier yelled over Mickey. "Tell him already."

Mickey's head swiveled around to stare at Ian, who was leaning over so he could see the screen too.

"I was just about to. Don't ruin the surprise." Ian chastised playfully.

"Ian, what the fuck is he talking about??" Mickey asked, looking into Ian's bright, dancing eyes, his heart jack-hammering in his chest.

No way. No fucking way....

"Well....." Ian started, his hand coming up to rest on the back of Mickey's neck. "I think I still owe you one trip to Mexico, right?"

Mickey's mouth fell open, but no sound came out, so Ian continued. "I hope you're not mad, but I really wanted to do this for you. Take you all the way, when I couldn't last time." Ian's voice was low, his eyes searching Mickey's, a little fear laced in his expression.

"You got me a trip to Mexico? For my birthday? With what money?"

"Meth money." Ian said plainly. "Remember? I told you about that."

"Ian, what about my parole?" Mickey asked, totally forgetting about Lauren and Javier, anyone else in the room. "Bateman will never let me go."

"Actually, we already talked to him." Jack said. Mickey whipped his head around to stare at Jack disbelievingly.

"You what?"

"We did." Matt piped in. "I mean, we kinda stretched the truth a little. Told him we had a job in California. But he was surprisingly receptive. I was actually pretty shocked." Matt chuckled. "Let's not look a gift horse in the mouth, huh?"

Mickey nodded, feeling numb all over.

This can't be happening. This kind of shit doesn't happen to him.

"But don't go getting arrested down there." Matt teased. "I don't want to have to explain that shit to Bateman. That guy kinda seems like a dick."
"He is." Mickey agreed, still shell shocked.

"So, we will see you soon, then, yes?" Javier asked, drawing Mickey's attention back to the tablet.

"I guess you will." Mickey replied, feeling like he may be having an out of body experience.

He was going back to Mexico. With Ian.

"Good." Lauren said. "We'll let you get back to your party. Call us soon to make plans, okay."

"Okay." Mickey replied.

"Te amo." Lauren and Javier said in unison, twin smiles splitting their faces.

"Te amo." Mickey replied.

"By Ian!" Javier said, waving. Ian waved back, smiling, and they were gone.

Mickey dropped the tablet down onto the table with a thud, turning in his seat to stare at Ian. Ian's expression was tight, eyes wide, lips stretched into a thin line. He looked a little scared, like he was waiting for Mickey to flip his lid on him.

A bright, blinding smile broke out on Mickey's face as he hooked a hand around the back of Ian's neck and pulled him into a deep kiss. If the rest of the room hadn't already faded away, it would have been obliterated at that point.

It was just him and Ian. He heard Ian groan in the back of his throat as Mickey pushed his tongue into his mouth. Ian's hands flew up to his hips, easily lifting Mickey from his chair and pulling their bodies together tightly. Mickey smiles against his lips, curling his fingers into that red hair he loves so fucking much.

After a moment, Mickey pulled back, resting his forehead against Ian's. His face was hot and he could feel the blush along his neck. He looked into Ian's eyes, getting lost in that warm adoration radiating from his irises.

"I can't believe you fucking did this." Mickey whispered.

"You happy?" Ian asked, his green eyes dancing between Mickey's slightly wet blue ones.

"Fuck yeah I am." Mickey laughed, dipping his head for another kiss. Ian pulled him closer, crushing him to his chest.

"Good."

Their moment was interrupted when the rest of the party surrounded them. Ian let Mickey go so he could make his way around the room, getting hugs and congratulations from the rest of the group.

Mickey grabbed up his excited son as he accepted handshakes and pats on the back from Kev and Carl, Fiona and Debbie. Svetlana corralled Matt and Jack to help her with the cake. It was a small chocolate cake Yevgeny had picked from the supermarket, with blue and green swirls in the frosting.

Svetlana sliced off pieces of cake, depositing them onto paper plates, handing them to Jack while Matt grabbed another round of beers from Kev.

Mickey sat back down, placing Yevgeny in the seat next to him and taking an offered piece of cake from Jack and a beer from Matt. Once everyone had a piece, Ian and Jack sat down with Mickey and
they all started eating.

"Were you surprised?" Jack asked, wiping a small smudge of frosting off his chin with his thumb, and sucking it into his mouth. His lips were stained blue and Mickey huffed out a laugh at his childish absurdity.

"Damn fucking right I was." Mickey laughed, his eyes going from Jack to Ian and back. "So you were in on all this shit from the very beginning?"

"Oh yeah, you know. The party, the trip, the visit from this little bug." Jack said, running a hand through Yevgeny's hair. The child squirmed, batting Jack's hands away. He gave Jack a little grimace, looking so much like Mickey in that moment. Jack couldn't suppress the affectionate smile he gave back. Yevgeny just raised his eyebrows, turning back to his cake.

"Wow." Mickey said, surprised. He had no idea.

"It sucked having to lie to you, but I think it was worth it in the end." Jack said, winking at Ian, who smiled back.

"Yeah, thanks a lot. Shit's fucking unbelievable." Mickey replied, trying to keep his composure. He looked from his best friend, to his boyfriend, to his son. All seated around the same table, happy and smiling.

This was by far, the best birthday he'd ever had.

"We did it all for you, Mick." Ian said, reaching his hand out, intertwining their fingers on the table. "I know I didn't give a speech with your gift, but I hope you know how I feel by now. Everything for you, always."

---------------------------------------------------------

"We wish we could stay, but Zhenya has practice tomorrow." Svetlana said, standing outside the bar, hands on Yevgeny's shoulders.

"That's okay." Mickey said, kneeling down to be eye level with his son. "You gonna kick some ass?" he asked, running a gentle hand over his head.

Yevgeny smiled at his father. "Yeah! You're not supposed to fight in soccer, but screw 'em!"

"Yevgeny!" Svetlana barked. "Следите за своим ртом."

"Yes, mama." Yevgeny sighed, head hanging low. "Will I see you soon?" he asked his father, eyes pleading.

"I sure hope so, buddy. We'll talk to Momma and figure it out, okay?"

"Yay!" Yevgeny hollered, wrapping his tiny arms around Mickey's shoulders. Mickey held him tight, wishing the visit wasn't over so soon.

Svetlana and Yevgeny left not long after that, leaving Mickey feeling a little empty.

Everyone else was gone by then, save for Matt, Jack, Mandy and Ian. They stood outside the bar,
milling about until Svetlana and Yevgeny were gone.

"Alright, guess I'll head out." Matt said, turning toward the small group. "Jackie, you wanna ride home?"

"Sure dad, that would be cool." Jack said. He turned, pulling Mandy into a hug. "Thanks for helping out today, you're for sure my second favorite Milkovich now," he smiled.

"Ha fucking ha, Jack." Mandy said, falling into the hug easily. Once they parted, she punched him hard in the shoulder.

"Ah, fuck. You people, so violent." he teased. He walked over to Ian, rubbing his shoulder. "Gah, she hits fucking hard."

"Yeah, best to stay on her good side." Ian laughed, pulling Jack against his chest. Jack held him back just as tight, pressing his face into Ian's shoulder.

"We did good today." He whispered up to Ian. "Thank you for letting me help."

Ian pulled away, looking down into Jack's eyes. The kid was so sincere, it was a little tough to maintain eye contact.

Jack has changed so much, even over the past few months. Ian thinks he only saw him drink two beers the whole night. Ian has to say, he's happy for Jack. Maybe even a little proud? It's a new feeling, but he likes it.

"We did. " Ian agrees. He pats Jack on the shoulder once before slipping out of the embrace. "And don't fucking thank me for LETTING you help, Jack. Jesus. We did this shit together. Thank you for being part of it."

Jack blushed, which was something Ian was not used to seeing. Ian cracked a smile. His eyes wandered over to Mickey, who was saying goodbye to Matt and his sister. Mickey hugged them both, a huge smile on his face, and Ian's heart almost exploded. He did a good thing today.

"You send me some of those baby pictures, Mick. Lex is gonna wanna get on shopping ASAP."

"You don't have to do that, Matty." Mickey replied, rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly.

"Shut up. " Matt insisted. "Yes, we do."

Mickey shook his head fondly, just as Ian and Jack walked over. Mandy was sliding into the front seat of Matt's truck, clicking her seat belt and waiting.

"Mick." Jack said, holding his arms out wide. Mickey rolled his eyes, but pulled the other man to his chest regardless. "Happy birthday, kid. Fucking love you." he whispered. Mickey nodded, his face hidden in Jack's shoulder, which he was glad for. Suddenly he was overwhelmed with emotion again. Remembering the last time he and Jack had celebrated his birthday together. It was much different than this night.

Jack had been there for him when no one else was. And he was still here now. Fuck, Mickey felt so damn lucky to have him.

To have all of this. His family, his son. His fucking friends. And Ian.

God, Ian.
Mickey felt his throat closing up. He had to shut this shit down before he fucking lost it.

"Yeah, yeah," he said gruffly. He squeezed Jack tight one last time before pushing him away, maybe a little too roughly.

Jack laughed, stumbling backwards until he fell into Ian, who was standing a few feet away.

"Shit, sorry. Mick's assaulting me again." Jack said, turning around to face Ian. "So, call me, you two. I'm thinking for MY birthday this year, we can go to Fire Island. Whatdaya think? Hot, barely dressed gay men as far as they eye can see??"

"God damn it, Jack. You're father is standing two feet away." Matt sighed, opening the driver's side door and slamming it shut behind him, no doubt to block out the stupid shit his son was saying.

Mickey shook his head. This fucking idiot.

"You're such a dumbass." Mickey laughed as Jack slipped into his seat.

"Yeah, but you guys love me anyway." Jack smiled, blowing them both kisses before slamming the door. He waved like a moron the whole way down the street, until the truck turned and they were out of sight.

"Jesus." Mickey laughed, turning to Ian.

"Yeah, I know." Ian smiled, he reached out, pulling Mickey toward him with his hands on his hips. "S'alot. You ready to call it a night?"

"Don't be stupid, Gallagher." Mickey scoffed. "Our night is just getting started."

Mickey laughed, all the breath getting knocked out of him as Ian shoved him roughly against the hallway wall. Ian kicked the door shut behind him, plastering himself to Mickey's body, burying his face in his neck.

"Shit." Mickey sighed, letting his head fall back against the drywall as Ian nipped and sucked on his exposed skin. "Gotta lock the door."

Ian hummed against his neck, reaching behind himself blindly with one hand, twisting the deadbolt, never letting up on Mickey's throat.

Mickey groaned, trailing his hands up Ian's sides. He pulled at his dress shirt frantically, finally freeing it from his jeans and sighing in relief once his fingers found that hot bare skin underneath.

Ian sucked in a sharp breath as Mickey dug his fingernails into the muscles on his back, shoving a leg between Mickey's knees, spreading his legs wider. He rutted against Mickey's thigh lightly, one of his hands sliding down the wall to tangle in Mickey's hair. He pulled the dark locks, tipping Mickey's head so he could slot their mouths together.

Mickey melted into the kiss. Fucking melted. All his muscles relaxed and he went boneless in Ian's arms.
Ian wrapped his free hand around Mickey's waist, his palm flexing on one of Mickey's glorious ass cheeks.

Mickey let himself be kissed for a while, letting himself drown in the taste of Ian. The way his lips moved against his own. The way their tongues slid over each other. The feeling of Ian hot and hard against him, grunting and breathing heavy.

Fuck, he was so turned on.

"Mick." Ian said between kisses. "What do you want?"

"Ian." Mickey sighed, groaning lowly as Ian cupped his ass harder, grinding his erection against his thigh rhythmically. "You, want you..."

"You got me. All of me. Everything, Mick. For you."

Mickey smiled, certain he'd heard Ian say that exact thing earlier in the night.

He lost himself as Ian kissed him again, any and all coherent thought going right out the fucking window.

Ian grabbed him by the hips and pulled him off the wall, walking them backwards toward the bedroom. Mickey's back hit the door and it went swinging, slamming into the opposite wall with a thud. Once they were inside the bedroom, Ian pulled back just enough to grip the hem of Mickey's shirt and pull it over his head. Mickey raised his hands to help, and once the shirt hit the floor he immediately went for his own belt.

He stripped quickly, falling onto the unmade bed gracelessly, watching Ian shed his own clothes with hungry, lust-blown eyes.

Ian was a god damn work of art. No one had ever been sexier in Mickey's eyes, and no one ever would be. He was sure of that now.

Ian kicked off his boxers and crawled over to Mickey, hovering over him with a hand on either side of his head. He leaned down, capturing Mickey's lips in a deep kiss, all while fumbling under his pillow, searching for the lube.

"Here, here." Mickey stammered, producing the elusive bottle seemingly out of nowhere. Ian grabbed it, placing it on the bed by Mickey's hip as he lavished attention on his neck with his lips and teeth.

Mickey lay there, entranced and unmoving, on his back, staring up at the ceiling while Ian worked his body any way he wanted to. He sucked a deep hickey into the milky flesh under his collar bone, pulling back to admire his handiwork before continuing his southern track. He ran his tongue along Mickey's rib cage before curling his tongue around one of his nipples, causing Mickey's back to arch severely, a breathy "Christ." slipping out of his lips. Mickey's hand flew up, his fingers tangling in Ian's hair as his boyfriend blazed a hot trail down his chest with his mouth. He ran his tongue over the barely defined ridges of Mickey's abs, moaning at the taste of flesh under his lips.

Ian bit at his hipbone, the fingers on his right hand flicking the lube open. Mickey sighed as Ian's tongue dragged along his inner thigh.

"Ian, c'mon." he whined, thrusting his hard cock up into nothing. Ian chuckled, his breath ghosting over Mickey's tender, bitten flesh. His body broke out in goosebumps as Ian licked his way over to his cock.
“Yeah, okay.” Ian sighed. "Can't tease you on your birthday." and with that he dipped his head down and took Mickey's cock into his mouth, swallowing down more than half of it in one go.

"Oh. Fuck." Mickey groaned. He flexed his fingers in Ian's hair, his head tilting back as his eyes fell closed.

Ian had always been skilled with his mouth, but tonight he was stepping up his game. Mickey's breath hitched as Ian swallowed him down over and over. Ian moaned around his dick, sending a shiver of vibrations up his spine.

He pinched his eyes shut, his hand still tangled in Ian's hair. He rested his hand at the base of his skull, not pushing or guiding, just holding. His hand trailed down to the side of Ian's neck, feeling the muscles there flexing and relaxing as Ian's head bobbed.

"Jesus." Mickey moaned as Ian took him all the way, his throat constricting around his cock as he swallowed. Short puffs of breath shot out of Ian's nose, tickling the hairs in Mickey's groin.

Mickey was so lost in Ian's ministrations, he twitched in shock when a cold wet finger breached his hole. He flinched but relaxed into the sensation quickly.

"Yeah, fuck. C'mon, more." Mickey moaned, his hips falling out wider, giving Ian more room to work.

Ian slid one finger in and out of Mickey's body, slowly working him open in a way that he knew Mickey secretly loved, even though he was always goading Ian to 'hurry the fuck up.'

But that didn't happen tonight. Mickey just laid there, staring at the ceiling, fingers still gripping Ian's hair tight in his tattooed fingers as he prepped him agonizingly slow.

Ian peeled his lips off Mickey's cock, letting fall wetly against his stomach as he pumped that solitary finger in and out of Mickey's ass.

Ian smiled against Mickey's skin as Mickey let out a grunt of pleasure, his legs twitching on the mattress. Once Ian felt a little give, he added a second, then a third. By that time, Mickey was squirming all over the mattress, clawing at the bed sheets and Ian's back, desperate.

Ian was not much better, his hips thrusting down against the mattress, chasing friction. Mickey just looked so good, sounded so good.

Ian forgot why he was dragging out this prep in the first place. He shook his head a little, pushing up onto his elbows, his fingers slipping free of Mickey's body.

"Ian, please." Mickey moaned, covering his flushed face with his palm. "I gotta... we..."

"Shhh, s'okay." Ian said, crawling over Mickey body and diving in for a vehement kiss. He moved his lips frantically against Mickey's, tangling their tongues together. Ian was so amped up, he needed it now.

"How d'ya want it, birthday boy?" Ian whispered against his lips.

"Like this." Mickey murmured, rolling out from under Ian and onto his hands and knees, pushing himself up on shaky hands.

"Yeah, fuck. You love it from behind." Ian said hotly, running a hand down the curve of Mickey's spine, gripping his ass firmly in one of his hands. "You want it hard?"
Mickey nodded wildly, pushing his ass further into Ian's hand. "Yeah. Fuck."

"Good, me too." Ian said, sliding one hand up Mickey's side, curling his fingers around his shoulder.

He gripped his dick in his other hand, hissing through his teeth at the contact. God, he had to get inside Mickey, like now.

He lined up with Mickey's entrance and rocked his hips forward, breaching him with just the head.

"Oh." Mickey sighed, dropping his head between his shoulders. "Ian."

Ian groaned. The way Mickey said his name when he was keyed up like this was fucking sinfully hot. He gripped his hip tighter and thrust forward, burying himself to the hilt.

Mickey moaned, low and long, pushing his ass back, asking for more.

Ian gave it to him.

He slammed his hips forward, over and over, pulling Mickey back onto his cock with an iron grip. Mickey took it all, arching his back and thrusting back onto his hard on, eager for all Ian could give him.

Ian moaned, cocking a hand back and bringing it down hard on Mickey's ass cheek. Mickey keened, arching his back. Ian watched a bright red hand print bloom on Mickey's ass with a flair of possessive pride. He smiled through a growl as he slid his hand up Mickey's slick back to grip his shoulder again, fingernails biting into his collarbone.

Mickey was sweating, his body hot and sticky. Ian's hands were burning him where they gripped him by the hip and shoulder. Mickey threw his head back on a particularly hard jab, Ian hitting his prostate and making his mind blank out.

"Fuck." he croaked, his arms giving out as he face-planted onto the mattress below. He moaned into the sheets as his leaking cock got trapped between his body and the bed.

Ian chuckled, falling with Mickey. He landed on his body, still balls deep in his ass. He started thrusting, slower now. Mickey mewled underneath him, pulling one leg up high, desperate to get Ian deeper inside.

Ian moaned against Mickey's neck, his hand sliding up to interlace their fingers above Mickey's head.

The frantic, needy pace dissipated like a fog, and Ian and Mickey fell into a languid, sensual rhythm. Ian rocked his hips slowly, but deep, targeting Mickey's prostate with precision.

"This good, Mick?" Ian ground out, teeth clenched as he tried desperately to control his rutting. He slid his hips back, until just the tip was resting inside, before gliding forward again, barely pulsing his hips. "You like it when I fuck you slow?"

"Yeah, yeah." Mickey said, turning his head to the side, nuzzling his nose against Ian's. Ian smiled, closing the distance between them, pressing their lips together lazily. "You feel so fucking good. Fill me up. I can feel you fucking everywhere, god." Mickey sighed, stretching his neck out for Ian to greedily suck on.

Ian was losing his tenuous grip on whatever control he had. His hips started rocking with more purpose, his body crying out for release.
"Ah, fuck. Ian." Mickey moaned lowly, trying to push his ass up more, hindered by Ian's heavy body on top of his. But he didn't want to move. He didn't want space. He wanted Ian right fucking there. On him. Inside him.

Ian wedge a hand between Mickey and the mattress, slipping his fingers around his cock, pulling it slowly in time with his thrusts.

"Love you like this. Fucking love you so much." Ian whispered, licking along Mickey's neck, kissing behind his ear.

"Love you too-- fuck, Ian. Right there. Gonna come." Mickey breathed, burying his face in the blankets. He rocked with Ian, ass pushing back into each thrust, then forward into his tight grasp.

"Me too, baby. C'mon. Come with me." Ian growled, scraping his teeth along Mickey's shoulder blade.

Mickey moaned again, his whole body shaking as he came hard all over the bed. Ian breathed out heavy against Mickey's neck, feeling Mickey clench around him had him seeing fucking stars.

He thrust into his body twice more before pausing deep inside, filling Mickey up.

"Yeah, fuck. That's it." Mickey sighed, feeling sated and complete now that Ian had come inside him.

It had to be some primal shit he didn't understand, that desire to be marked like that by Ian.

Whatever it was, it was fucking hot.

Ian kissed the back of his neck once more before pushing up onto his hands and pulling out.

Mickey groaned, missing the feeling of Ian inside him already. He stretched his hands out and rolled onto his back.

Ian climbed out of the bed and wandered into the hall.

Mickey sat up a little more against the pillows, plucking a cigarette out of the box on the nightstand and slipping it between his lips. He lit it, a sated calm settling over him as he considered the events of the day.

Holy shit.

This had to be the most memorable birthday in his entire life. The events of the day playing on loop in his mind.

Iggy and Tessa had their baby. He shares his birthday now, with this tiny adorable little person. Katya is such a little doll, and being around to watch her grow up is going to be amazing. Mickey's actually looking forward to shit like taking her to the zoo to see the tigers, or getting together with his brother to teach her how to throw a fucking baseball, or a punch. He's certain Tessa will want to put her in ballet or something equally girly, but Mickey has to admit, even if he hates every second of it, he won't miss a single one of her recitals, or other little moments.

Then the party. Fuck. He had not expected that. He's still pretty shocked that Ian had been able to keep it a secret. Nevermind Jack, that kid can't keep his mouth shut to save his life. Mickey still hasn't come down from the high of the night. Seeing all those people coming together for him, it was unbelievable. Matt, Debbie and Carl. Fucking Fiona. That's some crazy shit.
And his son. His fucking son was there. Svetlana brought Yevgeny to Chicago. Just to see Mickey. The visit had gone so well, Mickey can't even comprehend it. Over the past few months of Skype and phone calls Svetlana and Mickey have come to terms, have actually become friends to a degree. She promised Mickey that in the near future Yevgeny could come to visit, just him, spend some time with Mickey and Ian. That is more than Mickey had ever dared to hope for. He knows he has a custody agreement, but without Svetlana's help, that shit was just a piece of paper.

Now, Mickey's got all kind of crazy ideas of Yevgeny and Katya growing up together. Doing shit he never got to do with his own cousins. Playing hide and seek, fucking tag. Who the fuck knows, anything besides robbing stores and getting their asses beat.

He wants more for these kids, and he knows they are going to have that, and it warms him to his very core.

This whole night, this whole party has solidified it for him. He has a family he loves, friends he can count on, and a boyfriend who makes him whole. He's fucking loved.

He feels his face breaking out into a tired, sated smile.

Mickey feels accepted in a way he's never experienced before. But the most shocking thing of it all is, none of that dark anxiety is hitting him.

That all consuming dread he always gets when good things happen to him. That sinking feeling that he doesn't deserve nice things, that any scrap of happiness he gets will be ripped from his hands. He's been waiting for that feeling to start sinking into his bones, making him afraid and doubtful, but it hasn't come.

It suddenly dawns on him, the feeling he can't place.

He's at peace.

Just then Ian walks back into the room, a wet washcloth in one hand and two beers tangled up in the fingers of the other. He places the bottles on the nightstand and proceeds to clean up Mickey's torso and thighs. Mickey says nothing, knowing this little ritual is important to Ian for whatever reason.

He keeps it to a minimal eye roll. Ian's done so much for him today, the least he can do is let him wipe all the cum off his chest, if that's what he wants to do.

Once he's done, he throws the cloth to the floor, to be picked up later, and crawls back into bed. Mickey takes one of the beers from him, passing him the half smoked cigarette.

Ian lays his head on Mickey's shoulder and turns on the TV. Mickey's not sure how long he'll be able to stay up, but he grabs the remote from his boyfriend anyway.

"It's still my birthday, so we're watching 'The Punisher' " he declares, cuing up Netflix.

"Whatever you want, Mick." Ian sighs happily, laying a tender kiss right behind his ear before settling better next to him, cuddling close. "Anything, fucking everything, for you, always."

Ian has said that exact thing to him twice before today. Mickey feels it deep in his bones.

Message received.

"Thank you, Ian." Mickey whispers. He knows Ian knows he's not just talking about Netflix. "I love you."
"I love you too, Mick. Happy birthday."

Chapter End Notes

we're on the home stretch, my friends. two more to go. it's been a wild ride, and i can't thank you enough for going along with me down this long, winding road....

"Feliz cumpleaños. amigo" - Happy birthday, friend."

"Следите за своим ртом" - Watch your mouth."
Chapter Summary

Ian and Mick finally cross the boarder together.

Chapter Notes

this one was super emotional for me. i literally laughed and cried while writing it.

after this, we only have one more chapter left. i can't believe it, but we are finally at the end. it ended up being a tale of 'odyssey' proportions, but we made it.

The weeks leading up to the trip were a little chaotic. Mickey had a lot of shit to do, not wanting to push his luck any more than he already was with this little vacation.

Yes, he knew it was a little shady to lie to Bateman about the true purpose and destination of his trip. But fuck it. Ian set this up for him, with the help of pretty much everyone Mickey knows. Matt promised to back him up if it came down to it, so Mickey was going to believe him, and do his best not to stress out about shit that *probably* won't happen.

He's on his way down to the Probation Office at the moment. They're leaving for Mexico the day after tomorrow, so Bateman had called him and asked him to stop in. Probably just wanted to put the fear of God into Mickey before he left the state.

Mickey chuckled, making his way down the street, weaving in and out of pedestrian traffic, keeping his head down. He had his headphones in, listening to White Zombie, lost in his own world.

As he waited at a crosswalk, tapping his foot to the heavy beat, the song cut out and his phone started ringing. He plucked his phone from his pocket and swiped his finger across the screen, pulling one of his earbuds free.

"What?"

"Is that any way to greet your best friend forever?" Jack's voice trilled over the line.

"Hey Jack, what's up?" Mickey said, moving with the crowd when the crosswalk light started blinking.

"Just checking on you, you get down to the Probation Office?"

"What the fuck? Are you my keeper now?" Mickey asked, shoulder-checking some slow asshole out of the way as he came upon the Probation Office. He was a little early, so he leaned his back against the facade of the building and pinched his phone between his ear and shoulder so he could get a smoke out of his pack.
He lit up his butt, blowing the smoke up over his head, staring sightlessly at the cloudy sky.

"No, Mick." Jack sighed. "I'm not your fucking keeper. Just your friend who gives a shit about what happens in your life. Excuse me."

Mickey groaned, closing his eyes, bringing two fingers up to rub at his forehead. "Sorry." he said. "Yeah, I'm at the probation office. Just smoking a butt before I head in there."

"Whatdaya think he wants?" Jack asked. Mickey could hear him moving around on the other end of the line. Probably on his way home from work. Mickey could hear the distant sounds of the L approaching on Jack's end of the line.

"I'm pretty sure he just wants to remind me not to do anything stupid while I'm out of state. You know, just your basic 'please don't commit any felonies' speech." Mickey laughed.

"More like 'please don't get caught committing any felonies." Jack retorted gleefully, earning himself a reluctant chuckle from Mickey.

"You're an idiot."

"I know, but at least I'm not boring."

"That's for fucking sure." Mickey laughed. He pulled on his cigarette, flicking the ash onto the sidewalk.

"Did your passport thingy come in the mail?" Jack asked. Mickey heard a door close, followed by Jack's train pulling away. He waited for the sound of metal screeching to subside before he responded.

"Yeah, we got those passport card things. Like a passport but not. I don't really know much about it. Ian took care of all that shit."

"Oh!" Jack said, his voice perking right up. "I know what that is. That's perfect."


"No fucking kidding, asshole." Jack spat back, fondly irritated. "But I'm talking about when we all go to Jamaica next summer!" he continued, like it was obvious.

"Since when are we going to fucking Jamaica?" Mickey asked, tossing his cigarette to the ground and stomping on it with a booted foot.

"Ian hasn't talked to you about it yet?" Jack's replied, his voice equal parts amused and surprised. "We've been talking about it since he started planning the trip to Porta Vaillarta."

"No." Mickey answered, pulling the glass door of the Probation Office open and stepping into the cool lobby of the building. "He sure as fuck didn't mention fucking Jamaica."

"Oh." Jack said. He was quiet for a minute before giggling maniacally. "Well, the plan is for us to go to Hedonism. You, Ian, me and a sexy twink of my choosing are going to hit the beach, fuck on any and all available surfaces, and partake in all the fine Jamaican weed and rum we can get our faggy little fingers on."

"Excuse you? What the fuck are you talking about?" Mickey asked, his voice hushed as he hit the
button for the elevator and waited, tapping his foot in annoyance.

"Don't you dare tell me you don't know what Hedonism is, Mick. Jesus, do you live under a rock?"

"Do I seem like the kinda guy that holidays in the fucking Caribbean, you dick?"

"Guess not." Jack conceded, before continuing his speech, clearly excited. "Hedonism is a resort in Negril. It's super gay friendly, all inclusive, clothing optional. They have hot tubs everywhere, a god damn BDSM dungeon, and hot as fuck gay men crawling out of the exotic woodwork. It will make those pool spas you guys went to on Valentine's day look like a Days Inn."

"Okay.... And why are we going there again?" Mickey asked, still confused. The doors of the elevator slid open and Mickey stepped out onto the carpeted floor of the Probation office, standing in the back of the short line to wait some more.

"Cuz we are young and hot and why the fuck not?" Jack laughed.

"Jack, what did I tell you about that rhyming bullshit. You are a walking fucking haiku, I swear to Christ."

"I think it's adorable that you know what a haiku is." Jack retorted gleefully.

"Fuck. Off." Mickey replied tersely. "I gotta go. I'm here. You and Matty still good to swing us by the airport Friday morning?"

"Of course, Mick. Wouldn't leave you hanging like that. You know that."

Mickey did know that. He knew Matty and Jack would never leave him hanging. He could count on them, for a lot more than a ride. The thought warmed him. And he was also pleasantly surprised at how normal it all felt now. Relying on people, being reliable in return.

Sometimes Mickey has to stop for a minute and really think 'this is my life.'

He smiles every time.

He's gone so damn soft.

"Milkovich." Bateman's voice pulled his attention to the front of the room.

"Gotta go." Mickey said quickly.

"Good luck." Jack said back. Call me later." and he was gone.

Mickey took a deep breath, making his way across the room in quick strides.

Bateman was the last hurdle before he could see Mexico with Ian.

Here goes nothing.

"You do see the irony of this whole excursion, right?" Lip said, stirring his coffee with a spoon,
eyeing his brother across the sticky table of the diner they were at. Ian and Lip had been trying to meet for breakfast at least once a month over the past however long. It was hit or miss, either or both of them having to cancel often. Adult life often got in the way of brotherly quality time.

But Ian was trying to make it more of a regular thing. Lip is doing well these days, and Ian wants to be supportive of his brother. Lip struggles greatly with his sobriety, but he seems to be putting in a more serious effort this time around. He's told Ian several times that having people that care about him in his corner is one of the most important parts of getting sober, so Ian is determined to be there for him as much as he can.

"How is it ironic?" Ian asked, taking the bait. He sipped his own coffee, staring at his brother with an amused smirk on his face.

"It's ironic that Mickey wanted you to flee to Mexico with him, but you turned him down. But then he came back to Chicago, and now you are taking him to Mexico." Lip laughed. "That's the definition of irony, Ian."

Ian just shrugged. He leaned back when the waitress walked over, dropping two steaming hot plates in front of the ravenous men.

Ian immediately started scarfing down his eggs. He hadn't had anything to eat yet all morning, and he was feeling a little queasy from his meds. He knew a little protein would settle his stomach.

"I actually think it's pretty romantic." Ian replied once he finished chewing. He picked up his coffee cup and took a sip. "Like we're getting to finish something we started a long time ago."

"You started all this bullshit with Mickey long before he broke out of prison." Lip replied, taking a bite of his wheat toast. He wiped some crumbs from his shirt before locking eyes with Ian over the table. "You sure this is what you want?" he asked carefully.

"What? Mexico? Of course I am. I'm really looking forward to it. Besides, the money's spent."

"That's not what I'm talking about." Lip sighed. He slouched in his seat, glancing up at Ian like he didn't really want to have to articulate his thoughts. Like he was hoping Ian would read his mind and spare him the trouble.

Ian just raised his eyebrows expectantly, snapping off a piece of crispy bacon with his teeth.

"This shit with Mickey, Ian." Lip said pointedly. He leaned forward, elbows on the table. "Are you sure you want to get this deep in with Mickey again."

Ian was shocked. He could feel all the blood draining from his face as a chill went down the back of his spine.

What the fuck was Lip talking about?

"Huh?"

"Ian." Lip sighed. "I know you love him. I know things are good now. I know you are living this gay fantasy you've had in your head since you were sixteen years old. But how far are you going to take this? You've changed so much, in a good way. You've grown up, you're handing your diagnosis so well. You have a good job, friends that care about you. And us, your family. You could get any guy you wanted. I just don't know why you'd settle for someone like Mickey when the whole fucking world is your oyster."
Ian's body went from cold to red hot in an instant. He felt rage bubbling up inside him, preparing to flow out of his mouth like molten lava.

Lip, sensing his anger, put his hands up. "Hey, I'm not trying to be a dick."

"Well, you are a dick." Ian said, clenching his hands into fists. "Where the hell is all this shit coming from? You guys were cool. You ARE cool. I thought this never-ending beef between you two was squashed. Mickey promised me."

"Mickey didn't do anything wrong Ian." Lip sighed. "And we are cool. He's changed a lot, and I will give him all the credit he deserves for that."

"Then what the fuck are you talking about?" Ian asked, growing more confused with each word that passed through his brother's lips.

"Just because he's an okay guy, doesn't mean he's good enough for you, Ian." Lip replied, like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Ian asked, his voice climbing to questionable volume for the venue of this discussion.

Lip groaned, running a hand through his messy hair. "Ian, Mickey may be a decent enough guy now, but you deserve way more. Someone who is smart, can teach you things. Someone you can take places, nice places. Someone who can take care of you. Someone who's not an emotional cripple. Someone who doesn't have years of abuse in his past. Someone who doesn't have a fucking criminal record. Someone's who doesn't have a kid already." Lip said all of this in a rush, like he needed to get it out before Ian punched him. "You deserve to start your life with someone worthy of you. I like Mickey just fine. He's a okay guy, by south side standards. But you are better than that. I wish you'd realize that already."

Ian was struck dumb. What the fuck?

He took a deep breath, so he didn't reach across the sticky table and deck his brother in front of a half dozen witnesses. He closed his eyes, counting in his head until his heart slowed and his brain wasn't buzzing anymore.

Then, he opened his eyes and leveled his older brother with a withering glare.

"Lip." Ian started carefully, keeping his voice level and calm. "I love you. You are my brother, and one of the best friends I've ever had in my entire life. We have been leaning on each other since as far back as I can remember. I appreciate your concern for me and my future. All that being said, fuck off."

"Ian, man..." his brother started, but was interrupted almost instantly.

"No." Ian grit out. "I let you say your piece, now you have to listen."

Lip made a face, but crossed his arms over his chest, eyebrows raised defiantly.

"I know you never understood what I have with Mickey," Ian started, putting a hand up between him and his brother when Lip moved to speak again. "No. Let me talk." he said. He waited for Lip to relax back into his seat before he continued. "Okay." he started, taking a deep breath "I know you have this picture in your head of who Mickey is. And maybe your idea would have been right, a few years ago." Ian sighed, taking a deep breath. He grabbed up his coffee cup and took a sip before continuing. "But that's not who he is anymore, Lip. He's not the fucked up kid who broke my heart
or kicked my ass. He's not dangerous, he's not cruel, and he's not an emotional cripple, as you so eloquently put it. He's a lot more than that. He always has been." Ian said, a small smile blooming on his face. "He makes me happy. He treats me good. He's good for me. We're good for each other."

"I get that, Ian." Lip said slowly. "But I'm just saying, there may be someone out there that is better for you. Someone who doesn't have all the baggage, someone who doesn't come with so much pain and anger and dark shit. Don't you want a normal relationship?"

"Lip, come the fuck on." Ian sighed. "What the hell would I do with a guy like that? Do you know me at all?" he grabbed up his fork and started shoveling eggs into his mouth before they could grow cold. "I don't want what you would call a normal guy, cuz I'm not fucking normal. I've tried that, remember? Caleb. Trevor. Fucking Brian." Ian grimaced. "Those guys were as white bread middle america as you get. Brunch dates, fucking Sex and the City trivia nights at gay bars, long walks in the park at sunset. But you know what? That shit never worked out, because those guys didn't get me. I had nothing in common with them, and we couldn't relate to each other. I always felt weird around them. Like they always saw me as some street kid they were slummin' it with for the moment." Ian sighed, running a hand through his hair, eyes boring into his brother's face. "I don't feel that way with Mickey. We understand each other in a way no one else ever could. He has seen me at my very worst, and that shit never scared him off. I don't have to pretend to be anything with him. I don't have to soften my edges or watch what I say. Cuz nothing I say could ever disturb him or surprise him. Because he's been there." Ian finished his eggs and pushed his plate away. "He understands me, supports me, and he fucking loves me. What else do you want for me?"

Lip sighed, dropping his own fork to his plate. He looked over at his brother, an expression of resignation crossing his face. He shrugged. "Y'know, I'm not really sure. I just want you to have everything you deserve. And I'm still not a hundred percent convinced Mickey can give it to you. Call it the 'protective older brother' schtick. I can't help it."

Ian smiled despite himself. Lip was just looking out for him. In his overbearing, shitty Gallagher way. But he loved him.

Even if he was fucking wrong this time.

"I get it." Ian said. He leaned over so he could slip his wallet out of his back pocket, dropping a twenty on the table. "But you just gotta trust me enough to know that I know what I want, what makes me happy. And that's Mickey. I want him, I love him, and he makes me happy. So fucking happy, Lip. If that's what you really want for me, I have it already."

Lip gave him a lopsided smile, moving to stand. "Okay then." he said simply.

Ian smiled back, relieved. "Okay."

------------------------------------------------

"Milkovich." Bateman said, standing up from his desk a little, leaning over with one hand out. Mickey took it and shook it before dropping down into one of the wooden seats across from the large desk that took up most of the room.

"Mr. Bateman." Mickey replied quietly. He always tried to be on his best behavior when he had a visit with Bateman. His P.O. was a decent enough guy. Didn't give Mickey much of a hassle, like a
lot of his P.O.s in the past had. He didn't try to trip Mickey up, didn't call him in for meaningless visits, didn't show up at his work or house. He may even border on lax in some people's eyes.

But Mickey appreciated the long leash, and he guessed it had something to do with the fact that he was on his best behavior these days anyway, so Bateman had no reason to really fuck with him all that much.

If he had to be stuck a fucking P.O. for the next few years, Bateman was probably the best he could get.

All that being said, he was still his P.O., and still a hard ass.

"Thanks for coming in." Bateman said, leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms over his chest. "Just wanted to go over some things before you head to the Golden State tomorrow."

Mickey kept his face passive, fighting the urge to roll his eyes. "What do you need?"

"Just the documentation we talked about." Bateman replied easily. "I talked to your boss, Mr. Cauldwell. Nice guy. He said you guys'll be out in California doing some work on some buildings for the Historical Society out there? Interesting work."

Mickey nodded, digging in his back pocket for the fake itinerary Matt had printed up for him. Mickey still felt a little fucked up over Matt lying for him like this. But Matt insisted, kept telling Mickey that he deserved a break, and if the state was the only thing standing in the way, then Matt would do his part to help overcome that little obstacle.

Bateman looked over the print out, reading it once, then again. He then put the paper down on his desk and leveled Mickey with a cold stare.

"Okay, here's the deal, Milkovich. I don't do this." once the words were out of his mouth, Mickey's heart sank. He looked down, staring at his shoes as he waited for Batemen to drop the hammer.

He knew it couldn't be this easy. He knew his luck was not that good. He knew there was no way they could get over on an old school probation officer like Bateman. He's seen it all, probably. Mickey's little tricks are probably all small time, old hat shit to him.

Mickey's a fucking idiot.

"But I'm gonna make an exception here."

Mickey's head shot up so fast. Bateman chuckled at what Mickey could only assume was his totally confounded expression.

"What?" Mickey asked, like an idiot.

"You're doing really well, Mikhailio." Bateman said. Mickey had never heard him used his first name before. It was jarring, only adding to his confusion. "You have not given me one single problem the whole time you've been under my watch. You have a good job, your boss has nothing but praise for your work ethic, and for you as a man. You did all the things I asked you to, including the survivors group. How's that going by the way?"

Mickey shrugged, feeling a little put on the spot. "It's okay." he replied honestly. "I don't get it, sometimes, though. I mean, how many times do you have to sit around talking about the same fucked up shit?"
"Until it gets easier." Came Bateman's reply. "Is it getting any easier for you?"

Mickey thought about it for a moment. Really thought about it. Was it easier for him, dealing with what happened to him? With Svetlana? With Cassie?

He gave a small nod. "Yeah. It is." And he meant it.

"Good." Bateman nodded, a warm expression on his face.

"Anyway." he said, clearing his throat. "You never miss an appointment, and you haven't had a single run in with the cops. It's a lot more than I see from most of my cases. I also read in your file that you have a good relationship with your son and ex-wife. You have stepped up to the plate and made something of your life." Bateman was staring at Mickey, like he could see right into his damn soul. Mickey had a split second of regret for lying to him.

"I've spent a lot of time going over your file, Mikovich." Bateman said, pulling a thick manila folder to the center of the desk. It must have been Mickey's entire file, adult and juvie. It had his most recent mugshot clipped the the front, his name emblazoned across the top in black sharpie. "You know what I see in here?" he asked, tapping a knuckle on the folder, still staring right through Mickey.

Mickey shook his head, unsure if he was supposed to respond or not.

"I see a kid who never had a chance." Bateman said, surprising Mickey yet again. Mickey's eyebrows crawled up his forehead as he involuntarily leaned toward his P.O. "I see a guy who grew up with nothing, with a shitbag father, no offense, who knew nothing of life except crime, violence and drugs." Bateman opened Mickey's file, his eyes raking over page after page of records. "Your mother died when you were just a kid. OD. You found her. Your father was in and out of jail your whole life, dragging you and your brothers into his life of crime before you were even in middle school."

Mickey could feel his face going beet red. His neck was flushed, and a cold sweat was breaking out on his back. Bateman has done his research. Shit Mickey didn't even know what was in his file. How could he know all this shit?

"You went to jail for attempted murder." Bateman continued, totally unaware of Mickey inner turmoil. "I've read those records too. That case was a joke, and it was also rigged. I heard what happened with that judge. Disgraceful. You got sent away for fifteen years for something you didn't do."

Mickey smiled then, couldn't help it. Bateman shut that shit down quick.

"Don't you fucking smile." he said, glaring at Mickey over the desk. "I am not condoning what you did to that woman. Drugging someone, for whatever reason, is against the law."

Mickey wiped the smile off his face, schooling his features as the other man continued to stare him down. After a few more moments of cold glaring, Batmen returned his eyes to the folder and continued his little speech.

"I am also not going to give you any brownie points for your little disappearing act." Bateman said, eyes firmly glued to the papers spread out in front of him. "Even if you were wrongly convicted, absconding from the law is never an option, Milkovich."

Mickey wanted to tell him he had no other options. That he was alone, and no one would listen. But he figured it was best to keep his fucking mouth shut.
"But, once the truth came out, you turned yourself in. You did the right thing, ready to face whatever came as a result of your actions. That's a big thing, and a lot of other fugitives would not have done that. You've come a long way, son. I will give you credit for that."

Mickey nodded, eyes wide. What was Bateman getting at?

"You're doing a good job, Milkovich." Bateman said, his lips quirking up like he wanted to smile before he smoothed his expression once more. "I see no reason to stop you from taking this trip with your boss." he slipped a paper out of the back of that ginormous file of Mickey's and passed it over.

Mickey leaned forward, snatching the paper from his P.O.'s outstretched hand. It was his signed and notarized Travel Permit.

"Now, I know I shouldn't have to tell you this, but I will." Bateman leaned over the desk, arms crossed in front of him. "Do not break the law while you are away. No guns. No drugs, no prostitutes. No bar fights. No god damn littering. Am I making myself clear?"

Mickey nodded, still a little shocked that this shit had worked. "Yes sir."

"Don't go getting all polite on me now, Milkovich, kiss-ass isn't really a good look for you."

Mickey laughed. Couldn't help himself.

He was going to Mexico. With Ian.

"Now get outta my office, I've got appointments with people way more troublesome than you."

Mickey stood quickly, nodding yet again. "Thank you." he said quietly, slipping from the office before Bateman could change his mind.

----------------------------------------

"I guess this is it." Matt said, dropping their last bag onto the sidewalk at the entrance of the airport. Jack was leaning against the truck, snapping pictures of Ian and Mickey as they grabbed up their bags, throwing them over their shoulders.

"Why the hell are you taking pictures?" Mickey asked, his nervousness from the flight bleeding out of his mouth in the form of irritation.

"I wanna document our last moments together, in case you fall from the sky in a blazing ball of fire, Mick. Obviously." Jack said, an evil grin splitting his lips.

Mickey dropped his bag so fast no one saw him moving. He had Jack pinned against the truck in a heartbeat, his forearm under his chin.

"Say it again, asshole." he growled.

Jack smiled, even though his face was going three shades of red. "Sorry. Just trying to alleviate the tension a little. You're so high strung."

"Jack." Matt sighed, walking over and gently peeling Mickey off his son. "What did we say about getting Mickey all wound up before his flight?"
"That we'd have to pay his bail if he got arrested for being a prick to the TSA." Jack replied sullenly, as if he'd had this precise discussion a few times before.

Ian laughed. This was all quite absurd. Mickey was a mess on the way to the airport, scared to get on the plane, though he'd never say that. Ian knows Jack was just trying to help, redirect that anxiety into something Mickey could work with, like anger.

But Ian's the one that has to get on the plane with him, not Jack. So maybe Jack should leave the Mickey-whispering to the expert.

"Exactly." Matt said. "So keep your damn mouth shut, unless you wanna foot the bill." Matt clamped a hand down on Mickey's shoulder, turning him so they were face to face. "Flight's gonna go fine, Mickey. You're going to have a blast." he smiled at Mickey kindly, squeezing his shoulder once more before releasing him to grab up his abandoned bag off the sidewalk. "C'mon, let's get you guys checked in."

Mickey followed Jack and Matt into the airport, Ian by his side. They were walking so close their arms brushed with every step they took. Mickey was grateful for the contact. He was jumpy about getting on the plane.

They say goodbye to Matt and Jack, promising to call once they are back on the ground and headed inside.

Just as Jack had predicted, Mickey was a fidgety bastard to the TSA agents, and it took him twice as long to clear him than it did for Ian or anyone else in the line. The smarmy bastards took their time with a long, drawn out pat down that had Mickey twitching, barely able to hold in his sarcastic comments.

After what felt like forever, Ian and Mickey were seated in their seats, flying high over the country on their way to Mexico.

They were in coach. In the middle of the plane. No window seat for their cheap asses. Ian had his tablet out, reading something Mickey had no interest in. Mickey was sitting, fists clenched around the armrest, completely rigid. He didn't know what he was waiting for, but he was sure something awful was going to happen.

He's not used to this. Meaningless anxiety that has no real cause. He's used to being afraid for a reason. Immanent death or risk of injury. The cops chasing his ass, or Ian losing his shit.

Although, dying in a violent plane crash sounds like a good enough reason to be worried.

"Here." Ian says, revealing a small yellow pill in his palm.

"What the fuck, Ian?" Mickey looks around, expecting an Air Marshall to pop out of nowhere and arrest them both. "What are you trying to give me?"

"It's a god damn ativan. Prescription. For just this occasion. I already took one. It'll help." Ian gave him one of those looks, and Mickey caved almost immediately. He grabbed the pill and tossed it back with a ridiculously tiny vodka soda the stewardess had dropped in front of him with a plastic smile on her face.

Mickey closed his eyes, the placebo effect kicking in immediately, and he felt his muscles relax with the promise of calm the pill gave him. He reached over without thinking, lacing his fingers with Ian's.

Before long, he was drifting. The fear and anxiety of the flight and the unknown slipping off him like
a fog. His head lolled to the side and he just watched Ian read. He was fucking beautiful. The most
gorgeous thing Mickey's ever laid his eyes on. A loopy smile blooms on Mickey's face as he
squeezes Ian's hand.

Ian looks over, his eyes full of unmasked affection.

He thinks in that moment, that he can face anything life has to throw at him, even hurtling over the
earth in a metal death machine, if Ian is by his side.

Mickey smiles back, laughing at himself a little for being so damn gay for Ian Gallagher.

That's Mickey's last coherent though before his eyes slip closed and he's out.

The first thing Ian sees when the walk out of the airport in Mexico is two people standing on the
sidewalk, next to a cobalt blue convertible Volkswagen Beetle. His face breaks into a wide smile.

Javier is leaning up against the car, wearing a short sleeved white button down and tan cargo shorts.
He's holding an old fashioned parasol over Lauren's head. She's wearing a 50's style dress, with a big
bright cherry print on it, huge white sunglasses taking up most of her face. He dark hair is still cut
short, curling just under her chin.

Javier sees them first, his face breaking out into a luminous smile.

"Mickey!" he says, pushing off the car. He closes the parasol quickly, tossing in the back seat of their
care before striding over fast, Lauren hot on his heels. "Te he extrañado mucho." he opens his arms
and Mickey lets go of Ian's hand to fall into the embrace.

"Yo también te extrañé. Mucho." Mickey replied easily. The spanish felt a little foreign on his tongue
after so long, but it also felt really good.

To be here, standing with Javier and Lauren again, after everything that has happened, felt surreal,
but so perfect. And to be here with Ian, well that was a whole other level of amazing.

Mickey released Javier after a moment to go to Lauren. She looked so good, so happy to see him.
She had pushed her glasses up off her face, tears streaming from her eyes.

"Mickey-baby." she choked out. "God." Mickey pulled her to his chest hard. He picked her up off
the ground and spun her around, her skirt flying out dramatically. She giggled like a child, tucking
her face into his neck.

"Ian." Javier said, still smiling. "So good to see you." he opened his arms and Ian fell into the
embrace. Ian's always liked Javier and Lauren. He's glad that Mickey had them, when he had no one
else. They are good people, and they really care about Mickey. Ian doesn't like to think about what
would have happened to Mickey down here, if he hadn't crossed paths with Lauren that day so long
ago now.

"I'm glad to be here." Ian replies, smiling.

"C'mon guys, I'm driving." Lauren says once Mickey finally puts her back on her feet. She walks
over to the Bug, sliding her hand down the hood reverently, a dreamy smile on her face.
"Nice car." Ian says, lifting his shades to get a better look. It's a gorgeous Beetle. The nicest one Ian's ever seen in real life. It's dark blue with a white soft top and all white interior.

"Jesus, Javi." Mickey says when he gets to the car. "I can't believe he let you take the car." his eyes shoot over to Lauren, who's smiling like the Cheshire Cat. "And let YOU fucking drive? What is the world coming to?" he sighs dramatically, causing the other two to chuckle.

Ian doesn't know who he's talking about, but if he had to guess it'd be Javier's father. Mickey has mentioned on more than one occasion how close they all were, when they lived down here together. Ian is nervous to meet them, certain Mickey has told them some unflattering things about him.

But he was here now. And that's what matters. That was the whole point of this trip. To show Mickey he's in this thing for the long haul. To prove to Mickey, his family and all their shared friends, that this is what Ian wants. Forever. Wants his life to be Mickey's and Mickey's life to be his.

So if he had to grovel a little at the feet of Mickey's mexican family, so be it. It's not like he doesn't deserve it, at least a little bit.

"Get comfy." Lauren says as the boys dropped their bags in the storage space up front before climbing in the back seat. "It's like three hours back to the beach house."

Mickey groaned, laying his head on Ian's shoulder as the got as comfortable as they could in the cramped space.

"At least the scenery will be nice." Ian said, taking in the beautiful countryside as they pulled out of the airport parking lot.

Mickey looked over at his boyfriend. Sitting in the back seat of Mateo's vintage bug, the wind whipping his hair as Lauren took a wide turn. He couldn't take his eyes off him.

"Yeah, the scenery is pretty fucking beautiful." he said, smiling.

--------------------------------------------

Ian is shaken awake god knows how many hours later. He lifts his head, blinking his eyes as he comes back to himself.

The sun is setting over the ocean. That is the first thing he sees. The sky is lit up with pinks and oranges, the giant ball of flame dipping below the surface of the sparkling water.

It's incredible.

"Pretty cool, right?" Mickey says, his eyes also on the ocean.

"Yeah." Ian replies, a little dazed. He still can't really believe this is happening. All of this was his idea, and it still feels so unreal. Like a god damn dream.

"C'mon guys." Lauren says, opening the car door and slipping out. She folds the front seat forwards so Mickey can climb out, followed by a sore Ian. Sleeping in the back of the bug has all his muscles tight and achy.

Mickey wanders around to the front of the bug, opening the trunk and grabbing both their bags. He
hands one to Javier, who's standing next to him, hand outstretched.

"Welcome to our home, Ian." Javier smiles, turning up the short walkway. Ian is a little blown away. He knew that Mickey always referred to his place in Mexico as 'the beach house', but this little bungalow was right on the actual beach. Like, footsteps away. Ian wonders how much they pay to rent it. But that's none of his business.

He follows in the back, listening to the three friends chatter about things he knows nothing about. A bar they used to frequent, the job they all worked together, Javier's family, and how much they are looking forward to seeing Mickey again. Ian tries to temper his jealousy before it has time to root.

There is no reason for him to feel left out. He's here now. Even if he can't ever be part of what came before, he's damn well going to be part of everything going forward. He steels himself, promising himself he won't let his guilt over the past taint this trip.

He walks inside last, closing the door with his foot and dropping his backpack on the floor with the other two bags. He rolls his shoulders, taking in the space.

It looks exactly the same as it did in all the pictures Mickey has back home. The small, neat kitchen off to the right. Clean, brightly hand painted tiles and old, but clean appliances. The counter had a bowl of mangoes on it, along with a vase of beautiful purple flowers and a stack of what looked like bills. The fridge was full of photos, most of the of Lauren, Javier and Mickey. Some were of people Ian's never seen before, but most of them were just the three of them together, looking content and happy.

Ian feels that twinge again. He missed out on so much. He pushes it down, again.

His eyes travel to the living room. There is a mattress pushed up against the wall, under a big window. Across from it in a worn-in looking armchair and a big coffee table. Along the far wall is a long bureau. On top of it is an ancient looking TV, and more framed photos. In the back of the space are two more doors.

"You guys only have two bedrooms?" Ian asks as Mickey drops down on the mattress like he still lives there. Javier takes a seat in the only chair, while Lauren is poking around in the fridge, grabbing up some Mexican beers Ian's never heard of and closing the fridge with her hip as she crosses the small space into the living room. She hands one to Mickey and Javier before her eyes catch on Ian, who is still standing by the door awkwardly.

"One bedroom." Mickey says, looking up at Ian from the floor. "The other room is the bathroom."

Ian swallows.

One bedroom.

The implications of that fact make Ian curious.

"Ian, baby. Sit down." she says with a gentle smile. She holds a beer out to him with a smile. "I don't know what Mickey told you, but we don't bite."

"Not without permission, at least." Javier chuckles, his thick accent forcing Ian to listen hard to catch the joke. He chuckles lightly, running a hand through his hair.

"C'mon, man." Mickey says, patting the mattress next to him. "Take that beer and sit the fuck down. You know that hovering shit makes me nervous."
Ian nods sheepishly, finally taking the offered beer from Lauren with a small nod before crossing the space to drop down next to Mickey on the floor. The mattress is so low Ian stumbles as he tries to get situated, crossing his legs out in front of him.

"So, Carino." Javier says, eyeing Mickey fondly. "Tell me about this boy of yours. Pictures are nice, but we want details."

Ian sits there on the mattress, sipping his beer, listening to Mickey regal his friends with news about Yevgeny. His dog, his broken arm during the winter, the spring play where he played a monkey. He knows all this already, but some of it it new to the other two.

Ian is stupidly stuck on that word. The one Javier called Mickey. The one he's called Mickey every time Ian's seen them together, all the way back when Mickey first came home.

Carino.

He knows what it means.

Sweety. My darling. Something like that. He's not fluent in Spanish. Can't even get by, like Mickey can. But he knew a select few words.

Mi amor
Mierda
Folllarme duro

My love
Shit
Fuck me hard

These are the only phrases he knows. And he may or may not have googled some of them before he came down here.

But 'carino' he knows solely because Javier calls Mickey that every single time they talk.

Ian sits there, sipping his Tacate, barely listening to the conversation. He's pulled deep into his own head, drowning in his own guilt and insecurity again.

He thought he was over this shit. He promised himself he wouldn't do this while they were down here.

This trip is for Mickey. Ian knows how much he's missed Mexico, even if he barely even talks about it anymore. Ian can see it in his eyes when he inadvertently tells a story about Javier and Lauren, or when he explains to someone what the ocean down here looks like.

But Ian can't help that little pang in his heart that wonders, what would have happened if Mickey never came home? Would he and Javier be together? Would they be happy?

Probably...

Ian remembers when Mickey first came back, how irrationally jealous he was of both Jack and Javier, even though he had a boyfriend of his own at the time.

Mickey had just seemed so carefree and alive when Ian had first seen him again, and Ian had been so sad and angry that he had gotten there with someone else. In Ian's mind, he had put in the work, how was it fair that someone else got this amazing version of Mickey, after the fact? After Ian spent years
But now, knowing what he does, he's grateful for Javier and Jack both, as well as Lauren and any other person who lifted Mickey up in his absence. Because Mickey is the person he is today because of those people in his life. They did things Ian could not, or chose not to at the time. And because of those people, and the love they had for Mickey, Ian gets to sit here, in this tiny beach house in Mexico, living a dream he'd given up for dead long ago.

Because Ian is a hundred percent sure that if Mickey had never met Jack, or Javier, or Lauren, he would have never come back to Chicago the man he is today, if he ever came back at all.

It is such a beautiful cosmic twist of fate, and Ian is grateful every single fucking day.

So he pushes that small bubble of insecure jealousy down. Mickey chose him, but not just him. He chose his son, and his siblings. He chose Jack. And Matt. Lauren and Javier and Javier's parents. Hell, he chose Svet and the Gallaghers. He chose Chicago, the Alibi and the ball field.

He chose his life. To build it up. To take the shit the universe had thrown at him and turn it into something beautiful.

But most of all, Mickey chose himself. For the first time in his life, Mickey put himself first. His health, his happiness. And he wants Ian to be a part of that.

Ian smiles, sipping his beer, coming back to the conversation just as Javier starts talking about Mickey's first ever karaoke experience, all that time ago.

Ian can't help but laugh.

----------------------------------

Ian pulls a short sleeve shirt over his shoulders, his fingers reaching down to button the buttons as he stares at himself in the small mirror that rests on the bureau. He's not nervous. At least, that's what he keeps telling himself as he nervously runs a hand through his hair.

It's messy. Maybe he should put some gel in it? Shit, does he have any? Mickey probably does. He drops to his knees in the middle of the living room, rifling through their toiletry bag until he finds a small tin of Mickey's pomade. He lurches back to his feet, wrenching the tin open and digging his fingers into the wax.

He's still fucking with it when Javier comes out of the bathroom, buttoning his own shirt.

He looks good. Really good. That's the first thing Ian notices. Anyone would, gay or not. Javier's a very handsome man. He's got a sky blue shirt on, dark jeans. His dark hair is perfectly styled, complimenting his caramel skin perfectly.

Ian sighs, mentally berating himself. This is not a big deal. Even if it feels like one.

Okay, maybe it's kind of a big deal.

His insecurity is not a surprise, but the severity of it is. He just can't stop his thoughts. That voice whispering in his ear 'what if Mickey was happier here?"
He shakes his head. Now is not the time to feel so out of sorts.

He's still tired from the flight. He knew they were going to hit the ground running on this trip, but a nap would have been nice after all that travelling. They'd only been on mexican soil for about four hours.

He can hear Lauren and Mickey in the bedroom. She asked him to help her pick out an outfit. When Ian had had the words leave her mouth, he had to clamp his lips closed over an incredulous laugh. He'd waited for Mickey to scoff. Waited for him to tell her he's not that kind of fag. Waited for some witty retort.

But what happened had Ian staring, mouth gaping open.

Mickey had heaved himself off the floor, dusted off his ass and asked, 'You still got that one red dress?' as he followed her into the back bedroom.

That was about ten minutes ago. Ian had been confused to say the least, but he'd kept his mouth shut, deciding to just get ready himself, maybe ask Mickey about it later, when they were more or less alone.

It was just such a Not-Mickey thing to do, Ian was left floundering a little. Just another reminder of how different things were down here. While Mickey was living this life Ian had no part in.

"You look nice, Diablo Rojo." Javier smiled, coming to stand next to Ian so they could gaze at themselves in the mirror, effectively pulling Ian out of his dark thoughts.

"Was that a regular thing?" Ian heard himself asking, his eyes wandering to the closed bedroom door.

"What? Mickey and Lauren getting dressed together? Yeah, yeah it is." Javier smiled kindly. "They are talking." he elaborated. "It's just something they've always done. When she wants to speak privately to him, she makes him dress her."

Ian was confused. "But why? Mickey's shit at fashion. He's not that kind of gay."

Javier laughed, laying a hand on Ian's shoulder. "I know this, Rojo. She just makes him hold things for her and listen to her speak. Do you not have a woman like this in your life?"

Ian's thoughts went immediately to Mandy. He laughed too. "Yeah, I guess I do."

Javier nodded. "Come into the kitchen with me." he said, waving Ian over "Let's get this chicken ready."

Lauren turns in a circle, eyeing herself in the mirror. "I don't know, Mick. I'm just not feeling this one." she shrugs her shoulders, dropping down on the bed. She picks at the skirt of the blue dress she's wearing, glancing down at it in distaste.

Mickey rolls his eyes heavenward, sipping his beer before dropping it on the bureau and walking
back over to the closet. "Where's the red one? You love the red one." He starts rifling through the clothes, his brows drawn together in concentration. "Or how about the one you were just wearing? What the fuck was wrong with that one?" he doesn't know how he gets sucked into this bullshit. Every time. Even after being gone for so long. He's still such a bitch for Lauren. He could never say no to her.

He also knows this is a transparent ploy to get him alone. It always is. She's got something on her mind. He just has to wait her out.

And find her something to wear, obviously.

"I want to wear something special." Lauren says, like he should know that already. "This is a big night. My Mickey is back." she lurches off the bed and jumps on his back.

"L, Fuck!" Mickey yelps, his hands automatically flying back to support her weight.

"We missed you." she murmured into his neck. "I missed you." her arms tightened around his shoulders, and she placed a tender kiss on his neck before jumping off and returning to her seat on the bed.

Mickey righted himself, tugging his shirt back down with a frown. He pulled out a black and white dress with a tiny red bow on the bust. "How about this one? You always look good in black." he held it out to her and she smiled, taking it from his hand and laying it on the bed so she could start stripping. She dropped her dress off her shoulders and stepped out of it before grabbing up the new one and pulling it up her body, completely ignoring Mickey's averted eyes and blushing face. No matter how much they did this, Mickey still didn't like watching Lauren change. She was like his fucking sister.

"How are you, Mickey?" she asked, turning so he could zip her up.

"I just told you." he replied, eyebrows raised. He zipped her dress with a flick of his wrist before grabbing up his beer and taking a sip as Lauren sat back down to slip a pair of red pumps on her feet. "Out there, in the living room?"

"I know what you said." Lauren replied. She stood and placed her hands on Mickey's cheeks, staring into his eyes. He stared back.

If this were Mickey years ago, there would be no way he would have been able to maintain eye contact like that. He'd spent so much time in his life hiding. From others, from himself. And even something as simple as eye contact was too much for him. He didn't want anyone to see him. Not who he really was.

But here he was, letting Lauren hold his face and stare right into his soul. "How are you, Mickey?" she repeated, her gaze never wavering.

"I'm good, L." Mickey smiled. And he fucking meant it. "I'm so good, it fucking scares me."

And that was it, wasn't it? Nothing good ever lasted. Not for Mickey. His gaze faltered, one of his hand coming up to wipe down his face. "I don't know how to keep it." he muttered, as she pulled him to her chest.

"Oh, Mickey. My sweet, fucked up Mickey."

Mickey laughed, his arms tightening around his friend.
"You know how you keep it? Just keep doing what you're doing. You are such a good person, Mickey. Ever since that very first day I knew you were special." she pulled back so she could look into his eyes again.

That gaze of hers, seeing right into his damn soul. 'You're kind, and you're loyal. You're honest and trustworthy. You're giving and loving and such a good friend."

"You mean when you got me in the middle of a purse snatchin'?" Mickey laughed, causing Lauren to roll her eyes.

"Don't change the subject. You're a good fucking person, Mickey!" she said, passionately.

"Wasn't always like that." Mickey muttered. "I was such a prick. Did awful fucking things. Shit, the things I did to Ian? I don't know why he ever even gave me a chance."

"Mickey." Lauren sighed. "We've all done bad shit. Even Ian. You have told me things that I'm sure he's not proud of. I'm sure he thinks he's not good enough for you sometimes, too. But what matters is what you do NOW. And as far as I can tell, you are doing amazing."

"What if it's not enough?" Mickey asked bleakly. "What if it all falls to shit again? What if I lose it all?"

Lauren gave him a soft smile, running a hand through his hair. "Then you lean on those you love, and we help you pick up the pieces. I can't promise you things with Ian will work out. Just like I can't promise you anything about Jack or your son or any of that other shit back in the states. But I can promise you that you have me. I will always be here, as your friend, as your family. And you will never be alone again."

Mickey smiled, his eyes stinging a little as he fought to control himself. "Thanks, L. You've got me too, y'know."

Lauren's face broke out into a blinding smile. "I know, Mickey. I know."

-----------------------------------------------

Mickey feels like he's dreaming. He's felt that way since he walked out of the airport to see Lauren and Javier waiting for him in front of Mateo's beetle.

Things like this did not happen to Mickey.

He's been thinking that shit a lot over the past year.

Lauren's words to him back at the beach house echo through his mind as he stands at the door of the house, hand coming up to twist the knob.

You will never be alone again.

Mickey liked how that sounded.

And for the first time in his life, he believed it.

A small smile split his lips as he walked across the threshold of the house and into Maria's waiting
"Mikhailo!" she cried, wrapping her arms around him tightly, swaying from side to side. She pulled back after a few moments, cupping his face with her hands. She stares into his eyes for a long moment, smiling brightly. "Te extrañamos, hijo."

"Yo también te extrañé." Mickey replies easily, "It's so good to see you." he said, releasing Maria so he could embrace Mateo, who was standing off to the side, in front of the large sliding glass door.

"Mickey." the older man said warmly, pulling Mickey to his broad chest with strong arms. "It's been too long mi amigo."

"It has." Mickey agreed. Once Mateo released him he stepped back, turning to look for Ian.

Ian was standing with his back against the wall by the door, his arms crossed over his chest, a cautious expression on his face. Javier and Lauren walked past him and further into the house, embracing Maria easily and falling easily into a conversation that Mickey could not hear.

Mickey smiled at a clearly shy Ian, waving him over. Ian gave him a tiny smile back, pushing off the wall and making his way over. Mickey smiled warmly at him, eager to put him at ease. It was easy to forget that Ian was a stranger here. Mickey felt like he was home, with his family, but Ian was surrounded by strangers in a strange place.

"Mateo, Maria, this is Ian." he said, unable to contain his smile. His lips were stretched so wide his face actually hurt. All his fears and misgivings from the beach house had evaporated, leaving nothing behind except for his love for these people, and his excitement to spend time with them. "Ian, this is Mateo and Maria, Javier's parents."

"Nice to meet you." Ian said shyly, extending his hand toward Mateo.

"Chico tonto!" Mateo laughed, gripping a shocked Ian by the shoulders and pulling him into a tight hug. "Ven aca."

"I don't know what you're saying." Ian muttered into Mateo's shoulder, causing the rest of the room to erupt into laughter. His arm laid limp at his sides while Mateo held him close before pulling away and giving him a warm smile. "Welcome, welcome." he said.

Ian gave a small smile, feeling himself calming a little. There was no reason to be nervous or shy.

This was Mickey's family.

Maria held her arms open, and Ian dutifully fell into them. "Este hermoso niño tuyo, Mickey." she said, pulling away to gaze at Ian's blushing face. She turned to Mickey, who was standing with Javier and Lauren, watching the exchange. "Esos ojos, Mickey." she said.

"I know." Mickey replied.

Maria finally released Ian and he walked right back over to Mickey, needing his comforting presence. Ian was never shy. He was always confident and sure and open to meeting new people. But this was just all so fucking surreal. Mickey's actual family had never been like this. Warm and caring. The inside jokes the Milkovichs had were all about jail or drugs. Watching Javier's family joke with Mickey about how skinny he was, or how much he gorged himself on Maria's tamales was not what Ian was used to at all. It was so domestic and filled with adoration, it was jarring.
It was like he was dropped in the middle of a mexican sitcom, and Mickey was the star.

He felt out of place, which was the opposite of what he wanted. Ian was trying to bring these separate parts of Mickey's life together with this trip, not push them farther apart.

The fact that everyone was speaking spanish didn't help. It made him feel even more excluded.

Maybe this was a bad idea.

"Mama, no más español, okay?" Javier said as they all took their seats around the table. "Ian doesn't understand it."

Ian sat between Mickey and Javier on one side, while Lauren sat across from him. Javier's parents took their seats at either head of the table and Mateo started filling everyone's glasses with wine.

Maria looked over at Ian, that same warm smile on her face as she started passing dishes around. "Oh, I'm sorry." she reached over and patted Ian's hand. "I did not mean to leave you out, love. It's just natural for us, yes?"

Ian nodded, feeling like an idiot for letting his emotions get the better of him. These people were nice, they invited Ian into their home, and he was letting his own insecurities make it awkward.

He smiled, taking the offered plate. The food smelled delicious, and he told Maria as much. She smiled at him again, and Ian felt the knot in his chest loosen a little bit.

He was freaking out for no reason.

The conversation was light. Easy topics that Ian found interesting and funny. They talked about Javier and Lauren's backpacking trip along the coast of Mexico. They talked about Maria and Mateo taking tango lessons. They talked about the ocean and hurricane season and the corrupt Mexican government. They talked for a long time, after the food was put away and the tequila came out.

They found themselves sitting around a fire pit in the back yard. The yard was big, trees on all sides. They weren't near the ocean. Ian didn't know why he expected the entire country to be surrounded by water, it's just what he always envisioned when he thought of Mexico.

Ian was sitting next to Mickey, Maria on his other side. Javier and Lauren were in the middle of some deep discussion about Portugal with Mateo. Ian had never been there, knew nothing about it. Mickey was interested, however, asking questions and commenting.

Ian turned when he felt a hand on his arm. Maria was looking at him with that same warm smile on her face. "Help me in the kitchen?" she asked. Ian nodded, not wanting to be rude. He turned to Mickey.

"I'm going to help Maria with something, be right back."

Mickey nodded, with a smile of his own. He grabbed Ian by the back of his head, pulling him down to his face and planting a small kiss on his lips. It was over before Ian could even react.

"Don't be too long." Mickey said, releasing him. Ian stood there for a moment, dumbfounded all of the sudden. Mickey kissed him all the time. It wasn't odd or out of place, but for some reason, this kiss felt more important. Like he was showing his Mexico family what Ian meant to him.

Maybe Ian was reading too much into it. He did that a lot. But he couldn't help the smile that bloomed on his lips as he followed Maria back into the kitchen.
She was already pulling more bottles out of the fridge. Wine and liquor, some beers Ian had never heard of.

"Pulling out all the stops tonight." Ian commented before he could stop himself. He blushed, laying his hands on the counter as Maria continued to poke around in the fridge.

"Is a special day for us." Maria replied. "We have missed Mickey dearly."

"I get that." Ian replied. And he did get it. He has missed Mickey so much, so many times, over so many years.

"Ian, do you want Mickey?" she asked, pushing some of the bottles toward him. Ian startled at the question. What the fuck?

Of course he wanted Mickey. In every way possible, for as long as he could have him. But how was that any of this woman's business?

"Excuse me?" he asked, his voice coming out quieter than he wanted it to.

"Is a simple question." Maria responded. He broken english reminded Ian of Svetlana, and he had to fight down the nasty feeling in his stomach. Was he being interrogated by Mickey's mexican pseudo-mother?

Because that's what it felt like, all of the sudden. "Do you want Mickey?"

Ian had to force himself not to scoff. What does this woman know about him and Mickey?

"Of course I do." he replied. He started gathering up the bottles, to take them back outside, but a gentle hand on his wrist stopped him.

"I'm not trying to upset you." she said softly. "We just love Mickey so much."

Ian's shoulders fell, and he slipped into one of the bar stools that lined the counter-top. He let his head fall into his hands, sure that this conversation was far from over.

"So do I." he replied, not bothering to look at her.

She continued speaking, undeterred by Ian's body language. "When we first met Mickey, he was so closed off. I'd never seen a man in so much pain, so unwilling to let anyone in." Ian cringed at her description, so certain he was to blame.

"It's not all your fault." Maria said, as if she could read his mind. "We know what his life was like, with his father, and the place you come from. We know how hard it was for him. I can not tell you how happy Mateo and I were when he started to let us in. It took a very long time. Years. But once he did, it was like getting the key to a very special treasure. Do you feel that way, Ian?"

"Since I was fifteen." Ian answered honestly. He waited then, hands clenched on the counter-top, for that question he hated. 'Why didn't you follow him?' 'Why didn't you go with him?'

But Maria surprised him yet again.

"It must have been hard for you to lose him, then." Maria said instead. Ian was shocked. He looked up at her with wide eyes, causing her to chuckle. "I will not presume to know what your life is like back home. I can only imagine it must have been a shock, what he did. What he asked you to do..." she paused, her eyes going to the back yard, where Mickey had his arm slung over Lauren's shoulder.
while he gesticulated wildly with his free hand. "We love him dearly. And he speaks so kindly of you. We always hoped to meet you, but we did not expect it. The way he spoke of you...." she sighed, taking her hand away to gather up all the things they had to take outside. Ian took half the bottles as she opened the door with her free hand. "We're just happy it worked out. This is not what we expected at all." Maria said honestly, leading Ian back out toward the fire.

"Me either." Ian replied, wanting nothing more than to get back to Mickey.

"So, is this it?" Mateo asked, his voice calm and quiet in contrast to Lauren and Javier's yelling on the other side of the fire. The were screaming and pushing each other around, oblivious to anyone else nearby.

"Is what what?" Mickey asked, sipping his drink, his eyes trained on the fire in front of him. Mateo had added some driftwood from the sea to the fire, so the flames were dancing with beautiful blues and greens. It was hard to look away.

That is, until his eyes caught on Ian, walking toward them from the kitchen with Maria. No matter where they were, Ian would always draw his attention.

"You and la hermosa cabeza roja ." Mateo replied, as if Mickey should know. And maybe he should.

It always came back to Ian, afterall.

"Yeah." Mickey breathed, letting all the oxygen out of his lungs. "This is it. Forever, Mateo."

"Good." his friend responded, clapping down on his shoulder hard with his palm. "This is what we always wanted for you, Mikhailo."

Mickey was surprised by his use of his full name, but the seriousness of the moment tempered the action a bit. Mickey wobbled a bit under the weight of Mateo's hand, but steadied himself the best he could.

"Me too." Mickey replied quietly. What else could he say, really? It was the truth, they all knew it. There was no use denying it, or lying. There was no reason to hide anymore.

The thought gave Mickey more peace than he'd ever had in any moment in his whole life. Is this what life was going to be for him now? Happy moments with people who loved him? What the fuck?

He could get used to it.

"And he is good to you?" Mateo asked, his eyes trained on Ian as he sat next to Javier and started talking with Maria and Lauren about whatever. "He makes you happy? After everything?"

And Mickey understood. He got what Mateo and Maria were trying to convey. He had told them some seriously sad stories about him and Ian. He knew they'd be worried. Even if he still wasn't used to anyone giving a shit about how he felt or how he was treated, he could see where they were coming from.
And he appreciated it.

But it was unwarranted.

"It's good, Mateo." Mickey said, smiling over the rim of his glass as Ian chased Javier around the yard. "It's so good. I'm happy."

"Good." Mateo replied, laying a hand on Mickey's shoulder and squeezing tightly. "This is what we always wanted for you." he repeated, patting Mickey on his forearm quickly before setting off across the yard toward his wife.

Mickey watched him for a moment, before following his lead, eager to be beside Ian again. It's where he belonged, after all.

---------------------------------------

"I hope you brought your wallet." Mickey laughed, as he and Ian trailed behind Lauren and Javier. They were only a few paces ahead, his arm slung over her shoulder as she wandered from booth to booth, her huge sunglasses perched on top of her head so she could peruse the wares better.

It had been a long couple days, but Mickey was so fucking happy.

After dinner with Mateo and Maria, Mickey and everyone had settled around the fire pit. They sat up drinking, swapping stories and catching up into the wee hours of the night. Mickey had hoped to get back to the beach house, have Ian to himself for a few minutes. They hadn't gotten off since they landed on mexican soil. Not that it was a big deal, but Mickey was missing the way Ian's hands felt on his body, the way Ian made him feel with his own body.

Mickey was spoiled now. Not that he's complaining.

Alas, the plan to go back to the beach house that night was voted down when everyone present realized they were too wasted to drive. So Ian and Mickey had ended up passing out in the hammock in the back yard. That was also something Mickey never thought they'd do. Laying there, arms wrapped tightly around each other while they swayed with the breeze. Moon high in the sky, stars out. It was just like any one of a million dreams Mickey had had while he was living down here, so certain he'd never see Ian again.

Life has a way of fucking you up, surprising you. And Mickey's still learning that those surprises are not always a bad thing. Not at all.

Like right now, as he and Ian follow Lauren and Javier through this huge street market. The street fair was an annual thing, vendors and crafters from all over the region came down to peddle their wares. Mickey knew it was a big deal, but they'd never bothered to come when he lived down here. What was the point? They weren't exactly crafty people, so all this handmade artistic shit was really not of any interest to him.

But Lauren and Javier had acquired a taste for it over the past year, apparently. The way they were talking, you'd think they were old hat hipsters. Lauren was going on and on about handmade soaps, beach glass wind chimes, and hand-blown glass art pieces. She was laughing, standing in front of one specific booth when Ian stopped dead in his tracks. Mickey turned, eyebrows raised.
"What?" he asked, confused.

"That's it!" Ian said, smiling. "That's what we're getting for Jack."

Mickey rolled his eyes. Of course.

------------------------------------------------------

Ian stood in front of the booth, his fingers tracing over the elegant glass in front of him. The pieces were amazing. All different colors swirled into the glass. They were all different shapes and sizes, but the idea was the same.

Hand blown glass dildos.

Ian chuckled quietly as Mickey finally made his way over to the table.

"Is this going to be a thing with you two now?" He asked, picking up a hefty looking purple dick. "I mean, is this what you guys are going to give each other for birthdays and Christmas? Dicks? Where are we gonna put all these dicks? Are we going to need a special shelf?"

Ian laughed a little louder at that. It was kind of ridiculous, but he didn't care. He knew Jack would love it. Maybe Mickey was right, and this could become their own little inside joke. He'd like that, having something silly and fun, yet still personal between him and Jack. Ian considered him a friend now, not just a guy he knows through Mickey. Ian knew he'd love this, and hopefully he'd see it the same way Ian does.

As reinforcement of their own friendship, separate from Mickey.

That's what Jack said he wanted, and Ian wanted that too.

Now all he had to do was pick one. He grabbed up a red one with a large, bulbous head. He turned to Lauren, dildo extended toward her. "Would you like this one?"

Lauren giggled. "Why are you asking me? There are two gay men on either side of you who would know best, considering..."

Ian chuckled. "Yeah, I guess." he turned to Javier. "What do you think?"

Javier smiled, clearly pleased to be involved in the dick decision. Mickey rolled his eyes. They were gonna be here for a while.

Mickey crossed his arms over his chest, leaning against the awning of the booth. A small smile played on his lips as he watched Ian and Javier go through the dildos meticulously, not skipping a single one. Like this decision was life or death or something. Every once in a while they would turn to Mickey to gauge his opinion on one piece or another. Mickey didn't give them much, thumbs up or down. He wanted Ian to pick it himself, it seemed to be a big deal to him.

"I like this one." Ian finally said after a long time. He was holding up a clear glass dick, with green and white swirls throughout the shaft and sack. It wasn't as big as some of the other ones, probably around seven inches, if Mickey had to eyeball it. (he had a skill, measuring dicks by sight, be it in the flesh or on a toy.)
Mickey gave him another thumbs up, while Ian paid the vendor. The woman's face bloomed with a giant smile when she saw he had American dollars. It was super cheap, forty American dollars, which ended up being hundred and hundred of pesos. The woman wrapped the dildo in tissue paper and slipped it into a bag before handing it to Ian. Ian smiled, grabbing the bag in one hand, and slipping his fingers between Mickey's with the other.

"Is that a conversation piece? Or is Jack supposed to..." Lauren trailed off, her eyes glued to Ian's gift bag.

"Can we not speculate what Jack's going to do with the god damn dildo?" Mickey sighed. "Please?"

That earned him a few chuckles from his friends, even though he was dead fucking serious.

They wandered around the market for a few more hours, picking up gifts and little trinkets for people back home. Some ceramic art pieces for Fiona, Debbie and Mandy. Little brightly painted sugar skulls they knew the girls would love. Mexican chocolate and coffee for Matt and Lexi. A few of those Luce Libre mexican wrestling masks for Iggy, Lip and Carl. They'd get a kick out of those. A bottle of Mezcal for Macy. It was a good gift for her, seeing as she'd offer to share it with them. Mickey chuckled. Macy would love it, any reason to get the gang together. They grabbed a hand-woven blanket for Katya. Mickey secretly hoped she'd have it her whole life. A reminder of her uncle's love for her.

And Yevgeny. Mickey spent a long time picking out a gift for his son. Nothing quite seemed right, until he came across a brightly painted coyote. Blue, with pink and yellow details. The man said it was an old tradition, to carve these coyotes from the copal tree. Alebrije coyote, he called it. They are supposed to represent your spirit guardian.

Mickey's not sure he believes all that shit, but he's not opposed to a little help from the spirit world, if it will help his son feel safe and happy while he's not around.

Mickey also picked up some cheap Taxco silver bracelets. They were thick, rectangular shaped bracelets, with black lines and odd shapes carved into silver. He slipped one onto his wrist before grabbing Ian by the shoulder and turning him around. He was deep in conversation with Javier about a beach trip they were planning for the following day.

Ian spun around, his face lit up with a huge smile. "You ready to get going?" he asked. They'd been at the market a long time, and Mickey was all shopped out. He nodded, grabbing Ian's hand and slipping the other bracelet onto Ian's wrist.

"What's this?" Ian asked, eyeing the bracelet, and the matching one on Mickey's wrist. They'd stopped walking, Javier and Lauren stopping a few feet away, looking back curiously.

"A reminder." Mickey said simply. "How far we've come. How much we have ahead of us." Mickey shrugged, unsure if he was articulating himself properly. He felt like such a fucking fag in this moment, but he pushed that shit down. He needed Ian to know how he felt, and if that made him super fucking gay, so be it.

He was, after all, pretty fucking gay for Gallagher.

The smile that bloomed on Ian's face said he'd hit the mark. Mickey smiled back, feeling a little shy all of the sudden. How Ian still managed to pull so many emotions out of him after so long was a mystery to him.

It used to scare him. How much Ian made him feel. But now he welcomes it, and all the shit it brings.
Ian stares at his bracelet for a moment longer before his eyes find Mickey's, his smile fades and his eyes start to fill with tears.

"What? Fuck, Ian. What's...." but he's cut off by Ian's hands on his face, pulling him up into a deep passionate kiss. Right there, surrounded by people on all sides. Mickey doesn't give a fuck. He wraps his arms around Ian's waist, pulling their bodies together as he opens his mouth for Ian's tongue.

Ian smiles against his lips, pulling back far too soon for Mickey's liking. "I fucking love you." Ian whispers into the small space between their faces.

Mickey smiles. "I love you too, obviously." It should be obvious now, right? There can't be any doubt in Ian's mind. Not anymore.

"Guys!" Lauren calls to them from a few feet away. "I have got to get out of these heels. Let's fucking go." she waves her arms dramatically, grabbing Javier's wrist and pulling him none-too-gently toward the exit of the market.

Mickey laughs. "We better go, before she really loses her cool." Ian smiles at him one more time before stepping away and starting after their friends.

Mickey's hand shoots out fast, intertwining their fingers tightly. Ian stopped moving, his eyes traveling down to their clasped hands, their matching bracelets gleaming in the sunlight.

When Mickey was a kid, and first started messing around with Ian, he was so certain his life was over before it even began. He'd been so sure he'd never have a chance to be happy, never have an opportunity to be his true self. He had tried to suck up every available second with Ian, back then, wanting to get as much happiness as he could, while he could. He had felt like he was stealing someone else's life, and he knew he could never keep it.

But now, standing in a crowded mexican market, with his friends, holding bags full of gifts for their family back home, Mickey has never been more happy or less scared in his whole life.

This is his reality now.

Who saw that shit coming?

-------------------------------------------------------------------

"I am so beyond tired." Ian sighed, tossing his pills back and swallowing them down with a bottle of water from the nightstand. "I can't believe all we did was walk around all day."

"And spend money." Mickey reminded him, pulling his shirt over his head and tossing it in the general direction of their open suitcases on the floor. "Don't forget, we did a lot of that shit."

They had gotten back from the market a few hours earlier, had an early dinner and stayed up for a while, drinking and playing cards. It was a nice night, but they had plans for the following day, so Javier and Lauren had called it a night, sending Ian and Mickey to the bedroom with clear orders to get some rest.

And they would. Just not yet.
"Yeah, but that's the point of vacation, right?" Ian laughed, tossing his own shirt aside and closing the distance between them. He placed his hands on Mickey's hips and started guiding him backwards toward the bed.

Mickey laughed, going easily. He let Ian push him onto the mattress, his back hitting the quilts as Ian knelt on the edge of the bed, towering over him.

"How tired are you?" Ian asked, eyes dancing. He reached up and ran his fingers along Mickey's collar bone, down his chest. He splayed his hand out as Mickey drew in a sharp breath, arching his back into the touch as Ian ghosted a single fingertip over an erect nipple.

Mickey was hard in an instant. All it took was a look from Ian and he was ready to go. It had been days since they'd fucked. This trip taking up all their time together, hardly giving them a moment alone. This was the first night they weren't out or busy with family. It was finally just the two of them, and Mickey wasn't going to waste the opportunity.

"Never too tired for that cock, Ian." he sighed. "Get serious."

Ian chuckled, crawling onto the bed and tipping his head down. He ran his tongue along the waistband of Mickey's jeans, earning himself a groan from the man above him. Ian would usually love to tease his boyfriend, but they had both had a long day, and a good orgasm and some sleep is what they both need.

His hands come up to join his mouth as he works on sucking a hickey into the soft flesh just below Mickey's belly button. Mickey sighs, bringing a hand up to card his fingers through Ian's hair. He can feel Ian smile against his skin as his fingers find his fly, unzipping his pants and tugging them down. Mickey lifts his hips to help and soon he is naked, skin tingling as he waits for Ian's next move. Ian stands to quickly shed his own clothes and soon he's back to hovering over Mickey's body, gazing down at him with an utterly ravenous look in his eye.

Mickey smiles up at him, clutching the back of his head and bringing him into a biting kiss. Ian groaned, laying flat on top of Mickey. He was heavy, but Mickey loved it. Loved the full weight of Ian against his body. Loved the hard lines of his muscles under his fingers, and the harder line of his cock resting against his hip. Mickey bucked up, shoving his tongue deeper into Ian's mouth as his fingers tangled in that red hair he's loved for years.

"God, Mick." Ian sighed, thrusting down gently as he ran his lips along the column of Mickey's throat. "It's only been a couple of days, but I feel like I haven't fucked you in forever."

Mickey groaned, scraping the nails on his free hand down Ian's back, coming to rest on his ass. He grabbed the muscle hard, relishing the feel of it in his hand just as much as the appreciative moan that slipped past Ian's lips.

"Get to it, then." Mickey groaned, pulling Ian's face back to his and kissing him hard once again.

They made out like that for a while. Hands roaming along each other's bodies as their tongues danced together. Mickey was breathing hard, his cock weeping precum and aching to be touched, but he couldn't tell Ian to hurry up. He didn't want to disturb what they were doing at all. He wanted it to happen just as it was, because it was fucking perfect.

Ian's lips found his neck again, biting sharply before soothing the bruise with his tongue. His hand was gripping Mickey's hip hard, fingers digging into his flesh hard enough to leave crescent shaped welts behind.
Mickey moaned again, thrusting up against Ian's hip. Ian sat back then, reaching over to the nightstand to grab the lube they’d left there, but had yet to use.

Mickey sighed in relief seeing the tube in Ian's hand. He let his body go lax as Ian popped the cap and drizzled some onto his long fingers before settling on his side next to Mickey's prone from. Ian tipped his head down for another kiss as his fingers found their way between Mickey's cheeks. Mickey spread his legs as wide as they'd go, his knees pointing toward the ceiling. He huffed out a breath into Ian's smiling mouth as he breached him with two fingers.

Mickey's hand shot off the mattress to bury his fingers back in Ian's hair as his boyfriend worked to open him up. Ian kissed him through the whole prep, licking into his mouth fervently as he pumped his fingers in and out of his ass.

Once Mickey was rocking into his movements, clearly ready for more, Ian withdrew his fingers and wiped his hand on the sheets. He crawled over Mickey's body, with a hand on either side of his head.

"Here." Mickey said, tucking a pillow under his own ass. "Wanna do it like this." he said, curling his calves around Ian's lower back, pulling him down further on top of him. "Wanna see you."

Ian smiled, kissing him quickly once more. He remembered a time when Mickey was adamantly against face-to-face fucking. Ian can say he doesn't miss those days. "Yeah, I want that too." he said, reaching down between them to grab his hard cock. Mickey moved his hand away gently, as he snagged the lube up instead, popping the cap quickly and dribbling some out onto Ian's erection. He rubbed it along the shaft, getting it as slippery as possible, staring into Ian's blown out eyes the entire time.

Ian couldn't look away if he wanted to. Mickey's eyes were so fixed on his, it was like he'd hypnotized him. He ran his hand up and down his dick, licking his lips. He bit down on his bottom lip as he guided Ian's dick toward his open and waiting hole. Mickey let his head fall back on the pillows as Ian started to inch forward.

Ian fell forward on one elbow, the other hand winding around to pull Mickey's thigh up higher on his hip as he sank into his body.

Mickey hands flew up again, one cupping the back of Ian's neck, the other resting on his lower back as Ian finally bottomed out. He rested his forehead against Mickey's as they stared into each other's eyes.

This would be the point where normally Mickey would utter some kind of command. 'Move.' or 'C'mon, while we're young.', but his mouth was silent and his mind was completely blank. There was nothing in this moment but the look in Ian's eyes, and the feeling of his cock, hot and heavy inside him. He closed his eyes, pulling Ian's mouth to his again with that hand curled around his skull, the other pulling him deeper into his body. He let his legs fall out wide, welcoming Ian in just that much more.

Ian groaned into the kiss, pushing his tongue into Mickey's mouth as he finally started rolling his hips. Mickey moaned in response, pushing his hips up as best he could from his position, eager to take all Ian had to give him.

Ian kept the pace slow, and Mickey was totally on board with that. He's all for a rough fuck, but sometimes, and only ever with Ian, Mickey wanted to savor this shit. Ian's lips on his neck, his teeth biting into his shoulder. The way his thighs spread his legs wide as he thrusts into his body, hard yet gentle. The way he runs his hands down his side, delicately, like Mickey's something precious to be
treasured. Or the way he grips his ass hard enough to bruise as his pace picks up.

Mickey arched his back on a particularly good thrust against his prostate. He saw fucking stars as he scraped his nails down Ian's back hard enough to draw blood. Ian hissed, then moaned, fucking into him harder. Each roll of his hips had them inching closer to the edge. That was fine by Mickey. He felt no need to draw it out this night, secure in the fact that he could fuck Ian any time he wanted to, for the rest of their lives.

It was an odd time to have such a revelation. He wanted Ian forever. It seemed obvious, yet not. Forever had never seemed possible to Mickey before. Not when he was a kid, not when he was with Ian the first time, and not this entire time they'd been together since he'd come home.

But now, tangled up in each other, holding on for dear life as Ian fucking Made Love to him, he knew without a doubt that he wanted Ian for fucking ever, and he'd do whatever he had to to make that shit happen.

"I'm close, Mick. Please tell me you're close." Ian grunted, sitting back on his haunches and gripping Mickey by the hips. Mickey's hands flew up over his head, tangling in the blankets as Ian fucked him hard. He threw his head back, bucking back into the thrusts with his whole body.

"Yeah, fuck. Ian. Harder. Fuck me. Make me come." he commanded, not even bothering to make a move for his own cock. He knew Ian would take care of him.

And he did.

Ian reached up with a shaky hand, wrapping it around Mickey's bobbing dick and stripping it in time with his increasingly erratic thrusts.

"Oh, god. Yeah, that's it." Mickey sighed, his eyes raking over Ian's sweaty, glistening body. He looked so fucking good, breathing heavy as the muscles in his stomach clenched with each powerful thrust. Mickey moaned, his hands flying up to grab Ian wherever he could. His hands settled on Ian's forearm, moving with Ian as he jerked him off roughly. He trailed his hand down until he could curl his fingers around Ian's fist as the moved together to get him there.

Ian looked at him, a feral smile on his face as he pumped his hips. "I fucking love you, Mickey."

"I...I...oh my fucking god.... I love you too.." Mickey choked out as he came between them. He spilled his seed, his body jerking with the power of it. Ian moaned at the sight, releasing their shared grip on his deflating dick so he could grab his hips again. He held on tight, as he lost all semblance of rhythm. He fucked into Mickey's tired body a few more times before stilling deep inside. He came with a quiet sort of sated sigh, his hips moving slowly a few more times before he stopped completely. Mickey smiled up at him as he pulled out and rolled off the bed. He grabbed a few tissues out of a box on the nightstand and cleaned them up as Mickey lit a cigarette for them to share, just part of their post-coital ritual they shared each time without much thought.

Once they were cleaned up, Ian dropped onto the bed next to Mickey and plucked the cigarette from his fingers. "That was good." Ian said, taking a drag and passing it back before laying down completely, his head pillowed on Mickey's chest.

"You say that like it's not always amazing." Mickey replied with a smile.

"Fuck off." Ian laughed, smacking his stomach with an open palm. "We may have had trouble with a lot of shit, but the sex has always been epic."
Mickey laughed, but he got caught on the first half of Ian's statement.

We may have had trouble with a lot of shit.
That was the understatement of the century.

Mickey's not stupid enough to think it's all going to be roses and gay rainbows from here on out, but he's certain he'll do whatever it takes to make this shit work.

Ian's it for him.

"So what's our plan for the last days of our trip?" Ian asks as Mickey turns off the light and they are suddenly surrounded by darkness. Mickey pulled Ian closer with an arm around his shoulder. "Uh, L and Javi wanna take you out for one of our real karaoke nights. And, um, I wanna take you to the beach, just us."

Mickey wondered if Ian was thinking about the same thing he was. The beach. Us. What Mickey had told him had gotten him through all his lonely nights in prison. The thought of seeing the ocean with Ian.

It had never happened.

Mickey had saved the beach for the end of the trip on purpose. Sure, they'd been down there a few times since they'd arrived. Walked along the water, let Ian take it in with his own eyes. But they hadn't stayed.

Mickey wanted it to be special. He wanted it to be like he saw in his dreams so many times. So he saved it for when it could be just him and Ian.

He just hoped it was as special to his boyfriend as it was to him.

"The beach?" Ian asked quietly, running his hand slowly along Mickey's side. "Just us?"

Maybe he did remember.

"The beach." Mickey confirmed. "Us."

"I can't wait." Ian mumbled, kissing Mickey's neck gently.

"I've been waiting a long ass time." Mickey replied before he could think better. He felt Ian flinch against his side, so he wrapped his arm tighter around his back, tucking him against him closer. "You know, none of that shit matters anymore, right?" Mickey asked into the darkness. "You not coming with me, or me marrying Svet. All the fights and us walking away from each other."

"I know." Ian replied automatically.

"No, Ian, I'm serious." Mickey replied, emotion coloring his voice. "None of the shit we did back than means fuck all, except for the fact that it brought us right here, to this exact moment. If it didn't happen the way it did, who knows where we'd be."

"Jesus, Mick." Ian laughed wetly, tears evident in his voice. "When did you become so thoughtful and introspective?"

"Just saying it like it is, Ian. Not some queer-ass poet or anything."

Ian laughed. "There's my man."
"Fuck off."

They lapsed into silence, laying in the dark, just listening to each other breathe. Once Ian was on the precipice of sleep, he heard Mickey mumble something into his hair.

"Cada dia te quiero mas." he said quietly, his lips ghosting along the shell of Ian's ear.

Hearing Mickey speak spanish is still so strange to Ian. He shifts a little closer, curling one of his legs around Mickey's hip. "What?" he asked quietly. "What does that mean?"

Ian swears he can feel Mickey smile against his face. He plants another soft kiss to his head before tipping his head down to whisper into his ear.

"Every day I love you more."

Chapter End Notes

Lil bit of spanish, courtesy of google, as per usual...

Te he extrañado mucho. - I've missed you so much.

Yo también te extrañé. Mucho. - I missed you too. A lot.

Te extrañamos, hijo. - We missed you, son.

Yo también te extrañé - I missed you too.

Chico tonto, ven aca. - Silly boy, come here.

Este hermoso niño tuyo, Esos ojos. _ This beautiful boy of yours, those eyes.

Mama, no más español - Mama, no more spanish

la hermosa cabeza roja - that beautiful red head

http://www.mexicolindo.biz/Artists/coyote.jpg - Yev's coyote


https://img.etsystatic.com/il/405a65/1281142391/il_570xN.1281142391_6dq0.jpg?version=0 - ian & mick's matching taxco bracelets.
Phil Collins was right

Chapter Summary

Mick and Ian finally get to the beach.

Chapter Notes

our last google spanish lesson
somos familia - we are family
perdoname - forgive me
olvidalo - forget it
pero loco - crazy bird
alma gemela - soul mate

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Mickey startles awake, shooting up straight in bed, covered in cold sweat. The wind is howling outside the window, torrential rain beating against the glass as Mickey tries to catch his breath. He reaches over in the dark, needing the comforting warmth of Ian's body.

His head whips over when all he feels is a cold empty bed.

Where the fuck is Ian?

Mickey looks around the room, and is startled and confused when he can't see their bags anywhere.

His heart is still pounding from a nightmare he can't remember, and he can't shake the feeling that something is very wrong. He runs a trembling hand down his sweaty face before throwing his feet off the mattress and standing on the cold floor.

"Ian?" he calls out, uncaring that Lauren and Javier are probably dead asleep. He leans on the wall to regain his balance as he wanders out into the living area. It's dark in the house, the space illuminated only intermittently when lightning flashes outside. He sees the silhouette of Lauren and Javier asleep on the bed on the floor. He stumbles further into the room, catching his knee on an end table and tumbling to the floor.

He's surprised it doesn't hurt when he lands on the hardwood on his face. He feels drunk, but that doesn't make any sense. He can't remember the last drink he had. He can't remember what he was doing before he went to sleep. He can't remember much, and that scares him even more.

All he knows is Ian was supposed to be next to him when he woke up, and he wasn't, and now he's face down on the floor. He pushes up to his hands and knees. He feels like he's moving underwater.
"Ian?" he calls again, his voice sounding strained and distorted in his ears.

"Carino?" Javier's quiet voice filters through his mind. He sounds far away. Mickey gets to his feet and looks around. Moonlight filtering through the living room window shines a sliver of light along Javier's worried face.

How did Javier get so close?

"Javi?" Mickey replies, still confused. Something is very wrong. "Where's Ian? He's not in bed."

Javier gives Mickey a look. A mixture of concern and fear that Mickey doesn't like at all.

"Mickey, mi amor." Javier sighs, running a soothing hand through Mickey's hair before gripping his neck tight. "Nightmare, again?"

Mickey shakes his head, tears burning his eyes. "I dunno. Don't remember." his voice is coming out rough, and he feels like he can't breathe. "Javier, where's Ian?"

"Oh Mickey." Javier replies sadly. "Ian's not here. He's never been here."

Mickey's heart constricts painfully in his chest, his whole body going cold. "No." he whispers. "That can't be true. I was home. I'm only visiting. Ian came with me. Ian's with me..."

Javier's eyes widen as he grips Mickey by the shoulders. "Mickey." he says sternly. "Ian's not here. Ian's not with you. It was only a dream, okay? You are home, here with me and Lauren. Nothing else is real."

Mickey can't fucking breathe. His heart is pounding and his whole body is numb. Javier smiles sadly, pulling Mickey to his chest. "Ian's not here." he repeats. "Nothing else is real."

A choked sob rips from Mickey's chest as Javier pulls him close. Javier strokes his back with a warm hand, whispering against his ear over and over. "Ian's not here, nothing else is real."

--------------------------------------------

Mickey shoots up, chest heaving. His face is wet with tears and his whole body is drenched in cold sweat.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

The rain is pouring from the sky, pelting the bay windows so loudly the noise almost drowns out the pounding of Mickey's chest.

Almost.

"Mick?" Ian's sleepy voice is the best sound Mickey's ever heard in his life. His warm, soft hand wraps around Mickey's wrist, and the touch calms him immediately.

Ian must feel how clammy Mickey's skin is, because his hand tightens on Mickey's wrist for a moment before he sits up next to him. "Hey." he whispers, scooting closer to Mickey and wrapping and arm around his shoulder, pulling him to his chest as he sits up against the headboard. "What's amatter?" he mumbles against Mickey's hair, planting a tender kiss on his sweaty hair.

"Nothing." Mickey mutters. He feels like a fucking idiot. He hasn't had a nightmare in months, and he hasn't had a nightmare about Ian leaving him in even longer. He thought he was past all that shit.
But, apparently shit like that just doesn't go away on it's own. Even after months of happiness and stability with Ian, Mickey is sad to realize that he still has that deep seated fear that Ian is going to fucking leave him.

He hiccups like a child, then is horrified to feel the sting of fresh tears in his eyes.

No. Fuck no. It's bad enough he's losing his shit over a god damn dream. He's not going to cry too.

"Hey, c'mon Mick. We promised. No more secrets." Ian says, squeezing Mickey's shoulder.

"You wanna know everything, huh?" Mickey laughed bitterly, wiping his eyes with harsh fingers. "Even the stupid shit that goes on in my fucked up head?"

"Especially the shit that goes on in your fucked up head." Ian replies. "You know all the shit that goes on in my fucked up head."

Mickey nods slowly. He's got a point.

He just sits there for a moment, listening to Ian's heartbeat. The simple, steady beat soothes his frazzled nerves immensely. He takes a deep breath, letting it out slow.

"You were gone." he says quietly.

"What?" Ian's voice strained. Mickey doesn't have to see his face to know what it looks like. Pained.

"You were gone." he repeats, feeling small and weak. "In my dream, I woke up here, in Mexico, but you weren't here. Javier was there. I asked him 'Where's Ian?' and he said you had never been here. That I wasn't with you, and whatever I thought I had with you now wasn't real." he pushed his face into Ian's chest, feeling fresh tears trying to work their way out of his swollen eyes, but he bit them back.

"Oh Mick." Ian said, and Mickey could hear his voice breaking. Great, now he'd made Ian cry too. Ian reached up with his hand and turned Mickey's face so they were eye to eye. "I'm never going to leave, ever again."

"T'was just a dream, Ian." Mickey says pathetically.

"Yeah, a dream rooted in real world shit. I don't need to be fucking Freud to know where that shit came from. You're not that deep."

"Shut the fuck up." Mickey said, a traitorous laugh bubbling up from his chest.

Ian laughed a little too, before settling into seriousness again. "I fucking mean it, Mick. And I'm going to prove it to you, every day for the rest of our lives if you let me." he tightened his grip on Mickey's shoulder as he pulled them both down to the bed again, Mickey's head secure on Ian's chest. "You're it for me. Forever. I'm not going anywhere."

Mickey nodded, feeling too overwhelmed and emotional to speak anymore.

"Please believe me." Ian said quietly.

"I do." Mickey whispered. And he did.

Mickey tilted his head up, and even though it was dark in the room, Ian met him in the middle, on instinct. They exchange a tender, open mouthed kiss before Mickey laid his head back down, letting the steady rhythm of Ian's heart beat lull him once more.
"I love you Mick." Ian said into the darkness.

"I love you too, Ian."

-------------------------------------------------------

"You look tired, baby. You sure you still wanna do this?" Lauren asks for what has the be the fifth time that day. She was hounding him at breakfast, she was hounding him after lunch, she was hounding him as they cooked dinner together, and now she's hounding him while they are getting ready to go out for the night.

"L, come the fuck on." Mickey sighed, pulling his black button up over his shoulders and pulling it straight on his body. His fingers start working the buttons as he stares at his friend in the mirror. She got a blue dress on. Tight. She turns so he can zip it for her. He stops buttoning his own shirt so he can zip Lauren's dress, since he's a gentleman like that these days. When she turns back around, he goes back to his own shirt. She bats his hands away and starts on the buttons herself, earning herself an eye roll from Mickey. "I've been telling you all damn day. I wanna do this. It's our last night in town. We gotta go big." he gave her a genuine smile, and she returned it, relieved to see her friend looking more relaxed. Mickey hadn't told her what had happened, but she could guess. Mickey's been having nightmares since she met him.

But she keeps that to herself.

Mickey thinks she's overreacting, of course.

Sure, he'd been dragging ass most of the day. That nightmare had fucked him up, and restful sleep was hard to find for the rest of the night. But every time he startled awake, Ian was right there, where he belonged, and Mickey would slip into unconsciousness again.

But that kind of night would make anyone a little tired the following day. None of that shit mattered, though. Because he and Ian were leaving tomorrow night, and Mickey is not leaving Mexico without one of their old-school karaoke nights. Ian's been going on and on about this since they landed at the airport.

And what Ian wants, Mickey's going to try to give him. Besides, it's not just about what Ian wants. Mickey wants this too. This one last night with his friends, a memory he can hold with him until he can make it back down here again.

He wants to come back already, and he's not even gone yet. He can see himself coming back here for good, in the future. Maybe he and Ian could have their gay Mexican fairy tale after all, one day.

Mickey smiles at Lauren one last time before turning back to the mirror, his fingers going up into his hair, pushing the strands one way and then the other. Lauren comes up behind him, wrapping her arms around his waist and setting her chin on his shoulder. Their stare at each other through the mirror.

"What?" Mickey laughs, letting his hands fall to his sides awkwardly around Lauren's arms.

"You're happy." she smiles.

"What?" Mickey replies, eyebrows raised.
"I've known you for years, Mickey." Lauren says, her eyes meeting his in the mirror. "I've seen you low. Real fucking low. And I've seen you happy. Or I thought I had. You were good here, with us. Loving and fun and sassy. Content? Maybe..." she laughs, pinching his side. He yelps, slapping her hand away, but he doesn't pull out of her hold. "But now, with Ian, it's like you've really let yourself be happy. You've come alive."

"Oh fuck off." Mickey laughs, finally squirming out of her arms and walking over to the end table. He stuffs his wallet and his phone in his pocket. Lauren grabs him by the shoulder and whips him back around to face her.

"No, you fuck off." she laughed, punching him in the shoulder. "You are. You are practically fucking glowing. You're happy and you're in love. And I'm so glad you found that with Ian. That you found your way back to each other. That's a once in a life time thing, Mickey-baby. Don't ever let it go again."

"Wasn't planning on it. Not really all on me, though, is it?" Mickey mumbled, running a hand over his face.

"You know." Lauren said, reaching a hand up to run her fingers through Mickey's hair, fixing the mess he'd made. "I never thought I'd like Ian. After what you told me. But knowing him now, I can see why you love him so much. You two have been through so much, but you came out the other end together. I'm happy for you."

"I'm happy too, L. But it's not just cuz of Ian. It's cuz of you, and Javi. It's because of Mateo and Maria and Jack. You guys were there for me when I had fucking no one. And I know I'm lucky to have Ian. I know that shit all day every day. Just like I'm lucky to have my family back in my life, my kid. But I wouldn't have any of that shit if it wasn't for you."

Lauren smiled, tears welling in her eyes. She shook her head. "That's not true, Mickey. You did this all on your own."

"That's a lie and you know it. When I ran into you all that time ago, I was on the verge of some very bad shit. I was stealing to survive, running in a dangerous crowd. I was one bad decision away from being a drug mule or a solider in a cartel. And you caught me stealing some stupid overpriced purse and changed my whole fucking life. You took me to your house, got me a job, became my friend. I don't think I've ever thanked you for that."

Lauren shook her head again, wrapping her arms around Mickey and pulling him to her chest. He fell into the embrace easily, taking a moment to marvel at how much he's changed. Once upon a time, he'd cringe away from this kind of intimacy with anyone.

"Don't you ever thank me for that. I told you that day. We were fated to be friends. And now, somos familias."

Mickey kissed the top of her head before pulling away so they were face to face again.

"We are." he agreed, smiling at her as she wiped tears from her eyes. "We are family."

"Guys!!" Javier's voice floated across the apartment, breaking the moment. "Let's go! Me and Ian have been ready for ages, and that karaoke's not going to sing itself."

Mickey groaned as Lauren pulled him toward the front of the house.

"Don't even play with me, Mick. We all know you love karaoke. You can't lie to us."
Mickey smiled, but didn't say a word. He couldn't lie, that much was true. What surprised him though, was that he hardly ever wanted to, or had to, anymore.

The first thing Ian thinks when he walks into what he's been told was Mickey's regular bar when he lived in Mexico, was that the place reminded him very much of the Alibi. The thought brings a smile to Ian's face.

Even when Mickey was far away, he found a place that felt like home.

The bar is smaller, compared to the clubs he's seen on his trip so far. Ian had been surprised when Mickey had told him they were going out clubbing a few nights ago. Clubs were not Mickey's scene, never were. But Javier and Lauren loved them, so apparently Mickey would play along once in a while. It brought on such a strong sense of nostalgia, dancing in that club all night. The lights, the gyrating bodies, and Mickey tucked into a corner with a drink in his hand, watching Ian from afar with raised eyebrows and a smirk on his face.

They had had fun that night, staying out late and losing themselves to the music, with Mickey egging him on from the sidelines.

But tonight felt different. There was hardly a dance floor, for one. Just a small patch of space in front of an even smaller stage, a few people swaying back and forth drunkenly. The bar had a few people scattered along it too. All of these people were locals, and regulars, that much Ian could tell. The whole place had a warm, neighborhood feeling that Ian really appreciated. Not a single tourist as far as the eye could see.

"Are my eyes deceiving me?" An older woman called from behind the bar. She was pretty, with her caramel colored skin and dark hair swept off her face in a loose bun on top of her head. She was probably Monica's age, if Ian had to guess. She wore a turquoise sun dress an a bright, wide smile. 

"It's me, Sofi." Mickey laughs, leading the small group over to the bar. The woman, Sofi, tosses her bar towel in Mickey's face.

Ian's eyes widen, but Mickey just laughs, grabbing the towel off his shoulder and tossing it right back. Sofi catches it, dropping it to the bar and leaning over, pulling Mickey into a one-armed hug that he readily reciprocates.

Sofi lets him go and glares at his two companions. "You knew he was coming back, and you didn't tell me?"

Lauren just shrugs, but Javier looks apologetic. "Perdóname. We haven't been around."

Sofi just smiles some more. She shakes her head, grabbing some empty glasses and filling them with beer from the tap. "Olvidalo." she waves Javier off. "We celebrate." she fills the glasses and hands them out before pouring one for herself. "How long is your stay?" she asks.

Mickey takes a sip of his beer, unable to wipe the smile off his face. Sofia was a nice lady. He hasn't really thought of her much since leaving Mexico, but she was always kind to him.

"We're actually headed back to the States tomorrow. But I couldn't leave without some authentic
Pájaro Loco karaoke." he motioned over his shoulder to the machine in the back. Pero Loco had been their spot when he lived here, and he couldn't fathom leaving Mexico without getting down karaoke style with his friends.

He was relishing in his fagginess, and he loved every second of it.

"Going so soon?" Sofia's face fell a little. Ian wondered how close she was to Mickey and his friends. He wondered if she was like a Mexican version of Kev. More than a bartender, a friend.

"Yeah, sorry." Mickey replied, giving Sofia a sheepish smile. "We've been kinda busy, and we weren't here for long."

"Well, no matter!" she exclaimed, her smile coming back full force. "You will dazzle us all with your singing, all is forgiven."

Ian couldn't help but smile. He knows Mickey's changed a lot, and he'd like to take credit for all of it, but Mickey did most of the work himself. Him and his friends. His support system. Ian knows how important it is to have people in your corner. And he will be forever grateful for those people who held Mickey up when the world fell out from under him.

Guilt starts to build in his gut, but he pushes it the fuck down. He's not going to do that anymore. Go over and over the past. Shit he regrets, but can not change. He's done beating himself up.

He grabs his beer and takes a long sip, settling in to a conversation between Mickey, his friends and Sofia the bartender. An interesting story about Mickey's first months in Mexico.

Ian may not have been there, then, but he is certain he will be there for everything in the future.

----------------------------------------------

Mickey is feeling pleasantly buzzed. He has to be, to do a karaoke night. It still doesn't come naturally to him. Letting go. Not caring. Making a bit of a fool of himself in a room full of strangers. He has to make a conscious effort for this kind of shit, and the first step on that journey is to get a tiny bit drunk.

He's sitting at a table now. Sofia lead them over to a table by the stage about a half hour after they arrived. After they had caught up and teased each other to contentment, she filled their glasses, on the house and sent them on their way.

Mickey's feeling a little bittersweet about this night. The end of a trip he never thought he'd have. When he'd taken the bus back to the states to surrender himself to the Feds, he never thought he'd be able to see Javier or Lauren or the ocean ever again. By all assumptions, he should be sitting in a cold, lonely 9x7 cell right now, trying to sleep over the sounds of his prick celly jerking off.

But that's not where he is at all. By some miracle of fate, he made it out alive, and he's sitting in Pájaro Loco, getting ready to go wild on some classic tunes.

Life is so fucked up sometimes.

"C'mon, Ian. Me and you." Lauren says, grabbing Ian's wrist and pulling him toward the stage. "I want a duet with you before we do the big finale."
Ian blushes, but follows. He's used to attention from strangers, but he's no singer. But it's all in good fun, and he likes the idea of being included.

Lauren walks over to Sofia and picks a song. Ian stood awkwardly by the stage, eyeing the big screen where the lyrics would be and the collection of microphones on the stage. Everyone in the bar was already staring at him, and he could feel his skin heat up with a blush he's not used to. He used to take his clothes off for money, why is the idea of singing in front of a bunch of drunks making him so nervous?

He took a sip of his drink before placing it on the nearest table as Lauren made her way back over to him. His eyes caught on Mickey and Javier sitting at the table. Ian smiled, waving like an idiot. Mickey smiled back, rolling his eyes a bit.

"You ready?" Lauren asked, pulling Ian onto the stage.

"Ready as I'll ever be." Ian laughed, just as 'Like a prayer' by Madonna filled the room. "This shit, really?"

"All gay men know Madonna, don't even try to tell me different."

Mickey knew he was smiling like a fucking loon, but fuck if he could stop. It was like his face had a mind of its own. He used to be so good at masking his emotions. Whether he was happy or sad or fucking furious, he could keep a lid on that shit and no one would ever be the wiser. But now, he wore his emotions all over his stupid face. He's one of those guys now. And he can't say that he regrets the change. It's nice to not have to hide all the time.

Ian's voice pulls him out of his head. His head swivels up to the stage, where Ian and Lauren are singing and dancing. Ian's got a thin layer of sweat on his face that Mickey can see glistening in the stage lights. He's got a big, bright smile on his face and a mic in his hand. Lauren spins around him, laughing the lyrics out.

"When you call my name, it's like a little prayer." Ian's eyes lock with Mickey's as the words tumble past his lips. "I'm down on my knees, I wanna take you there."

Mickey shoots his boyfriend a dirty smirk, eyebrows raised.

"You love him." Javier says, totally out of left field.

"Well, yeah." Mickey says, glancing over to his friend before his eyes gravitate naturally back to Ian.

"I always hoped you'd find your way back to him." Javier confides. "Even while we were lovers, I knew your heart belong to Diablo Rojo." he added on the last part quietly, but Mickey heard it.

"Javi, you know I've always cared about you. What we had was casual, yeah? We both fucked other people that whole time. Hell, we used to compete to see who could score the hottest guy." Mickey was confused, where did this come from?

"I know. I would never let myself fall in love with a man who's heart is owned by another." Javier replies, as if it should be obvious. And maybe it should be. "I may have had those kind of feelings in
the very beginning, carino, but I learned very quickly that your body may have been mine for the taking, but your heart never would be. I can't tell you how happy I am that you found your alma gemela again. You are meant to be together. I believe this with all my being."

Mickey looked away for a moment, overcome with emotion. Javier had been so good to him, loved him so much when he couldn't even love himself. If his case had never been recalled, and he'd never gone back to the States, he could have easily spent his life loving Javier. But his friend was right, it never would have been like it was with Ian. He and Javier could have been content to love each other, but Mickey would never have been as invested as he is with Ian, and he'd never love Javier or any other man the way he loves Ian. So things worked out exactly the way they were supposed to. And Mickey is eternally grateful.

"I have found someone." Javier says suddenly. Mickey's head shoots up and their eyes meet.

"What? Why are you just telling me? Where is he?" Mickey fired off his questions in rapid fire succession.

"Yes. David. He is a businessman from Australia, setting up shop in Porta Vallarta. He is good. You would like him. He is traveling for work right now. You will meet next time you visit."

"So you think this is it? Long haul and all that shit?" Mickey asked, excited for his friend.

"I mean, I don't know if he is my Diablo Rojo." Javier smirked, raising an eyebrow. "But I like him and he's good to me."

Mickey smiled so wide his cheeks hurt. "Oh, Javi, I'm so happy for you." he said, leaning in his seat to pull his friend into a tight hug. "I told you, didn't I?"

"You did, carino. You did." Javier whispered, holding Mickey tight to his chest. They only pulled apart when Mickey's phone started to ring. The sounds of Pink Floyd filled the air, clashing harshly with the Madonna Ian and Lauren were still belting out a few feet away.

Mickey smiled, leaning back so he could slide his phone out of his pocket. 'Wish you were here' was Jack's ring tone. He'd set it up himself while Mickey was in the bathroom one day before he left for this trip. Jack was such a cheeky asshole.

Mickey hadn't talked to Jack all that much on this trip, settling for sending him pictures when the mood struck. Mickey's not ashamed to say he misses his friend. A lot. He slides his finger across his home screen, accepting the video call. Jack's smiling face takes up the screen, and Mickey smiles back instantly.

"Mick." Jack says, his voice full of tenderness and love. "How's the trip?"

"Hey Jack." Mickey smiles. "It's good. We're having a fucking blast." Mickey eyes flicked over to the stage then back to his screen.

"I can see that. Your pictures look amazing. You better send me some when you finally get to the beach. Gotta see that shit." Jack said, running a hand through his unruly hair.

"I will. I kinda can't believe we haven't been yet, but we've been so busy." he ran a hand over his mouth before admitting his real reasoning. "I kinda want it to be special, just me and Ian."

Jack made a strange sound, a mix between a sigh and a giddy giggle. "Oh Mick, you big ol' romantic you. Super sweet."
"Fuck off with that shit, Jack." Mickey grimaced, eyeing Javier who put his hands up in surrender, though he was smiling knowingly. "So what if I am?"

"I just think it's fucking adorable." Jack replied easily. "You are such a softy, Milkovich. God, I can't even with you sometimes."

"Again, fuck off." Mickey spat, but he was smiling too. It wasn't such a bad thing, to be a little soft now and then. Took him his whole life to realize that, but it was true. "So, what did you want, anyway? Not that I don't want to talk."

"I wanted to see the karaoke, obviously." Jack smirked. "Did you think I wouldn't find out?"

"Ain't like it's a state secret, asshole." Mickey replied, turning the phone around to show Jack the stage. "They're singing Madonna."

"I can see that, Mick." Jack replied. "You gonna get up there?"

"You know I am." Mickey replied, smiling again, turning the phone back to his face. "But you ain't seeing that shit, cuz I don't wanna hold the phone while I get down."

Jack laughed. "Well that's just fine. I'll get your ass up on the stage when we get to Jamaica."

"You were serious about that shit?" Mickey balked. He'd forgotten all about that. The idea that he was the kind of person who could travel like this now was still a little bit strange to him. He never thought he'd have opportunities like this in his life.

"Fuck yeah I was. Am I the kind of guy who says shit just to say it?" Jack said, looking mildly offended. "We're fucking going." he said with finality before raising his voice. "Hey, Javier."

Javier leaned over so his face was also on the screen. "Jack! Como estas mi amigo?"

"Estoy bien." Jack replied with a cheeky smile. "Listen, once Mick gets off probation, we're all going to Hedonism in Jamaica. You and Lauren should come." Jack said, clearly getting swept up in the excitement. "We could make it a whole thing. What do you think?"

Just as Jack finished talking, Ian and Lauren came back to the table, laughing and a little out of breath form all the dancing they were doing on stage.

"Jack!" Ian said as he took his seat next to Mickey. He wrapped an arm around Mickey's shoulder, pulling him close so they could both be seen on the screen. "What's up?"

"I was just asking Javier and Lauren to join us on our Jamaican vacation." Jack said.

"Oh, that's a great idea." Ian nodded, excited. "What do you guys think?" he looked over across the table. Mickey swiveled the phone around so his friends could see Jack's expectant puppy face. No one on the planet could say no to that shit.

"I'm down for sure." Lauren replied eagerly. "I've always wanted to go."

"Of course I would love to join you." Javier smiled. "Thank you so much for asking us."

"Oh! I'm so excited!" Jack gushed. "We're gonna have so much fun. And sex! So much sex!"

"Okay, alright." Mickey said, pulling the phone in close. "Keep it in your pants, you perv."

Jack laughed, shooting Mickey an obnoxious wink. "Never."
"Fucking idiot." Mickey replied, his voice dripping with fondness. "But we gotta go. We're up next. Get to planning your Big Gay Sex Vacation. I'll call you once we're at the airport, so you and Matty can know when to head out to pick us up."

"Sure thing, Mick. And send me some pictures of the beach, yeah?"

"Yeah yeah, said I would."

"Okay, spin me in a circle." Jack said, smiling.

Mickey rolled his eyes, but did a lap around the table with his phone so Jack could say goodbye to everyone. Once the screen was back to his own face, he smiled. "Okay douche, I'm gonna let you go."

"You better not ever try to let me go Mick. You're stuck with me now." Jack winked again, the prick. Mickey rolled his eyes again.

"Ain't stuck with shit. Want you around." he mumbled. He couldn't see his life without Jack anymore, and even joking about it kinda bothered him.

"I want you around too, Mick. For ever. We're gay besties! Some day I'm gonna get us T shirts. Or friendship bracelets! Or matching butt plugs! Oh Mick! Matching butt plugs for sure. Ian! We are shopping for those as soon as you get back."


"Don't encourage him."

Ian and Jack both burst out laughing, which only irritated Mickey further. "You guys are the worst. Never should have introduced you. Ganging up on me and shit."

"Oh Mick." Jack sighed fondly. "You love every second of it. You don't fool me."

"Whatever." Mickey replied, but he was smiling again. "I'm really hanging up this time."

"Okay." Jack acquiesced, calming himself. "Have fun, and I'll see you when you get home. Love you."

"Love you too man." Mickey replied. And he did. When he first met Jack he never could have guessed what a huge part of his life he would become. But god, was he grateful.

Jack blew him a few kisses before he hung up, and Mickey waved like an asshole before ending the call and putting his phone face down on the table.

"That kid is such a trip." Lauren smiled.

"He is." Mickey agreed. "But I wouldn't have it any other way."

Ian smiled at him, wrapping an arm around his shoulder and pulling him against his body. Mickey turned just enough, tipping his head up just as Ian's face came down. They met in the middle in a kiss.

Mickey never though he'd get to a place in his life where he'd be comfortable kissing any man in public. Not even Ian. But the idea of not kissing him didn't even cross his mind. He just did what felt right. And kissing Ian felt fucking perfect.
He slipped his tongue into Ian's mouth and his fingers into his hair, pulling him impossibly closer. Ian smiled into the kiss, his hand coming up to curl around Mickey's hip, pulling their chairs together so there was no space between them. The rest of the room melted away and it was just them and this kiss. Mickey pushed his tongue past Ian's lip, so far beyond caring about anything except the way Ian felt pressed up against his body.

That is, until Sofia calls Mickey's name from the stage.

He reluctantly pulls away, pressing one last lingering kiss to Ian's swollen lips before standing from the table. "We're up," he says, walking toward the stage. Lauren and Javier follow him, but Ian stays behind, taking his phone out and hitting the record button. He wants to capture this moment.

Mickey saunters over to the stage, hopping up and turning to see Javier and Lauren right behind him. The bar is more packed than it had been when they first got there, but karaoke nights were always big, so he shrugs it off. He's long past any reticence he once had. He doesn't give a shit about what anyone thinks of him. Not anymore.

Once the three friends are on stage, Mickey looks around the room.

And just like that, it's like Mickey's traveling back in time. To when he first got to Mexico. To when he first let Lauren strong arm him into this bullshit. He's changed so much since then.

Point in case: he doesn't even feel like an asshole once he starts belting out Meatloaf at the top of his lungs. Not even a little bit.

He grabs a mic and so do his friends. He shoot a glance at Ian, who is sitting by the stage, sipping his beer with a smirk on his face. He smirks back, giving him the finger before turning toward Sofi to give her a thumbs up.

The song starts and the crowd goes wild. Mickey smiles, that free, happy feeling descending upon him again. Javier takes the first verse, as always, and Mickey spends the time dancing with Lauren. He spins her and dips her and she's laughing breathlessly by the time he lets her go.

Lauren take the female verse, and Mickey sings along here and there, but his eyes are on Ian. He's got his phone out, probably recording the entire shit show. Mickey smirks, an idea popping into his head.

He jumps off the stage and strides over to Ian, who's looking much less cocky now. Mickey extends his hand, and Ian takes it, confusion coloring his face. Mickey tugs him up to stand and leads him back to the stage.

Ian looks nervous again, like he wasn't just up here moments ago. Mickey doesn't give a shit, he pulls Ian close with a hand on his hip and shoves the mic under his nose.

Ian laughs, but plays along, shoving his phone back into his pocket to focus on the music.

Mickey stares right into Ian's eyes, waggling his eyebrows as he belts out the lyrics.

"Ain't no doubt about it, we were doubly blessed
Cause we were barely seventeen and we were barely dressed
Ain't no doubt about it, baby got to go and shout it
Ain't no doubt about it, we were doubly blessed
Cause we were barely seventeen and we were barely dressed"

Ian gives him a fond smile, and Mickey just knows he's thinking the same thing Mickey is. About them, back in the day. Young and horny, fucking around. Never in a million years did Mickey think that a spur of the moment fuck inspired by violence and an ill-timed hard on would result in the love of his life.

Doubly blessed indeed.

Mickey pushes Ian away with a cheeky smile before going back to Lauren and dancing some more. They have a routine that they follow every time they sing this song, and Mickey knows it by heart.

Lauren laughs loudly as he scoops her off her feet and spins her around fast. Javier and Ian are still singing, so Mickey deposits Lauren back on the floor and goes back to his boyfriend.

Mickey puts a hand on Ian's chest just as the music turns again. He raises his eyebrows, licking his lips before going ahead and doing what he considers a pretty gay thing. Singing to his boyfriend.

"Do you love me!?
Will you love me forever!?
Do you need me!?
Will you never leave me!?
Will you make me so happy for the rest of my life!?
Will you take me away and will you make me your wife!?"

Ian chuckles, pulling Mickey to his chest. The singing and dancing goes on around them, but in that moment, it's just them again.

Ian tilts his head down so his mouth is right next to Mickey's ear.

"Make you my wife, huh Mick?" Ian says huskily. "You want that?" he jokes.

"Fuck off. S'just a song." Mickey mutters, though his heart is jack-hammering in his chest. "Ain't gonna never be your fucking wife, anyway."

"Of course not." Ian agrees readily, licking Mickey's neck filthily. "But you'd make one hell of a husband."

Ian pulls away before Mickey can properly respond. He walks over to Javier and they dance together as Lauren and Mickey finish the song duet-style.

"It never felt so good, it never felt so right." Mickey sings, staring right at Ian across the stage.

"And we were glowing like metal on the edge of a knife..."

The song ends and the friends go back to their seats. Another couple jumps on stage and start singing 'Love is a Battlefield', of all things.

"Y'know." Ian starts, sipping his beer. "I'm not one to read too much into 'signs' and all that shit, but Mick, Pat Benetar? Really?"

"I know." Mickey agreed. He needs a cigarette. "It's kinda ironic."
"Why?" Javier asked, feeling totally out of the loop. For good reason. Mickey had never told him or Lauren the story of that night. It had been too painful for him to think about, never mind talk about. But shit was different now.

"When Ian first got sick, we were having problems." Mickey said, surprising himself by talking about such a dark time so easily. "Shit was super fucked up. And Gallagher here got the bright idea to drink it all away."

Ian huffed out a small laugh, running a hand through his hair. "That's not exactly how I remember it."

"Of course not." Mickey scoffed playfully. "Anyway, we wen't down to our spot. The ball field I told you guys about." he saw his friends nodding their agreement, so he continued. "We fought. Like banged each other out real hard. Covered in blood, the both of us. But then, once the adrenaline wore off, we ended up fucking, right there. Freezing cold and everything, middle of winter, really." Mickey chuckled at the memory. "Then, once we were done, we headed back to Ian's. I don't even know which one of us started it, but suddenly we're screaming out 'Love is a Battlefield' at the top of our lungs." Mickey's eyes flit over to Ian, who is watching him speak with that moony, love drunk expression he gets sometimes. "We were gonna go on our first real date that night. But then Sammi..." Mickey trails off, not wanting to tell the story to it's sad ending.

"And look at you now." Javier says, pulling Mickey out of his head.

"Look at us now." Ian agrees, running his fingers through Mickey's hair. Mickey melts into the touch, his whole body going boneless.

Look at them now, indeed.

- ---------------------------------------------

"Mick, where are we going?" Ian asked for the millionth time. Mickey didn't answer him. He just gripped his hand tighter as he led him down the beach. It was late, and it was dark. The only light guiding their steps was the shining of the moon above them. It was full and beautiful, but only illuminated the beach so much.

"Shut the fuck up, or the only place we'll be going is back to the house." Mickey retorted, adjusting the blanket under his arm.

They had left the bar about an hour ago. It was still early, barely 11, but the beach was pitch black, save for the moon.

Mickey could hear Ian grumbling behind him, but it only made him smile. Ian was gonna flip his shit when they got to the spot.

Mickey loved this spot. He's dreamed about this spot a lot since moving back to the states. He hopes Ian loves it just as much as he does.

Ian dutifully follows behind his boyfriend, trying to keep up with him while stumbling through the sand. Ian doesn't understand why they had to save the beach for the last minute. Like, the literal last minute. They are leaving to go back to Chicago tomorrow. And now Ian has to see the Mexican ocean in the dark.
But he doesn't say any of that. He wants to see what Mickey has planned. He doesn't want to ruin it with his inane questions.

They had walked back to the house with Lauren and Javier after karaoke. Everyone had been pleasantly buzzed and Ian was looking forward to fucking Mickey and sleeping it off so they could be good to go for their long journey tomorrow.

But Mickey had other plans.

They walk farther down the beach. Away from the street and the sounds of the city night life. Mickey never releases Ian's hand as he guides him past sand dunes and little grassy hills. They reach a huge rock outcropping, and Mickey drags Ian past a giant boulder and into a tiny cove.

There is a small inlet along the biggest boulder. There is grass all around, and the waves lap along the shore quietly. Ian is astonished. He's never seen a place so beautiful in all his life. The moonlight reflecting along the ocean waves is other-worldly. He feels his face split into a wide smile as his eyes travel from the scenery to his boyfriend. Mickey looks shy all of the sudden. He runs his fingers along his upper lip before twisting around and spreading the blanket on the sandy embankment they are standing on. He gives Ian a sheepish smile, then shrugs.

Ian smiles back, kneeling on the blanket as Mickey starts rummaging through the backpack he brought. Mickey shoots Ian a victorious smile as he pulls two beers out of the bag. He handed one to Ian, setting his own on the sand to go back to digging through the bag. He grabs a small bottle of lube and an Altoids tin and sets them on the blanket.

Mickey sits down next to Ian, grabbing his beer and tossing the Altoids tin to Ian. "You can start it." he says, twisting the cap off his bottle and taking a long pull of the satisfying liquid.

Ian eyes the Altoids tin curiously before opening it. It has three joints in it, and Ian smiles. Of course Mickey would find weed somewhere. Javier probably hooked him up. Ian will have to thank him later.

Ian plucked one from the tin before closing it. He grabbed a lighter out of his pocket and lit the joint, taking a long drag before passing it to Mickey and taking a seat on the blanket.

Mickey took the joint, putting it to his lips as Ian pulled him to lay down with him. Mickey laid his head on Ian's chest, holding the pungent smoke in his lungs for a moment before blowing it out and passing the weed to his boyfriend.

They just laid there for a while, silently smoking and holding each other. The stars were out in all their glory, and the sound of the ocean lulled them into a state of quiet bliss.

Ian laid a tender kiss to the top of Mickey's head. He felt light and fuzzy. And so fucking happy.

"You ever think..." Ian started, a slow smile curling his lips. "Back in the day, this is where we'd be?" he couldn't help himself, it was just the perfect thing to say in the moment.

Mickey chuckles, pinching Ian's side until he squirmed. He gets where Ian is going with that question. "Us, laying under the stars on a Mexican beach? Yeah, I could have predicted that." he answers, playing along.

Ian laughs. He may be high as a kite all of the sudden, but even he can see that this whole trip is like some big cosmic 'full circle' shit. Mickey and Ian on a beach in Mexico, on a spread out blanket under the stars....
It's like this was how their life was always meant to be, and no matter how many times they'd tried to run from it, deny it, or burn it to the ground, they were always fated to end up in this one spot. Together.

Yep, Ian's high. Jesus.

"We shoulda brought the Flasklight." Ian mutters, taking a hit off the joint and passing it to Mickey. Mickey took it, bringing it to his lips and inhaling deeply.

"Couldn't." he replies, coughing slightly. "Still all sticky and shit from that day at the market. L never washed out all that tequila."

"Oh." Ian laughed, getting more comfortable on the blanket as Mickey scoots even closer to him. "It's okay. We don't need the flashlight anyway. The fucking moon is huge."

"Yeah." Mickey replies quietly. He stretches his body out next to Ian's, nuzzling his nose into Ian's neck. "I kinda like it like this. Just us and the moonlight." Mickey admits. God, he's so gay.

Ian doesn't say anything. Doesn't tease him or goad him. He just wraps his arm around his shoulder and pulls him flush against his body. Mickey smiles, inhaling the scent of Ian's sun kissed skin.

Ian tilts his head down, running his nose along Mickey's cheekbone. Mickey chuckles, turning his face up so Ian can kiss him. Ian smiles, meeting Mickey's lips again and again. Their movements are languid, tempered by the booze and weed. Everything feels slow and honeyed. A quiet moan slips past Mickey's lips as Ian's hand traveled along his side, slipping under his shirt.

They licked into each other's mouths, hands roaming and gripping.

"This place is so cool." Ian breathes against Mickey's lips. "How did you ever find it?" he asks, leaning back to pull his shirt up over his head, tossing it over by their open backpack. Mickey struggles to sit upright again, tugging insistently at his own shirt before lobbing it over in the general direction of the bag. He spread back out on the blanket on his back so he could wriggle out of his shorts, watching Ian undress with hungry eyes.

"I uh, found it one day not too long after I got to Porta Vallarta." Mickey said, as Ian stretched back out next to him. They were both naked and hard now, but Mickey had a far away, nostalgic look in his eyes, and Ian put his dick on the back burner so he could listen to this story. He slid closer to Mickey on the blanket, propped up on one elbow, running a hand up and down his body as he spoke. "It was just after L and Javi found me, moved me into their house even though they didn't know me at all. I was still pretty low, y'know?" Mickey's eyes flicked over to Ian, who was staring down at him. The light from the moon illuminated his rapt, slightly sad expression. Mickey continued, wanting Ian to know this story. "I didn't do much but drink and get high for the first few weeks. L and Javi were understanding, which was weird enough. Just let me self destruct for a while. But one day, Lauren had enough. Told me I was killing myself. Needed to get outta the house and outta the bottle. She got me a job at the bar they work at, and she told me to talk a walk on the beach. I laughed right in her fucking face." Mickey chuckled at the memory. "But she was insistent, said nothing mends a broken man like the sounds of the ocean. I thought that was the biggest load of hippie bullshit I'd ever heard, but I went, just to shut her up." Mickey took a deep breath, his eyes flitting away from Ian's and landing back on the moon hanging low in the sky. "I found this place. This little cove here. I've never seen anyone else here, and I've never brought anyone else here. It became like, my little place. To be alone. To think or whatever."

Ian hummed, hand still moving idly along Mickey's body as he listened to him reminisce. He can see it. Mickey sitting here, alone with a bottle and his thoughts.
"I came here to think about you." Mickey added on quietly. Ian's hand stilled. His heart started pounding a little harder in his chest. Fuck.

Mickey swallowed hard. He hadn't planned on telling Ian any of this. It felt like a lifetime ago now. But he figures this is why he brought him down here, even if he hadn't know it at the time.

"I tried not to think about you too much, honestly. It fucking hurt, y'know? But some days, I just couldn't help it. So I'd come down here, so I could be alone with my thoughts. Memories, whatever. It was like this place was special, just for you and me. I used to wonder what it would have been like if you'd have come with me. I used to lay here, getting wasted by myself, fantasizing like a little girl. So fucking gay. But it's true."

"Mick..." Ian started, his hand coming up to run his fingers through Mickey's hair.

"I know, I know." Mickey waved him off with a small smile, "Doesn't matter, ancient history." he rolled over so he and Ian were face to face. "I'm just saying, I'm glad I finally got to find out what it feels like, to really have you here with me." he lifted his hand up and cupped Ian's face in his palm. "The reality is much better than the fantasy."

Ian huffed out a wet little laugh, refusing to give into his bubbling emotions. He tilted his head down, capturing Mickey's lips in a gentle kiss. Mickey kissed him back eagerly. He pushed his tongue past Ian's lips, tangling his fingers in his hair and pulling their mouths together over and over.

"Let's turn those fantasies into reality, huh?" Mickey chuckled, thrusting his waning hard on against Ian's hip as his boyfriend abandoned his lips to lick and suck along his neck.

"Yeah, Mick." Ian murmured into his neck. "Let's do that."

Mickey smiled up at the moon, unable to control his emotions anymore. This is what he's wanted for a long as he can remember. The beach. Ian. Them. Together. The fact that it was actually happening was a bit of a mind fuck.

Ian grunted, pulling Mickey out of his head and back to the moment. "God, your body, Mick. Love you like this." he ran his fingers along Mickey's rib cage as he moved to hover over him. He steadied himself on the sand with a hand above Mickey's head as he continued to run his fingers along Mickey's naked body. "You look so good, lit up by the moon." Ian's hand traveled down Mickey's side, curling around his hip as he dipped his head down to kiss him again.

"Seriously, Ian?" Mickey chuckled into the kiss. "You're so gay sometimes."

Ian huffed out a laugh against Mickey's lips, pulling back a fraction to give him a playful glare.

"I'm so gay all the time. Just like you're so gay." Ian replied, raising his eyebrows. He trailed his hand down along Mickey's stomach, his fingers finally curling around Mickey's dick, which was hard and throbbing again. "So gay for each other."

Mickey laughed. Couldn't help it. He fell in love with the biggest dork on the planet.

"Fucking idiot." he smiled fondly. "Do something gay to me, then."

Ian laughed, dipping his head down to run his tongue along Mickey's neck. Mickey sighed, arching into the touch. Ian smiled against his skin slowly stroking him as he licked and nipped his way down his chest. He stopped for a moment to run his tongue along one of Mickey's nipples, biting gently before soothing the tender nub with his lips.
"Ian." Mickey groaned, the word barely a whisper. Ian nodded against Mickey's stomach. He didn't need to hear anymore. He grabbed Mickey's hip with one hand, and guided his erection toward his open, waiting mouth.

Mickey sucked in a sharp breath as Ian swallowed him down. His hand shot up form the blanket, tossing sand everywhere as his fingers tangled in Ian's hair as he bobbed his head.

"Oh, fuck." Mickey muttered, unable to tear his eyes away from Ian's lips wrapped around his cock. Ian looked up at him with that feral, hungry look that always got Mickey so hot. "You look so good with my dick in your mouth, Gallagher." he laughed, Ian cocked an eyebrow at him, maintaining eye contact as he sank down impossibly deeper, taking Mickey into the back of his throat.


Ian preened at the praise, redoubling his efforts. He held himself up with one hand, not wanting to get sand on his dick as he took Mickey deep into his mouth. He pulled off slightly, running his tongue around the sensitive head, savoring the taste of precome there. He could blow Mickey all night and never get bored, but that's not what he wanted. Not tonight.

He pulled off, slowly stroking Mickey's cock, his tongue darting out to lap at the head once, then twice.

"Get the lube, bitch." Ian laughed, winking at his boyfriend. Mickey rolled his eyes, but reached back with one hand, flailing around on the blanket blindly until his fingers closed around the bottle. He tossed it toward Ian and it landed on the blanket a few inches from his hand. Ian moved to grab it, but Mickey bucked him off, sending his careening sideways with a huff.

"Mick, what..." Ian started, but Mickey shut him up by shoving the bottle in his hand and throwing a leg over his face. He settled on top of Ian, his face hovering over his hard cock.

"Get to preppin'." Mickey muttered, just as he closed his lips around Ian's leaking erection.

"Ungh, okay. I'm the king of mulit-tasking." Ian groaned, pinching his eyes closed as Mickey's talented mouth worked his cock. He clicked open the lube, raising the bottle over his head so he could see to drizzle some liquid onto his fingers. He moaned as Mickey deep throated him. Mickey smiled as best he could around the throbbing dick in his mouth. He pulled Ian deeper, pressing his tongue hard against the shaft as he dragged his lips up and up. He swirled his tongue around the head. He was so lost in the heady taste of Ian on his tongue, that he yelped in surprise when Ian entered him with two fingers.

"Ah fuck." he said, pulling off Ian's cock as just holding it in his hand while he relaxed into being stretched.

"God, Mick. Wish you could see what I see." Ian groaned, moving his fingers harder and faster. Too much prep wasn't really necessary, but Mickey was enjoying it, so he wrapped his lips back around Ian's dick and got lost in the feeling of Ian's long fingers stretching him wide.

Ian bucked his hips up into Mickey's wet mouth, relishing the filthy sounds that were slipping past his full lips. Sucking and slurping, muffled moans any time Ian hit just right inside him.

Ian pumped his fingers, the fingers on his free hand digging into the flesh of Mickey's ass. He pulled his cheeks apart to get a better look at what he was doing. God it was so fucking sexy. Mickey was so fucking sexy.

"Okay, enough." Mickey sighed, breathless and a little dizzy. Deep-throating Gallagher was no joke.
He should get a medal or something. He swung his leg back around, dropping down on the blanket next to Ian again. They both turned toward each other simultaneously. Their mouths met desperately as Ian blindly grabbed the lube and rolled them so he was on top.

"Wanna do it like this." Ian muttered, sitting up on his knees so he could slick up his dick. Mickey nodded wordlessly, spreading his legs wide in anticipation. Ian just looked at him for a moment.

He can't believe, sometimes, that this is really his life. That he and Mickey found their way back to each other. That they are happy and in love. That he's about to fuck Mickey on a Mexican beach, like both of them have been dreaming about for years.

"Ian, come on back." Mickey said, his voice a little uncertain. He kicked Ian in the ass, drawing his attention back to the matter at hand.

"Sorry." Ian said sheepishly. "Just so fucking happy to be here with you."

"Yeah, me too." Mickey replied quietly. He gave Ian a tiny, shy smile. Such a non-Mickey thing to do. "But I'll be even happier after I blow my load, so get the fuck in me."

Ian couldn't help but laugh. That's his Mickey. Equal parts soft and sarcastic. Unsure and unstoppable. Loving and scathing.

And fucking perfect.

"Yeah, yeah, asshole." Ian chuckles. He grips one of Mickey's legs and wraps it around his waist. Mickey curls the other behind Ian's knees as Ian drops down on one elbow. He grips his dick with his free hand, stroking it a few times to spread the lube around before lining up and pushing forward slowly.

Mickey's eyes are locked with Ian's. Neither of them blink or breath as he pushes forward. Mickey's eyes are brimming with emotion. Ian can see it all plain as day. Love. Adoration. Lust. Devotion.

Mickey doesn't need to say a god damn word. Ian can see it all in his eyes.

Mickey's hands come up and frame Ian's face. The fingers on one hand running through his hair, the other stays on his cheek as Ian finally bottoms out.

"Oh Mick." Ian says, resting his forehead against Mickey's as he starts to slowly roll his hips.

Mickey doesn't look away. Not once. He's spent so much of his life hiding from Ian. How he was feeling, what he was thinking. He wasn't gonna do that anymore. He wanted Ian to see it all. He laid himself out bare for Ian to see. He wasn't ashamed and he wasn't scared.

"Ah, yeah." Mickey sighed, tugging Ian's hair as he started to pick up the pace. It was hard to move, on the blanket. Too many inches one way or the other and they'd end up in the sand. Mickey dragged his nails down Ian's back, earning himself a lustful hiss from the man above him.

"You feel so good. Always feel so fucking good." Ian moaned, finally breaking the intense eye contact to sit up on his knees. He grabbed Mickey's legs, pulling them up and out so he could thrust more freely. "You like that, Mick? Taking it all like that?"

"You fucking know I do." Mickey replied, his hands curling into the blanket on either side of his body. He lifted his hips up off the blanket, meeting Ian thrust for thrust. "Gimme that cock, Ian. Don't fucking hold out on me."
Ian made a funny sound, somewhere between a laugh and a growl. His fingers dug into the meat of Mickey's thighs as he pounded into him.

Mickey arched his back, his head lolling one way then the other. Ian was an animal, and Mickey loved every second of it.

"Fuck me so good. Love it. God." Mickey was mumbling now. Getting dick-drunk on Ian's cock, like he always did.

"I love it too." Ian groaned. He dropped Mickey's legs, which he immediately wrapped around his waist. He tucked one hand under Mickey's back, pulling their bodies flush together as he rocked into him.

They didn't consciously decide to slow the pace, it just felt right at the time. Mickey hitched his legs up higher as Ian brought his mouth down against Mickey's. Mickey smiled into the kiss, snaking his tongue into Ian's mouth. They kissed passionately, getting lost in the feeling of tongues dancing and bodies moving.

"Ian, please, touch me. I can't..." Mickey moaned as Ian grazed his prostate.

"Yeah, Mick. I gotcha, baby." Ian groaned, he squeezed Mickey tighter with the arm around his waist, running the other up his elevated thigh before dragging it down to grip Mickey's leaking cock.

"Ian, fuck yeah." Mickey's back arched up away from the sand, electrified by Ian's touch. "And don't call me baby." he added on with a breathy laugh. "You don't turn me out hard enough for that faggy shit."

"Oh really?" Ian laughed, moving faster and harder, earning himself a ragged moan from his boyfriend. He chuckled again lightly as he stripped Mickey's cock in time with his thrusts, rocking them both on the beach under the moonlight. "We'll see about that." He pounded Mickey's ass mercilessly, digging them into a divot in the sand with the force of his thrusts.

Mickey threaded his fingers tightly into Ian's hair, pulling his face down into another biting kiss. He wanted Ian as close as fucking possible.

Ian moaned into the kiss, losing all semblance of rhythm. Mickey pushed his tongue deeper into Ian's mouth, unable to get enough of the taste of him.

"Mick." Ian moaned, teetering dangerously close to the edge. "I love you." he thrust harder, drowning in the moans spilling out of Mickey's lips and against his own. "God, I fucking love you so much."

Mickey's back arched drastically, Ian's cock hitting his prostate dead on. He moaned loud, his voice traveling over the crashing waves. "Gah! I love you too, Ian. I always have." and with that, he came hard, spilling all over Ian's moving hand and his own chest.

"Fuck." Ian cursed, releasing Mickey's spent dick and digging his fingers into the sand above Mickey's head as he chased his own orgasm. He surged into his pliant body twice more before stilling deep inside and filling his lover with his release.

Ian slumped forward, burying his face in Mickey's neck. He inhaled deeply, Mickey's intoxicating scent filling his lungs. He laid there for a few moments, waiting for his breath to even out and his heart rate to return to normal.

Usually, this would be about the time that Mickey would shove him off, spitting a haughty 'Get off
me you ginger giant’, but that's not what happened this time. He curled his legs further around Ian's hips, stroking up and down his back lovingly while pressing barely-there kisses to his hairline.

After Ian could breathe regularly again, he pulled out and away, dropping back down onto the blanket next to his boyfriend. Mickey turned, pulling Ian closer with a hand around his waist. He laid his head on Ian's sweaty chest as his own heart slowed. He tipped his head up just in time for Ian to tip his head down. They met in the middle in a tender kiss. Mickey licked into Ian's mouth, his lips moving sluggishly against his lover's. He felt sated and happy in a way he was started to recognize as normal.

Ian pecked him once more before standing up and grabbing his shorts. He tossed Mickey his and Mickey wriggled around on the blanket like an idiot, struggling to pull his shorts over his hips without having to get up. Ian laughed at him, knotting the tie on his own shorts before grabbing two beers out of the backpack and tossing one to Mickey. Mickey caught it in the air, twisting off the cap and scooting over so Ian could flop back down to sit next to him. Ian wrapped an arm around Mickey's shoulder, dropping a kiss to the side of his head.

"I've always wanted to do that here." Mickey said quietly, his eyes traveling from Ian to the crashing waves. He pulled a cigarette out of his pack, lit it and took a drag before passing it to Ian.

"That the second time you've said that to me." Ian said, his mind going to the long ago memory of them at the ball field.

"What? When?" Mickey asked, tearing his eyes away from the sea to stare at his boyfriend.

"At the dugouts, the first time we ever fucked there." Ian said, smiling through the nostalgia. "D'you remember?"

"Yeah!" Mickey's face lit up with recognition. "That was the summer you were all gung-ho army boy."

Ian laughed, pushing Mickey away roughly before pulling him close again. He didn't want any space between them ever again, if he could help it.

"I had just gotten out of juvie. And I missed you so much, but I couldn't say that shit. I was such a pussy back then." Mickey laughed, putting his hand out for the cigarette. Ian passed it back and Mickey took a long drag before stubbing it out in the dirt and tossing it by his backpack to pick up later.

"I could tell, you know." Ian said quietly, running his fingers up and down Mickey's arm, leaving a trail of goose bumps in their wake.

"Tell what?" Mickey asked playfully, though he had a pretty good idea already.

"That you cared about me. Even way back then."

"And how could you tell?" Mickey asked, smirking as he played along.

"You got this look in your eye, when you were with me." Ian smiled, waiting for Mickey's smart-ass retort. Mandy's words ringing in his ears like she was saying them all over again.

Mickey didn't sass him, however. He just smiled, curling his fingers into Ian's hair and bringing their foreheads together. "I never thought of myself as such a transparent fuck until I met you, Gallagher." Mickey said instead, surprising Ian. Ian's eyes widened, a small smile splitting his lips.
"I could never read you back then." Ian answered, shaking his head with a smile.

"Yeah, you could." Mickey insisted. When Ian just raised his eyebrows expectantly, he continued. "You always knew me, Ian. Way before I was willing to even know myself. You knew I was gay before I could admit it, you know I loved you before I could say it." Mickey took a long pull off his beer, letting out a slow breath before he spoke again. "You knew I could be a good person years before I could even entertain the idea." Mickey looked over at Ian with an open, vulnerable expression. "You've loved me and believed in me for so long now, and I just hope you know how much that means to me. And I love you too. Have for fucking ever now."

Ian stared at Mickey, slack-jawed and shocked. Sure, Ian and Mickey were open and honest with each other now, but what Mickey had just said was one of the sweetest, most heartfelt things Ian's ever heard from him.

"Mick, fuck." Ian whispered, running his fingers through Mickey's knotted up, sandy hair. "That's the sweetest thing anyone's ever said to me."

Mickey laughed, kissing Ian quickly. "Well, don't get used to it. I think I tapped out my 'emotional monologue' well for at least a few months."

"Good thing I'll be around then too." Ian laughed. "Don't think I'm gonna forget that in six months."

"I wouldn't dream of it." Mickey laughed. He finished his beer, dropping the empty onto the sand to pick up later. He reached around, digging in the backpack for the other blanket he brought. "Here, cover up, it's gonna get kinda cold once the moon goes down."

Ian took the blanket with a curious look. "Mick, are we sleeping on the beach?"

Mickey shrugged, laying back down on the blanket as Ian unfolded the blanket and laid it over their laps. Once they were both covered, Ian laid back down next to Mickey. Mickey turned instinctively, curling into Ian's side. Ian wrapped his arm tight around him, pulling him against his chest. They both sighed, relaxed and happy.

Mickey's breath slowed and he could feel sleep pulling him under. He smiled against Ian's chest. Mickey can't believe this is his life now. That Ian is his, really his, and they are living this life now, together.

When Mickey first met Ian, he knew the kid was gonna fuck him up beyond recognition. That if he kept hanging out with him, he'd be changed forever. Turn into a completely different person. At the time, the idea of that happening scared Mickey shitless. He was so afraid that having feelings for Ian would turn him into someone he didn't recognize.

And it did.

And Mickey could not be more grateful.

He falls asleep to the sound of the ocean waves, and the heartbeat of the love of his life thumping rhythmically under his ear.
It's so bright.

That's Mickey's first thought as he surfaces.

Jesus, he and Ian must have really worn themselves out. He had planned on just laying on the beach under the stars for a few hours, then heading back to the beach house, sleep in a bed the night before they were going back to Chicago.

But it looks like they ended up spending the whole night on the beach.

The sun is just coming up over the water. It's a glorious sight, and it still takes Mickey's breath away like it did the very first time he saw it. He takes a moment to just look, casting his eyes over the glorious waterfront.

After a moment, he leans over Ian's still form. He kisses his forehead, feeling like a smitten fucking idiot. "Ian, c'mon man. We fell asleep on the beach. We gotta get back to the house. You gotta take your meds and we gotta make sure we got everything packed for the flight tonight."

Ian groans, rolling over onto his back and covering his face with his hand. "What the fuck? I'm covered in sand." he sits up, brushing off his shoulders. "Can't believe we passed out."

"I can." Mickey laughed. "We got wasted and fucked like maniacs. When is that not a recipe for a post-orgasm coma?"

Ian laughed, pulling Mickey close. Mickey rolled his eyes but settled between Ian's spread legs. Ian wrapped his arms around him, pulling Mickey's back against his chest. Ian rested his chin on Mickey's shoulder.

Mickey rested his hands on Ian's arms, content to be held by him.

They sat there silently for a few moments, watching the sun rise over the water. A peaceful calm descended upon them that neither one of them ever thought they'd experience in life.

After the sun had broken the water and was making its ascent into the sky, Mickey tilted his head back, placing a tender kiss to Ian's neck.

"Wanna hear something pretty gay?" Mickey asked suddenly, turning his head back to the sunrise.

Ian laughed, squeezing Mickey's middle. "Sure Mick, lay it on me, however gay it is."

Mickey laughed too, before sobering. "Uh, you know when I broke outta prison."

Ian stopped laughing. He tightened his arms around Mickey, sensing this story was not going to be a funny one. "Yeah, Mick. I do."

"Well, right after we broke out. Y'know, Cassie let us out. Just let us walk right out, and there was this van waiting for us. Damon's guys. We hopped in and I sat in the back. I was freaked out, cuz it was a big fucking deal, breaking outta jail like that. But honestly, I wasn't even thinking about any of that shit," he took a breath, leaning against Ian harder. "I was thinking of you. Finally seeing you again. Wondering if you'd talk to me. If you still loved me, all that faggy shit." he laughed, but Ian wasn't laughing.

He had no idea Mickey had thought about him that much during his escape. That Mickey had never stopped thinking about him, even when his life was in danger and he was in such a perilous situation. Ian's heart constricts painfully in his chest. He kisses Mickey's hair, waiting out the rest of the story.
"So, one of Damon's gang banger buddies is playing the radio, and that Phil Collins song 'You Can't Hurry Love' is on the radio. And I'm sitting in the back, crouched down so no passing cars could see me. And I'm sitting there, listening to these lyrics, and it hits me. I guess this could be like the poltergeist truck, right? I'm hearing signs everywhere like some kind of circus freak. But anyway, I'm listening to the song and all I can think about is you. How I can't push you or make you love me or whatever. But if it was meant to be, we'd find our way back to each other." Mickey leaned his head back, looking up at Ian. He had that mooney-eyed, loved filled expression that Mickey always loved, even though he'd never admit it. "So I guess Phil Collins was right, you can't hurry love."

Ian's throat closed up as tears welled in his eyes. Fuck how did he get so lucky? He was never going to take it for granted ever again. Mickey was fucking it for him, and he'd do whatever it took to take care of him.

Mickey leaned back, tilting his head up for a kiss. Ian smiled, bringing their lips together languidly. Mickey pushed his tongue into his mouth, pulling him down by the back of his head.

Ian pulled away with a breathless laugh. "I love you so much Mick. And that is such a sweet fucking story." he rubbed his nose against Mickey's earning himself a playful swat against the back of his head. "But you do know that song was originally sung by the Supremes, right?"

Mickey leaned back, giving Ian a little glare that morphed into a wide smile. He chuckled, pulling Ian into another kiss. "Fuck you, Gallagher."

Chapter End Notes

i can't believe this is the end. i'm literally heartbroken.

thank you so much to all of you that came along for this journey with me. i just had to give mick & ian a happy ending. i'm sure a lot of you can relate to that.

i'm not done. gallavich still holds a special place in my heart. and even though everyone says this ship is sinking, i'm not giving up. like those musicians on the Titanic, that played until the very last moment. if we're all going down, i'm going down playing.....

End Notes

so.... i've just started writing again after a years-long sabbatical brought on by unexpected life issues and near death experiences. but after writing the first part of this series, i was reminded that writing is still very cathartic for me, and also very helpful to my brain damaged mind. almost makes me feel 'normal' again. whatever that means. so here we go.....

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!