If you ask Mike, he's not lonely. Not at all. Don't listen to the bullshit his best friend says. He's fine as he is, with lesser ties. After all, they're hard to maintain, despite how easy it is to create one. It's hard enough stay connected with the few contacts he already has.

But when he somehow has the misfortune of having Chester Bennington as a roommate, all hell breaks loose.

[Told in three different parts.]
Yeah, I know. Another new story when I haven't finished my other one. But I have to admit, I'm a little burned out by that so I'm sorry to those who are waiting for an update on it!!! I'll get to it eventually, don't worry!!!

I had this idea for a while now so why not write it down? I plan for it to be in three parts, each consisting of several chapters, which means the romance is gonna be a slow burn haha. Don't know if it'll be a good idea to make it long considering my busy life but the idea won't stop bugging me haha.

Anyway, hope you guys enjoy!!! And I hope everybody is having a great new year so far!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Mike's almost about to publish the Craigslist advertisement when Brad calls. He tucks the phone between his left cheek and shoulder as he flips a nearby book open absentmindedly. It's an encyclopedia, one which he doesn't even remember owning.

"So, remember what I told you?" Brad starts as a way of greeting.

"Told me what?" Mike flippantly asks as he scans through a page about dinosaurs. Judging by the simple grammar and simple visuals, it's a children's encyclopedia. “And it’s one in the morning. Why are you even up?”

“I have papers to deal with. And I need to tell you something before it slipped my mind.”

“Couldn’t it wait ‘til tomorrow?” Mike proposes, flipping to the next page, which displays the fastest animals based on land, water, and air.

Why did he even buy this in the first place? Why in the world would he even need an encyclopedia when he has the Internet, let alone a children’s one. It’s definitely not the one he owned during his childhood. This encyclopedia is good as new. Heck, there’s a receipt slipped between a couple of pages, dating back to last Sunday.

He definitely doesn’t remember buying any sort of encyclopedia last Sunday.

“Like I said, I need to tell you this before I forget. So remember I was egging you for being a shut-
"Uh huh." Mike skims through several pages, setting his sights on a couple of images he really does not need to see.

It’s about animal reproduction, which he doesn’t actually have a problem with. After all, it’s natural and way of life or some stupid shit like that.

But it’s an explicit illustration of two tree frogs fucking each other. Next to them is a similar-looking frog, releasing what looks like eggs into a pond.

Ew, what the fuck?

Thankfully, it’s only a cartoon and not a picture of real frogs and eggs but what the fuck?

He slams the book shut with a loud thud.

To think it’s a children’s encyclopedia too.

“And I was telling you that you’ll probably die sad and depressed thinking about how you hardly have friends?” Brad continues.

“Yeah?”

“And I thought you should get a roomie?”

“Yup.”

"And—"

Oh for god’s sake.

"Will you get to the point?" Mike snaps aloud.

He receives a snicker as a reply. "What's got up your ass?"

Mike rolls his eyes. If Brad doesn’t spit out whatever he has to say, he’s going to hang up on him right this instance. And Brad hates being hung up on.

But whatever. Childhood friends and wrath be damned.

"I'm not in the mood for games. It's one in the morning and I've been editing my ad for a couple hours now and I just graded loads of artwork so if you could just get to the point, you'd be doing me and my shitty mood a huge favour."

"God, Mike, fucking chill. I was just teasing. Should I call you back.tom—? Wait did you say "ad"?"

He feels his cheeks warm. Mike doesn’t even know why he did what he did. Maybe it’s because he had a couple of beers and figured hey, why the fuck not?

It’s definitely not because he’s lonely. Nope. No sirree. Not at all.

Judging by Brad’s bright tone, Mike knows what’s coming. Because Brad is nothing but predictable. “Yes, Delson. I know what you’re gonna say.”
“And that is…?”

Mike sighs again. “MIKEY boy,” he begins, molding his voice to sound like his idiotic friend. “I told you so.”

“Exactly.”

“Fuck you.”

“You love me.”

“Not anymore.”

“You’re breaking my heart.”

“That’s the goal.”

"Okay, okay, chill man. I’m just fucking with ya." Brad huffs. “You’re no fun anymore.”

Despite it being a light-hearted jab, there’s some truth to Brad’s words. No longer does anybody bother hanging around him freely, be it his co-workers or his students. He hates how that everytime he walks into the office or his class, everybody ceases their conversations. Months ago people would flock to him, seeking his company.

Now, he’s the asshole nobody wants around.

But whatever. They can do whatever the hell they want. It doesn’t bother him. Not in the slightest.

Mike chews his bottom lip as he scans through the paragraph he written. His friend doesn’t say a word for the next several seconds. He doubts it’s because his intimidation technique worked. They’ve known each other far too long to be afraid of one another. “Well?”

“Chill man, Jesus. I was grabbing my coffee. Remind me not to call you in the middle of the night.” He hears a sharp intake of breath. “Okay, so Dave was telling me last night that a friend of his plans to move down here.” Brad lulls, most likely for dramatic effect. “Thing is, he doesn’t have a place to stay at.”

Ah, he gets it.

Mike may be a lowly art major, but he’s not stupid. He knows his best friend well enough to know that he’s being set up. Brad’s strong suit is never subtlety.

If only his best friend would be as attentive to his wife as he is to Mike’s friendship/love life.

“So you want me to take him in.”

“Well...I mean, he insists to pay you for rent. So it’s not a charity case thing.”

Mike inhales deeply. “Brad, we talked about this.”

“Talked about what?”

“You know what.”

“Dude, you won’t see him often. He’s gonna be working down at Dave’s bar. So you probably would miss him most of the time anyway.”
“If that’s the case, why can’t Dave take him in?”

“You know why.”

Ugh, of course Mike knows what that means. Dave's married. Of course it’ll be weird to have your friend, wife and kids staying under one roof.

Mike wipes his face with his free palm. “Fine. I'll think about it.”

And not because whatever Brad said is true. He’s only doing it so Brad can leave him alone and Mike could finally delete the unpublished advertisement and get some shuteye.

"Great, great! Take all the time you need! The dude’s only coming by next week anyway,” Brad exclaims, sounding relieved. “Though there's a slight problem.”

"What?"

A pause. "You don't mind if he smokes, do you?"

Mike could only muster a heavy sigh.

Thing is, Mike minds. A lot.

That’s one of his pet peeves — smoking. He loathes it — the toxic smog that wafts through the air needlessly, poisoning the smoker and the people around them. The fact that people even have “smoke breaks” in the need of purging habits and cravings blows his mind. If anybody felt stressed out, why don’t they just try hitting the gym, or paint or anything that doesn’t involve polluting their surroundings?

But Brad is a persistent little shit as always and Mike caves in after a week of hounding.

“Just tell Dave to bring him around tomorrow morning,” he tells him as he wades through the thick Friday crowd, people trudging back home after a long day of work. “We’ll see from there.”

“It’s not a sure thing, is it?”

Mike shrugs but then remembers Brad is on the other side of town cooped up in an office and not walking next to him. “Yeah, guess so. But just tell Dave, alright?”

“Sure, sure.”

Mike pockets his phone after hanging up before quickening his pace, eager to be home.

If it does work out (which Mike doubts, honestly), he supposes he could lay some ground rules,
maybe tell the guy to smoke outside before coming in. Sure there might still be a hint of the stench but it’s better than nothing. Mike plans to steer clear of the guy anyway. Or maybe he’d crack a window open. If that sort of thing work.

It’ll be weird sharing the same space with somebody else again. He’s gone on living alone for so long that he forgot what it’s like to hear the soft footfalls of another, the pounding of the shower next door, the sight of different pairs of shoes next to his.

But that’s the least of his worries. Truth to be told, Mike doesn’t do socialization.

Well, not anymore. He’s not an introvert by any means. He likes being around people, striking conversations about different topics and gathering various viewpoints. It's vitalizing in a way.

But lately, conversations doesn't have the same spark. Every time he’s around people, needing to exchange words, the urge to crawl under the covers spikes up. He blames it on his work, which has been sapping his energy nowadays. Not only does he have mountains of artwork to grade, he's also the teacher-in-charge of helming a mini art exhibition with his students. Today is one of the rare days that he has the luxury of heading home early.

Bottom line is, Mike doesn’t have time to make connections with other people, let alone exchange a couple sentences on his own accord. It’s already hard enough to maintain constant contact with the few friends he already has at the moment. So why would he go out of his way to make his already difficult life more stressful?

He knows Brad worries about him, lecturing him on his hermit-like tendencies on a regular basis. But he can’t help what he feels, right?

Despite Brad’s good intentions, he goes a little overboard. Or way too much. Hell, the man is constantly checking in on him like a clingy mother. It may be endearing surface-wise, it’s smothering in reality. It’s a wonder that he has time to juggle both babysitting Mike, having a family, and his career. If only Mike could possess his multitasking skills.

And speaking of multitasking skills, he should stop thinking about stuff like this when he’s walking because, fuck he just collided with something solid.

The impact doesn’t send Mike reeling or landing on his ass. But his shirt suddenly feels wet and warm and the man in front of him is just gawking at him with a cup in hand, little brown puddles pooling beneath their feet.

And Mike shouldn’t be staring at him with his mind blank, fuck, because this random guy just spilled steaming coffee all over his shirt. Fortunately, it's not a shirt he’d miss, a worn-out striped dress shirt he got as a gift a year back.

But anyway, why isn’t there a lid covering the rim of that paper cup? Who in their right mind doesn’t seal their cups? The barista should be sued.

The guy doesn’t say anything either, just gapes openly. Their eyes meet for a moment. They’re a warm chocolate. Mike immediately averts them.

“Fuck,” the guy spits out.

Mike wants to slap him. Mike wants to run away. Mike wants the world to swallow him whole.

This is bad. Very, very bad. He doesn’t know why he thinks it’s bad though. It's just a little mishap after all. Probably because neither of them is saying anything or moving a muscle and heck, this must
look really weird to passer-bys.

Seriously, why can’t his fucking legs move?

“Fuck,” the guy repeats. “I didn’t see—I’m sorry I wasn’t paying attention. I— Uh—”

As if by magic, Mike finds the energy in him to work his jaw. “It’s fine. I’m okay.”

But the man has set his empty cup on top of a conveniently-placed post box and is now rummaging through his messenger bag. Pulling out a handful of paper napkins, he thrusts them into Mike’s hands. “Here, use these.”

This gives him the opportunity to admire the guy’s arms. They’re covered in inked flames of varying hues. Mike stifles a moan. He always has a weakness for pretty colours and—

Wait, why is he thinking this? What’s happening again?

Oh right.

“No, no, I’m fine,” Mike says, pushing the napkins away. It’s my fault. I wasn't paying atten—”

“No, it isn’t,” the guy counters, shoving them back into Mike’s hands. “You’re covered in coffee and I’m a total idiot and I probably burned you and—”

This is getting ridiculous, Mike thinks. Because really, they’re having a napkin tug-of-war in the middle of the pavement, and his shirt reeks of coffee and everybody is staring at them and oh god—

“Hey,” Mike interrupts him, more firmly this time. His fingers clamp themselves around both of the guy’s wrists. “It’s okay.”

He falters, his dark gaze flickering up to meet Mike’s. He turns away in response.

“I’m really, really sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

He moves to rub the back of his neck, gesturing to Mike’s body with his other hand. “I— Uh— I hope that isn’t your favourite shirt.”

Mike arches an eyebrow before shrugging. “Nah. Blue isn’t my colour. Or stripes. I mean, I like the colour but stripes never suited me. My brother got this for me last year. Never came around to wear it. I didn’t have anything nice to wear so I thought, “Hey, why don’t I wear this?” He has shitty taste in clothing, you know?”

Mike Shinoda, what in god’s name are you fucking babbling about?

So much for hating conversation.

A chuckle escapes the guy's lips. “I’m sure he has good intentions, despite his lack of, uh...fashion sense.”

Mike snorts. “Jason? Good intentions? If only you knew.”

Shut up, Mike. Just shut up now before you embarrass yourself further.

The guy lets out another breathy laugh and his eyes find Mike’s again. It’s not those brown orbs that
unnerves him. It’s that smile of his, the way the guy’s looking at him like he’s the sun peeking behind grey clouds or the stars guiding him home. It’s weird.

Very weird. The whole situation is weird. And awkward.

Which means, it's time to bail.

“Um, I got to go,” Mike mutters under his breath, before dashing off.

He doesn’t know if the guy is calling or chasing after him. He doesn’t want to know. All he wants is to lock himself in the confinements of his apartment and never leave and all he knows is that his brain has short-circuited and his heart's hammering against his chest.

Mike doesn’t stop moving until he’s right outside his front door. A quiet Japanese curse slips from his lips as he fumbles for his house key in his pants’ pockets.

“Ah ha!” he whispers to himself as he slips it through the keyhole, turning before bursting inside.

Finally. Sanctuary.

Sanctuary until tomorrow, that is. Maybe. If things doesn't go well. Or well.

“Fuck,” Mike groans to himself, roughly unbuttoning his ruined shirt. He doesn’t know whether it’s due to the idea of having somebody living with him or the awkward situation he was in. Probably both.

What he needs now is a shower.

An image of deep brown eyes, white teeth, and flaming tattoos flashes in his mind. He immediately purges it with the thought of frogs fucking, which is probably not the best course of action because ew.

Now, this is why he doesn’t do socialization.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact, one of my Science textbooks in secondary (high) school actually had pictures of those frogs. Safe to say, I was traumatized. XD
Thank you all for the nice reviews! It means a lot to me and helps me going! I'm glad that people seem to like this so far. Hopefully this chapter is also up to par!

In all honesty, Mike doesn’t know Dave Farrell well. Heck, he could count the number of times they’ve met with his fingers. The last time Mike saw him was four months ago most likely.

From the limited knowledge he has, Dave and Brad were roommates during their college years, remaining friends to this day. Some people call him 'Phoenix' for some ungodly reason. He’s married with a couple of kids and owns the third nearest bar from Mike’s place. He’s been there before. It’s a little quaint place. Rustic but charming.

So it makes sense that since he hardly knows the guy, he doesn’t have his number.

Which in turn makes better sense to meet up at Starbucks instead of his place. If things doesn’t work out, Mike doesn’t need strangers knowing where his place is and what looks like. He doesn’t care that Dave and Brad go way back. For all he knows, this potential roommate of his could be secretly a deranged sociopath.

“I’ll text Dave’s number to you,” Brad offers over the phone as Mike jots down his overdue grocery list. “I mean, I called Dave already so they’ll be by soon. Promise me you’ll play nice.”

Mike shakes his head, bringing the mug to his lips. His friend needs to stop babying him and pay attention to his own self because really, he’s forty years old for fuck’s sake. “I do play nice. I’m a nice guy. What makes you think otherwise?”

“Lots of reasons. Your inclination to sarcasm, for one.”

“My tendency to resort to sarcasm is to combat idiocy like yours, Delson.”

“You’re a riot, Shinoda.”

“Ain’t that the truth. And don’t you forget it.”

Brad snorts. “But seriously though, please be nice and not go all Hulk on them.”

Mike rolls his eyes. “Yes, mother. Anything else you need me to do? Should I take out the trash while I’m at it?”
“As a matter of fact, yes, son. The girls have been tracking mud into the house again. I need you to mop the tracks up for me.”

Mike’s about to throw another retort when he hears the bell at the door ring. He cranes his neck to get a better look. In walks two men, one resembling what seems to be Dave. His flaming mane is a definite standout from all the other blonds and brunettes. But the other guy, in a white V-neck and a beanie propped on top of his head…

The other.

Mike swears his eyes also bulged out from their sockets. Because what the fuck?

Why is he doing here?

It can’t be him. Oh no. Oh no...

“Um Brad,” Mike starts, wincing at his change of tone. “I’m gonna have to call you back.”

“They’re here?”

Mike glances back up, meeting Dave’s waving hand. The guy next to him has his head tilt to the side, his eyebrows knitted at Mike.

Oh fuck, here goes nothing. The moment of truth, the moment he’s been dreading since yesterday.

“Yeah, talk to you later.”

He hangs up before Brad could bid his own goodbyes, motioning to stand as the two men approach him.

“Hey, Mike,” Dave greets him with a polite smile and handshake. “Sorry for dragging you out here today.”

“It’s fine,” Mike insincerely replies because it is troubling him and of all the shear luck in the world, he gets him. Because of course, the whole world is out to fuck him over for all the shitty things he’s done in his life.

Thanks a lot, Brad.

Hopefully, the guy doesn’t recognise him. Though judging by his sudden grin, Mike doubts it. So he better not breathe a word out loud about yesterday because Mike really wants to forget all about it.

“Ches,” Dave begins. “This is Mike. I—”

“Yeah, we’ve met,” the guy cuts in. Never has Mike wanted to wipe a grin off somebody so badly. “I mean, we don’t know each other’s names but yeah, we know each other.”

Mike resists the urge to bang his head on the table. Of course the dude isn’t smart enough to keep their mouths shut.

Just great.

Dave’s eyes flicker between the two of them in puzzlement. “You two know each other?”

“Remember what I told you yesterday?”
Apparently Mr Spill-My-Coffee is a blabbermouth. Just fucking great. Just what Mike needs. He could easily imagine what he must have said.

*Hey, so you know. I accidentally spilt hot coffee over this klutzy dumbass who was floundering around like a dying fish. Like the guy was such a fucking weirdo!*

Well, maybe not. But still possible.

But if this reaches Brad’s ears, Mike’ll never hear the end of it.

Fortunately, Dave doesn’t laugh or make fun of Mike, which earns him brownie points in Mike’s eyes. “Oh, right. Huh. What a small world.”

Mike wholeheartedly agrees.

Several short seconds pass without anybody saying anything. Finally, Dave nudges his friend in the ribs, jolting him. His disinterested gaze dart from the short queue to Mike’s face. Plastering a respectful smile, he holds out a hand. “Chester. Chester Bennington.”

Mike meets him halfway. Despite his lithe frame, Chester’s grip is like titanium. He gives their intertwined hands a couple of brief pumps. Mike makes a mental note to never end up competing against him in an arm-wrestling competition should there ever be one.

“Mike Shinoda.”

Nodding in approval at their unclasped hands, Dave sneaks a glimpse at his wristwatch. “Hey, so stock’s coming in soon so I gotta hustle over to the bar now.” He throws an apologetic look at Mike. “Sorry to trouble you.”

Mike feels his body stiffen. While he doesn't know Dave well enough to be truly comfortable around, his presence would be a welcoming presence while both Chester and him interrogate each other. Just in case things get out of hand.

Dave claps Chester on the back. “And Mike, could you drop Chester off at the bar when you guys are done? He’s still new to the neighbourhood.”

“Phe,” Chester chides, sounding offended. “I can get make my way back just fine.”

Dave snorts. “Yeah, sure. And I’m the King of England. Your spatial knowledge has always been the worst.”

“I’ve gotten better!” Chester pauses, adjusting the glasses perched on the bridge of his nose. “Sorta.”

Mike carelessly lets a snicker slips his lips before quickly shutting his mouth. The last thing he needs is for Mr Strong Guy to pummel him for laughing at the wrong time, a horrible habit of his.

Chester’s attention is back on him immediately. For a moment, Mike figures he’d glare or call him out but Chester grins back at him.

Not a bad start. Or an adequate continuation from their bad start that was yesterday. Better than yesterday whichever the case.

“Oh huh, sure.” Dave turns to Mike with another rueful look. “But is it okay with you? Really sorry for troubling you like this. Don’t worry about Chester. He’s a good guy and definitely not a psychopathic murderer. If he secretly is, you can blame this all on Brad, not me.”
Chester huffs. “Dude, he can’t blame it on you if he’s already dead.”

“True… That’s why I need you to behave.”

“I’m a good boy!” Chester protests. “Just you wait and see. Mikey here would be singing my praises.”

Singing his praises? That’s way too soon to happen. But he’s not going to say that out loud.

Also, the nickname. Mike needs to remember to tell him not to call him that.

“Behave,” Dave half-heartedly reprimands before waving farewell to the both of them. Both men watch the redhead stride through the door frame, the door melodically shutting behind him.

And with that, brings the awkwardness.

Mike shoves his hands in his jeans' pockets, gazing out of the window next to him.

Chester clears his throat. “So, uh… How’s the shirt?”

“Eh, I threw it away. It wasn't salvageable.”

"I'm really sorry about that."

"It's okay."

“I could get you another one,” Chester offers.

Mike shakes his head. “It’s fine.” It’s then he realises that they’re still standing at a table in a Starbucks since Dave and Chester walked in, saved for everybody but the baristas and the queuing customers. “Um, you wanna order something first? Before we start?”

Chester throws another quick look at the counter. “Yeah, I think I will. One sec.”

Truthfully, it has been a while since he had a roommate. The last one was Brad before he got himself married. And before that was Joe Hahn back in college, who he was paired to share a dorm with. Both times were fine. Brad was his best friend so it was a given things would turn out great. He got on well with Joe, mostly due to their love for art and the classes they shared.

But Mike never sought for a roommate after, having slowly embracing the peaceful solitude that
came with living alone. He never knew how to actually interview somebody to live with him. Like, what is he supposed to say?

_Hey, what do you think about sharing an apartment with a walking disaster who is doing this mostly against his will, only goes grocery shopping every fortnight and comes home at weird hours at night?_

Luckily for him, Chester seems to have done this quite several times before. He brings up a vital topic that Mike forgot to give a good thought about since he was too busy frantically panicking about living with somebody again.

“So,” Chester begins as he unceremoniously dumps himself onto the chair opposite Mike, setting down his drink in the process. “Lay out the rules for me.”

“Rules?”

He waves his hand around, gesturing to nothing in particular. “You know, like what I’m allowed and not allowed to do. Lifestyle choices? Stuff like that?” Another smirk. Mike doesn’t know whether to be offended or not. “Heard you’re quite the uptight guy.”

Mike frowns. “What?”

Chester shrugs his shoulders. “Phe told me that you’re pretty uptight about stuff, especially when it came to your apartment.”

Phe?

Oh right. ‘Phe’ as in ‘Phoenix’.

“And he knows this...how?”

“Um, think he said a mutual friend told him?”

Mike almost facepalms right there and then. Figures Brad would say something dumb like that to tarnish and embarrass him further.

And Brad calls him his best friend.

“I’m not uptight!” Mike says hotly. He glances away from Chester’s smirk, feeling a blush creep up his neck. “I just like my place, uh, in a tidy fashion.”

“That’s what an uptight person would say.”

Gone is the bashfulness Mike associated to the guy who split coffee all over him. Now all he sees is a nuisance.

If things does end up going Chester’s way, Mike hopes he doesn’t see him too often. God knows if he can take this any longer.

Which is weird because once upon a time, Mike could give Chester a run for his money in terms of being chatty and annoying.

Guess age does get the better of you, he supposes.

“Uh well… You smoke right?”
Chester nods. “Don’t worry about it. I can smoke outside or at the balcony if you’re not into that kind of thing. If that’s okay with you.”

Relief washes over Mike. Maybe he’s overthinking this. Maybe it won’t be so bad, albeit his potential roommate being a total loon. As long as there’s compromise.

“Yeah, that’s fine with me.”

“What else?”

“Um…” Mike runs through his list of habits. He never gave them much of a thought before. “Well I usually take off my shoes at the door.” He quickly adds, “I don’t know if you do that kind of thing but if you could do that too, that’ll be great.”

Much to Mike’s surprise, Chester nods in approval. “Huh, I do it too. I hate how people prance around in their muddy ass shoes. Like fuck, they even lie in them! Even if they ran around in the mud!”

“I know right!” Mike agrees. “Like aren’t you people supposed to sleep on the freaking bed!”

Chester shakes his head. “Idiots, am I right?”

“Definitely.”

One thing they have in common, a big rule in Mike’s mental book too. That's good.

“Okay. But what about people?”

Mike’s ears perk up. “What about people?”

“Can I bring them over?”

“Define people.”

Chester’s lips quirk to the side. “You know…people.”

Mike’s brow furrows. Because what people? What kind of people is he talking about? Who would he be—

Oh.

Huh.

Those kind of people.

He doesn’t want to hear the passionate moans vibrating the apartment or the furious creak of the bed. He doesn’t want to be the unfortunate audience to an awkward goodbye between one-time lovers. He doesn’t need that at all in his life.

“No,” Mike says firmly. “You wanna do…that, you go to their place, not here.”

Chester’s grin doesn’t fade. “What about you?”

“I never bring anybody for sex over.”

“Didn’t know you’re such a stick-in-the-mud,” observes Chester.
“Well I’m not the one being juvenile right now,” Mike snaps in return.

Just when things were going great, the dude had to prove to be such a...such a...

Something flashes over Chester’s face but it vanishes before Mike could register what it is, his trademark grin in its place. Mike must’ve imagined it.

*Anger*, his inner voice proposes.

Maybe. If it was, fuck, there he goes again being an asshole.

Before Mike could apologize, Chester nervously chuckles. “Just kidding. I don’t do that kind of thing anymore anyway. What I meant ‘people’ as in ‘friends’.”

Mike’s irritation level slightly diminishes, shame settling in. “Oh,” he says sheepishly. “I guess that’s fine. Just let me know if it’s a big group.”

*So I can mentally prepare myself or lock myself up somewhere.*

“Nah, it’ll probably just be Dave and like another friend. Don’t know anybody else here yet. Only been here for a couple of days.” Chester slurps his coffee noisily. Mike never found such a sound both annoying and endearing at the same time. “So, any cleaning habits I need to be aware about?”

As minutes pass and conversations shift, Mike’s perspective on Chester Bennington shifts, from an immature chatterbox on acid to something between the lines of a golden retriever whose mouth is sewn to make it smile all the time.

Besides that stupid analogy, they share similar cleaning habits and enough interests to avoid bumping heads, which lifts the weight off his shoulders. Maybe they’ll get along just fine.

But the icing on the cake is that Chester isn’t on the run from the police or the FBI or any of the sort. According to Chester anyway.

“Just need to sort some stuff in my life. Dave offered a job at the bar while I do it.

“What would that stuff be? If you don’t mind me asking.”

Chester fingers one of his many wristbands, his eyes trained on the passer-bys outside. “I used to teach literature at a high school back in Arizona. But...I guess I burned out? I don’t know. Couldn’t
find a reason why I wanted to keep teaching. So I quit and decided a change of scenery would be
good to help me decide whether I wanna go back to teaching.”

A fellow teacher like him. Another aspect on the many common ground they share.

Mike sighs. “I know what you mean. I teach fine art at the high school here. I swear I feel like giving
up on it sometimes. It gets draining.”

Chester shifts his sights back on Mike, leaning forward. And there is those piercing set of brown
eyes. “I hear a ‘but’.”

Mike blinks. He didn’t think his voice echoes a ‘but’. Hell, he didn’t even think he was dissatisfied
with his job. Art has always been his life and he loves sharing his viewpoints, helping shed light on
its beauty to aspiring students like he was back in the day.

Nowadays, he can’t freely admit that he’s still in love with his job as he could before. After all,
people think he’s such a pisspot nowadays, no thanks to his workload.

It’s an interesting thought and something Mike might pursue one day. But now?

“I don’t know.” He smiles uneasily. “I don’t think I found my ‘but’ yet.”

“I’m sure it’ll come to you soon.” Chester Sneaks a glance at his phone. “Oh yeah, one more thing
before we finish up. I think we're almost done. But yeah, about the rent.”

Oh right. That was the one Mike gave a good thought about.

“Yeah, I thought of not making you pay rent. And before you feel bad about yourself,” Mike
promptly follows up before Chester could protest. “I thought it’ll be easier if we split the bills. That
way we have equal footing.”

“Yeah, yeah. That’ll be great.” Chester’s grin morphs into a more sincere one, similar to the one he
showed Mike the day before. Like yesterday, it unnerves him. “I really appreciate you considering
letting me stay with you. Despite yesterday.”

Now, Mike feels awful for having bad thoughts of the guy and giving him a hard time. Here’s
Chester who just wants a place to stay and actually being inoffensive as a whole and Mike is being
an overly sensitive asshole who just did it all for Brad's sake.

He should apologize, explain why he’s been acting the way he’s been.

But all he could do is manage a “Yeah.”

They dissolve into an awkward silence again. Mike is about to cut the whole meeting short because
he really can’t deal with awkwardness when Chester fractures it.

“Oh yeah, I need your number. I mean as much as this has been great, I wanna give this a good
thought over the next few days. And you can think about whether you want me around too. So we
don’t make rash decisions.” Chester pauses. “Damn, I sound so rational.”

“Lucky you,” Mike drily puts, reaching out for Chester’s phone. He won’t lie that while he’s glad
it’s not a sure thing this whole roommate shit is happening, Chester would be an interesting person to
hang out with.

If he actually has the time.
Chester wiggles his eyebrows as Mike punches his number. “So, if I gave you a booty call—?”

Rolling his eyes, Mike hands the phone back to Chester. “You wish.”

“What, a man can dream, can’t he?”

Mike shakes his head in badly disguised amusement before rising to his feet.

Maybe things won’t be so bad. Maybe Brad’s right. Having somebody new in his life won’t kill him.

Not that he’ll ever admit to him, lest he risks Brad calling him up every hour, cooing ‘I told you so’s’ down the line.

That’s the last thing he needs right now.
Hey there! So life has been coming back to wreck me so updates may take a while. Really sorry! But your reviews are really encouraging! Anyway, hope y'all like this chapter too!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chester doesn't call him the next day. Or the next.

In fact, he doesn't call back for the next five days.

This predicament leaves Mike feeling torn because on one hand, that’s good. He still has the place all to himself. He doesn’t need to share his space with somebody else.

But on the other end, he feels guilty. Chester seemed enthusiastic of being his roommate. And he seems like a nice guy. A little childish, a motor mouth. Also annoying. But Mike supposes he could handle him. Hell, all his friends are about as annoying as him. He has experience.

And then there’s the small part of him that wants Chester to just fucking decide and hell, shouldn’t Mike be calling the shots here? Why is he waiting for an answer when Mike could put his foot down and not be dragged around in circles? He owns the place after all.

In spite of it all, Chester Bennington intrigues him — his reasons for running, who he is as a person, what moulds him into being who he is today.

Not to mention that he’s Mike Shinoda and he wouldn’t be Mike Shinoda if he isn't a curious motherfucker.

But work after work keeps piling up and deadlines draw near and Mike soon forgets the man with the Cheshire grin and the flaming tattoos.
“I think this shade of pink offsets the orange better,” Mike tells Albert Castillo during one of his Wednesday classes. Picking up the small tube, he waves it in front of the half-painted sunset his student had created. “I mean, the pastel shade isn’t bad. You could blend it with this. It’s just that it’s… What kind of vibe are you going for?”

Albert doesn’t reply, only shyly looks up at Mike, who stifles a sigh. The boy was one of the meekest students he ever had. He hardly interact with his peers. Hell, he’s heard five sentences spill out of Albert’s mouth throughout the past six months. But the boy has a good eye for detail. It’s always the quiet ones.

“Um,” Albert squeaks. “I was… I think… A calm sunset? Like…” The boy gestures wildly, narrowly avoiding slapping Mike’s cheek. “Like— Like… Uh…”

"Hey, I just met you, and this is crazy. But here's my number—"

The majority of the class burst into fits of giggles. Even a small smile graces Albert’s lips.

Note to self, remember to mute the phone. This is the fifth time this has happened.

“Nice ringtone, Mr Shinoda!” calls Jacob Whitmore, the ever fearless star quarterback from the back of the class. “Didn’t know you’re into bubblegum pop!”

Grudgingly, Mike gives him credit when it’s due. During the time of year when Mike Shinoda the Art teacher is feared by students, there’s people like Jacob who’re bold enough to tread the fine line of bantering and being downright rude.

Frankly, he misses the banter. Maybe if he wasn’t so stressed out over work, he’d actually try to be nice to his students.

“Hilarious, Mr Whitmore. It’s still better than what you call music.”

“Hey,” Jacob says defensively. “Gucci Gang is an iconic tune.”

Gucci Gang? Iconic? Over Carly Rae Jepsen?

Fuck no.

“If you actually think saying ‘Gucci Gang’ twenty times in a row over a cheap beat makes it a tune, let alone, ‘iconic’,” Mike shoots back amidst Carly Rae Jepsen’s begging. “I think you may want to consider your music choices in general.”

Several snickers erupt from different directions. Jacob blinks rapidly, a look of surprise etched on his face before it morphs into a thoughtful look.

Hopefully that means Mike wouldn’t be receiving any complaints from whiny parents.

Triumphant (which is quite stupid considering how it was a squabble about his ringtone ), Mike informs the class that he’ll be taking the call before stepping outside. Knowing these bunch, thirty percent of the class would actually listen to him, forty-five would whip up their phones and start scrolling, twenty percent would start talking to one another, and the remaining five would either start a paint fight or throw a frisbee around.
Since it’s oil painting week, the former is most likely to happen.

Considering it’s in the middle of the last period, the hallways are empty, which makes Mike feel a little better when his ringtone goes off for the second time. What piques his curiosity more, it’s a number he’s unfamiliar with. Whoever the caller is, they’re a persistent one.

“Hello?”

An unmistakably sweet voice greets his ears. “Missed me?”

His phone almost slips out of his grasp. It’s him.

It’s Chester.

About damn time.

Mike knows he should be polite at the very least but he can’t stop himself from biting a sardonic reply. “Most definitely. Every minute, every hour of every day.”

“Are you always this sarcastic?”

And are you always this annoying? is what Mike wants to tell him, which is awfully rude (but typical) of him. Instead, he says, “Hey, sarcasm is an excellent and unappreciated form of art.”

“For assholes,” Chester notes.

“Like me. Thank you for solidifying an already established fact.”

Chester chortles. “With an attitude like that, I may be reevaluating my choice.”

Mike’s heart skips a beat. “Choice?”

“You know… To give you a chance, see your place, whatever. For a teacher, you sure are dumb.”

“Well, I do teach art.”

Chester scoffs. “That’s a dumb stereotype. But then again, you just went against the stereotype that teachers are know-it-alls. But it’s okay, you’re still hot so it’s all fine and dandy.”

Mike feels his cheeks begin heating up. Though Chester’s flirtation is one of the most basic flirts known to man, somehow it has some effect of Mike.

He really needs to talk to people more often.

“Uh huh.” He lifts his arm to eye-level, giving his watch a once-over. Twenty-eight more minutes before the school day ends. “So when do you wanna see the place?”

“Is today at six fine with you? I gotta head to work at seven.”

Mike rifles through his mental schedule. He has to oversee the Art Club right after the last period, and a couple of consultations with anxiety-riddled students about the upcoming exhibition. He could probably squeeze in a quick tour of his place.

Might as well get it over and done with.

“Yeah, today’s fine.”
“Great!” Chester exclaims and Mike’s guilt surfaces for the moment. The guy does seem excited to find a place. He shouldn’t be such a douchebag towards him. “Mind sending me the address?”

Mike contemplates requesting for Chester’s address instead. He could rush home quickly, grab his rust-bucket of a car, and drive over to Chester’s.

Just in case things doesn’t work out.

Fuck, when did he become such a paranoid?

“Oh, I’ll text it to you.”

“Cool, cool. See you then.”

Mike hangs up without another word, briskly sending the number his address. He knows he should have saved the contact number but there’s no point in that if things doesn’t work out.

The more he thinks about it, the more unsure he is of whether he wants the deal to fall through. In his mind, it sounds that he wants it to.

But there’s a part of him that’s...longing to have somebody in his life.

Ugh, that sounds so stupid, even if it was said inwardly.

Inhaling deeply, Mike turns around and returns inside. Unsurprisingly, his students are all abuzz, most of them having abandoned their artwork. And like he predicted, there’s a fraction of them hurling paint at each other. Though strangely, the whole class participates. The teacher in him is a little annoyed that they’re making a huge mess out of their immaturity.

But the Mike in him?

Now this is why he does this job, even if it goes against the definition of being a teacher. His students are not doing what they’re told to do after all.

But watching his students happily interact with one another, regardless of class, race, sexual orientation and the like, puts a smile on his face. It’s little things like these that makes him glad to be working in a place like this. It’s interactions like this that fuels him, that compels him to haul himself out of bed and face the day.

It’s been a while since he could actually say that he likes his job. Hell, it’s a thought that he never toyed with until Chester brought it up that day.

So...thanks to him?

“Hey!” Jacob yells, grabbing every student’s attention and Mike’s. He’s in the worst state of them all, his chestnut complexion caked in neon blue and purple. “Mr Shinoda is actually smiling! We did it, guys! We got him to fucking smile!”

Shrieks of joy and a chorus of whoops fill the room, thunderous applause backing them up. Even the introverts like Albert joined in.

It’s a sight to behold. Warmth spreads throughout his chest, a feeling he hasn’t felt in a long time.

But that doesn’t stop him from smacking half of the football team with detention. Hey, it may have been great and all but rules are rules.
By the time Mike reaches his building, it’s a minute to six. That means he’s not late, despite the growing crowd hustling up and down the pavement.

Thank god.

He was afraid he would be. Erika Chung had wailed about accidentally using mint green over spring green like she originally planned for around half an hour. Mike had to reassure her for another twenty minutes that the difference is hardly noticeable, even if Mike could tell a slight difference.

Obviously he didn’t tell her that. He probably would need another hour to calm her down.

The sound of an approaching car brings Mike back to reality. A shiny ebony Mazda pulls up in front of him. It’s a car he hasn’t seen around here, most likely an Uber rung by one of the tenants.

But wait.

He has seen this car. He could recognise Hello Kitty’s large face plastered on the side of the car anywhere.

A black Mazda with an oversized Hello Kitty sticker? That could only mean one person.

The driver, a woman with a pair of sunglasses and a large sun hat, winds down her car window. She sticks her head out of the window and does a double-take at him. “Shinoda?”

Yup, it’s definitely her. He can recognise that voice anywhere.

What a small world they live in.

“Talinda,” Mike notes coolly, hands shoved into his pants’ pockets. “Fancy seeing you here. So soon too.”

Talinda flashes her infamous pearly whites. Out of all of Mike’s coworkers, he likes Talinda best. She doesn’t take any shit from anybody, even the principal, which is a trait Mike wishes he could have. And while she can be a mouthy person, she knows when to keep her distance.

Not to mention she’s the only one in the faculty that could keep up with his sarcastic ass. That’s a big plus already.

“When Chester told me his potential roommate has a stick up his ass,” Talinda treads. “I had a feeling he meant you. I mean, he even said you had a nice ass. Which he isn’t wrong, by the way.”

Wait, what.
Ass? Chester said he has a nice ass? To Talinda of all people?

He’s never going to hear the end of it.

Before Mike could interject, another voice beats him to the punch.

“Tal,” it hisses. A head pokes out from Talinda’s side. Chester. “I don’t plan to be mashed potatoes today.”

“Please,” Talinda says offhandedly, turning her head to the side. “Shinoda only acts like a dick but deep down, he’s a huge softie.” She switches her attention back to Mike, moving her sunglasses down her nose. “Right, Shinoda?”

Mike completely disagrees but he doesn’t feel like arguing at the moment. After all, Talinda is a feisty one when it comes to debates. “Uh huh. Whatever you say, Bentley.”

Chester leans closer to Talinda, whispering in her ear with a sly grin. His eyes doesn't leave Mike's, which is a little unsettling.

Talinda jerks away, swatting him playfully. “¡No seas idiota!”

He withdraws further from Talinda, hands raised. “Solo digo.”

Rolling her eyes, she pushes her sunglasses further up the bridge of her nose. “Very funny. Now shoo! I need to get going.”

Chester plants a peck on her cheek before stepping out onto the sidewalk. “See ya.”

“¡Buena suerte!” she responds to Chester before adding to Mike, “See you tomorrow, Shinoda.” Talinda waves briefly at the both of them before zooming away.

As the sound of the engine fades into the distance, Chester shifts his body towards Mike, hand stretched out for a possible handshake. Unlike their last meeting, he’s donned a white T-shirt, displaying those tattoos Mike has taken a liking to. He could also detect a whiff of cologne and nicotine radiating from him.

“Hey man.”

Mike’s inclined to question him about what he told Talinda but lets it slide. “Hey,” he says, shaking his hand.

Chester palms his jeans over. But then he suddenly crosses his arms instead. “I guess you know Tal from work?”

“How’d you know that?”

“You told me you teach at the high school here. And there’s only one high school in the area.”

Mike’s tempted to slap himself hard across the cheek. “Oh yeah. Yeah, I did.” A nagging thought crosses his mind. It’s a weird thought, a strange question to ask somebody he knows but curiosity always gets the better of him.

“Um… Are you two…?”

Chester cocks an eyebrow. “Why?” he asks cheekily. “Afraid of making a move on a taken guy?”
“No,” Mike replies, a little too quickly for his taste. “Just wondering.”

Chester shakes his head. “Nah. I mean we did years before. But things didn’t work out and we decided being friends would be better.” His gaze trails over to the passing cars, as if lost in thought. “It’s funny how we’re way closer now than we were in a relationship.”

An unidentifiable sensation plants itself at the pits of Mike’s stomach. Maybe it’s envy, that Chester could share a close relationship with an ex without any hard feelings standing between them.

If only Mike was this amicable with his.

“I’ve been staying with her since I got here,” Chester continues. “I was supposed to stay with Dave at first but you know…wife and kids. I didn’t wanna intrude.”

Again, the power of curiosity overpowers Mike’s tact. He really needs to invest in a filter. “Why didn’t you continue staying with her?”

Mike expects Chester to flip out but all he does is shrug his shoulders. “I know we’re friends and all but…it just feels weird.” He waves a hand around. Fortunately for Mike, he doesn’t hit him in the face. “Like, I don’t know how to explain it but…it’s just weird.”

“I get it.”

Chester laughs. “No, you don’t.”

“Nope,” Mike agrees apathetically. “But I think I have some idea.”

While the building is twenty-two storeys tall, Mike’s apartment is situated at the end of the corridor of the second floor. That means a trip of several flights of stairs upwards in the rare case the elevator breaks down.

Which isn’t so bad. Sure, there’s more distance between the ground and his place but it’s better than having a place on the tenth floor. Mike never had been a fan of extreme heights.

Also, living at the very end means one less neighbour to worry about pissing off. Or pissing him off. But that next door neighbour his though? Well...

“Oooh, finally getting some?” Joe Hahn sniggers as he strolls down the corridor towards Mike and Chester.

“Don’t see you getting any either,” Mike counters, careening past his neighbour.
“Hey, I’m abstaining with you,” he hears Joe hoot from behind him. Mike rolls his eyes. “So if you’re getting laid, I’m going to start looking!”

Mike twists his body around to flip Joe off, receiving a boisterous laugh in response.

Like he noted earlier, what a small world they live in.

Chester glances over his shoulder. “He seems like a cool dude.”

“Don’t let that fool you. He’s a pain in the ass.”

“Like you?”

Mike ignores the jab, stabbing his thumb behind his shoulder instead. “That’s Joe, my next door neighbour. We used to go to college together. He’s harmless. But he can be an ass sometimes.”

“Huh. Small world.”

Indeed.

“So… You’re not getting some?”

...Oh for fuck’s sake.

Mike halts at his door, pulling out his key. “I’m not gonna answer that.”

He could hear the smile in Chester’s lilt. “That means ‘yes’.”

“That means ‘no comment’,” Mike defends, twisting the doorknob.

“That’s what they all say.”

Mike pushes the door open, revealing the inside of his prized home.

If Mike knew ahead of time, he would’ve tidied the place up a little. He swears he left the dishes in the sink, and there’s his denim jacket draped over the dining chair and his—

“What’s true?”

Chester begins pulling off his left sneaker, leaning against the wall next to him for support. “You’re a neat freak. But that’s good. Better than staying with a slob.”

Oh god. He’s so wrong. Can’t he see the dust bunny growing at the corner of the door? It’s fucking huge.

“It’s not that neat.” Mike reflects as he slips his feet out of his loafers. “I haven’t gotten around cleaning for the past week.”

Chester whistles lowly. “Can’t imagine what your definition of ‘clean’ is.”

A Brad-like response. Mike’s sure he’s done something terrible in his past life to be reincarnated into a life where people like Chester and Brad are constants.

“Just take off your other shoe so I can show you around.”
In the first place, Mike’s apartment isn’t that spacious. There’s enough space for two adults to live together without getting into each other’s hair. Except the bathroom, which they have to share. And maybe the PlayStation 4 too, which Chester animatedly questioned if he could use it.

The only place Mike doesn’t show him is the inside of his bedroom. He’s already opening up his little alcove of an apartment to a stranger. He doesn’t need to expose every part of him to him. It’s not necessary anyway.

He only vaguely gestures at his door, mumbling about it leading into his room. Much to his relief, Chester doesn’t press either.

“This would be your room,” he tells Chester, pushing the door open.

It’s as soulless as Mike recalls being. It’s a tiny room with a wooden-surfaced desk propped against one of the white walls, and a rolling chair tucked under it. A bed leans on the opposite of the desk, with a small bedside table next to it. There’s also a wardrobe pressed against a different wall. A sliding door built into the last wall leads out to a tiny balcony — the perfect place for Chester to smoke whenever he wishes.

“It’s...clean.” Chester runs a finger down the desk. “Mostly clean. And white.”

Mike rakes his hair with his fingers, slightly embarrassed. “Yeah. This is the guest room actually. The last time anybody stayed over was about five months ago.”

“Fuck buddy?” Chester proffers.

“Dude, we’d be staying in the same room if it was that.”

“True.” He steps over towards the sliding door, peering out at the bustling streets below. “Who was it then? If you don’t mind telling.”

Mike shrugs. “A friend.”

A friend meaning Brad Delson who got kicked out of his house after an intense argument with his wife. And despite silently agreeing with her, Mike is contractually obligated to house his furious friend for the night.

But Chester doesn’t need to know that.

“So...?”

Mike snaps out of his reverie. “So what?”
“Do you want me to? Move in. I mean, you are the owner so you call the shots.”

“Shouldn’t you figure out whether you wanna stay here?”

Chester spins on his heel, piercing Mike with his dark gaze. “Yeah, I mean…” He clears his throat. “I like the place. It’s nice. And you don’t seem like you’ll kill me in the middle of the night.”

“Thanks.”

“No problem.” Chester grins. Mike swears he’s practically bouncing on his feet. It’s a cute look. “Dude, you’re killing me with anticipation.”

Mike chews the bottom of his lip, half-disregarding him.

It feels like he’s gone through this already. Hell, he already has. It’s a thought that’s plagued him ever since that meeting in Starbucks.

Should he welcome this random person into his life? Would things change for the better with him around? Will things end in disaster?

_Goddamnit, Shinoda. You’re not asking him to fucking marry you. He’s just gonna live in the same place as you. That’s all. End of story._

Which in a twisted way holds a similar meaning but whatever.

Fuck, there’s only one way to find out.

He knows he’s going to regret this one day. Hell, he already does the moment he opens his mouth.

## Chapter End Notes

Songs mentioned in this chapter are: Call Me Maybe by Carly Rae Jepsen (do check out her album Emotion and Emotion: Side B if you're into 80s-influenced pop because her stuff is AMAZING. She's not just the "Call Me Maybe" girl.) and Gucci Gang by Lil Pump (this one...I don't recommend hahaha)

Translations (Hopefully they're correct. I don't know Spanish. I just got the phrases off Google so I apologize if they're wrong.):

¡No seas idiota!: Don't be an idiot!
Solo digo.: I'm just saying.
¡Buena suerte!: Good luck!
It’s been four days. And Mike doesn’t know what to make of Chester Bennington.

It’s not that he’s a bad roommate whatsoever. They haven’t been around each other long enough for Mike to make a conclusion (though that’s partially Mike’s fault). Even on the day Chester moved in, Mike was slaving away at work until late in the night.

Sure, he reeks of nicotine, booze, and sweat every time he returns from work, though Mike chalks it up to the bar (except maybe the former). It’s a trivial problem that can be solved with a shower. On the positive side, Chester doesn’t leave unwashed dishes in the sink, blare music in the middle of the night, or clothes strewn over the floor. It all’s good so far.

And then there’s Talinda and Chester.

To say he’s curious of their previous relationship is an understatement. For as long as Mike’s known Talinda, she’s never mentioned dating Chester or any Arizonan. Unlike him, Talinda isn't a private person. She’s pretty open with the guys and girls she's dated in the past, even to her students.

Or maybe she has mentioned Chester and it slipped Mike's mind. It's possible.

He could ask either one of them. But he doesn’t plan or incurring the wrath of Talinda Bentley and he hardly knows Chester. For all Mike knows, it’s a question that could end his life, be it by Talinda’s, Chester’s or both of their hands. And while his life isn’t that spectacular, he doesn’t plan on dying anytime soon. He still has grades to give out and an art exhibition to help organize and assess.

But all in all, Chester’s been decent so far. He could get on Mike’s nerves sometimes but he lets it slide. As long as he’s not an asshole, he’s cool with it all.

Though Chester’s most annoying trait?

Striking needless conversations.

Be it verbally or text messaging, he’s constantly hounding him with small talk for no particular reason. Mike tries his best to deflect them as nicely as he can.
“Hey man, how was work?”

His point exactly.

Mike lifts his head from his bowl of soggy cornflakes. Chester hovers over him, shoulders sagged. In that very moment, he looks at least five years older, with dark bags under his eyes. He definitely needs a good night’s sleep.

“Alright.”

“Nothing fun happened?”

Mike shrugs. “Not really.”

“Huh. Shit went down at the bar last night.” Chester pauses, possibly waiting for Mike to prompt him to continue. Mike doesn’t. “There were these two beefy biker dudes that got so drunk that they started singing *Kumbaya* at the top of their lungs.” Chester snickers. “It was amazing, you should’ve seen it. They got on top of the counter and tried to strip. They only got down when Phe threatened to call the cops.”

It wasn’t rib-tickling or anything of the sort but the story’s amusing enough to leave Mike’s lips quirked to the side. “Oh. Then shit didn’t go down at the bar.”

Chester raises an eyebrow. “What would you call it then?”

“Just...something good. ‘Shit’ would mean that something bad happened.”

“Didn’t know you teach English too.”

“Hey, *you’re* the ex-lit teacher,” Mike reminds.

“Lit doesn’t include grammar. And there’s an ‘ex’ for a reason.” Chester slips into the seat opposite him, his eyes trained on Mike’s bowl. “Hey, do you want to go and watch a movie later? Together?”

And there’s another of Chester’s trait. He won’t leave Mike alone, constantly pestering him with various ways to spend time together. This is his seventh attempt. Mike has turned down each and every one of them and this instance would be no exception.

They’re roommates for god’s sake, not friends. They’re not obligated to spend every waking moment with each other.

Besides, he’s not ready. Not yet.

Mike swirls his cereal with his spoon, ignoring the fact that his cornflakes are long past edible. “Don’t you have work tonight?”

“Yeah. But I meant around noon?”

Right then, Chester is flashing that smile that always leaves Mike feeling funny. He does it every time he pelts Mike with offers like these, like he’s aware of how much of a mess it leaves Mike in.

“I can’t, sorry,” Mike forces out of his mouth. “I have lunch with a friend later.”

It’s not a lie, unlike all the other excuses he provided Chester before. That’s why he’s wasting his morning filling his stomach with shitty cornflakes that won’t fill him up for the next hour.
“Oh,” Chester says, sounding disappointed. His curled lips straightens faintly. “Some other time then.”

He sounds so hopeful that Mike doesn’t have the heart to end this whole thing once and for all. He wants to tell him what’s stopping him from letting himself get close.

But all he could do shrug. Chester shouldn’t keep doing this. By now, he should’ve gotten the hint.

Mike supposes he has to try harder, though deep down, he feels awful.

Well, maybe a little.

But he’s turned down so many people in the past. So why does this one sting?

In spite of that, the one person Mike would never turn down is Brad. No matter how busy he is, he’ll make sure to allocate some time from his schedule to meet with him.

Maybe it’s horribly bias of him but it’s rightly so. No matter how much Brad can get on his nerves, he’s still his best friend. And Mike likes meeting his best friends face-to-face. There’s something about seeing his friend’s bird nest of a hair and hearing his irritating voice without the graininess of the phone line.

Though he’s not a big fan of the coffee shop Brad proclaims they make their default meeting spot. Their food is mediocre at best. He could hardly taste the fish in the fish and chips, their beef lasagna was swimming in bolognese sauce, and the greens in the Caesar salad could hardly be deemed “fresh”.

Today he chooses the chicken parmigiana. It's their best so far, despite the overabundance of pepper.

But hey, they make ridiculously great cupcakes so everybody wins.

“So, how has it been?” Brad inquires during dessert, which consist of baby blue cupcakes and steaming coffee. “With...uh...Charlie?”

Mike tries not to groan aloud. Of course Brad would touch on that eventually. It’s such a Brad-like thing to discuss Mike’s personal life during dessert. Mike figures that Brad thinks he’d be too busy being distracted by sweet treats to not heckle his ass.

But Mike knows better. They’ve known each other for over two decades for fuck's sake.

“Chester,” Mike corrects, as he peels the paper cup off his cupcake. “And no, nothing much.”
“Can’t be nothing.”

“Dude, he just moved in, like, four days ago.”

Brad brandishes his unused butter knife before smearing the frosting off the cake. It’s a barbaric thing to do and if this was their first meeting, Mike would’ve given him a lecture about how the frosting makes a cupcake. Without frosting, it’s a muffin. And muffins are a disgrace to the cake species.

Not that he hasn’t done it before. Brad is an asshole who refuses to see the truth.

“So? Lots of things could happen in four days,” Brad points out.

“Does it matter?” Mike asks before sinking his teeth into his cupcake. Instantly, his senses are overwhelmed by the coupling of the light but sugary frosting and the soft, moist cake. There’s a hint of vanilla, to which Mike almost moans in delight. He has a huge weakness to vanilla.

His eyelids flutter shut. If he doesn’t know better, he would’ve thought he'd gone and went to heaven.

“Shinoda, could you stop orgasming for a moment and answer my question?”

Of course there’ll be somebody to bring him back to the ground. And that person has to be a nosy Brad Delson.

“What?” Mike demands, opening his eyes to Brad settling his knife on his plate. “You want to know if I fucked him or some shit?”

Brad’s lips twist into a smirk. “Did you?”

Mike almost spits out his chewed cupcake, which would be one of the biggest offences he would’ve committed in his life. A cupcake is to be savoured slowly, not sprayed over checkered-printed tablecloths. Especially this particular cupcake. It'll be a sin.

“No!Fuck no, why the hell do I want to do that?”

“I don’t know! Maybe he’s hot or something.” Brad gulps his coffee, leaning back against his seat. “Which reminds me. Do you have a picture of him?”

Mike’s eyebrows knit together. “Why?”

“Just curious.”

“Dave never showed you a pic?”

Brad shakes his head, setting his cup down to pick up his sad excuse of a cupcake. “Nah.”

“And you didn’t ask?”

“Nah.”

Mike takes another bite out of his treat, resisting the urge to give Brad a swift kick under the table. “Did I ever tell you you’re a dumbass?”

“Hey,” Brad says, sounding offended. “Who’s the one that ended up in law school?”

“Apparently, I’m sorely mistaken.”
Brad nibbles the edges of his cupcake. “Why does it matter anyway?”

“He could look like a psychopath!”

“Tsk, tsk. So judgmental. Not all psychopaths look like normal people and not all normal people look like psychopaths. Trust me, I know.” Brad extends his hand, beckoning Mike. “Just hand me your phone.”

“What makes you think I have a picture of him on my phone?”

“But do you?”

Guilty as charged.

Heaving a loud sigh, Mike rummaged through his pocket to pull out his phone. He taps his phone several times before arriving to Chester’s most recently sent photo — a selfie of him in their apartment on the day he moved in. It was a cute picture, Chester grinning at the forefront with his luggage surrounding his bare feet.

“Here,” he says, slapping his phone in Brad’s palm.

“Say, he’s pretty cute,” Brad notes, eyeing the picture with odd fascination. He nods his head in approval. It reminds Mike of a father consenting to his child’s relationship with another. With Brad’s behaviour, this situation might as well be one. “I can see why you couldn’t resist my offer.”

“Shut up and eat the cupcake or I’m eating both and leaving you to pick up the bill.”

Mike takes a couple of cupcakes home for Chester after being badgered by Brad. He had given him an ‘informative talk about “being nice” and “a good roommate”. Which is redundant. Mike knows how to be a good roommate, thank you very much. And that’s to steer clear of his roommate and not be a nuisance to them.

But he guesses getting his roommate cupcakes is a nice gesture, especially heavenly ones like them. He really needs to stop being a grumpy asshole.

And that’s what Brad told him too.

“You need to stop living in the past,” he told Mike before they parted ways. “You’re not—”

“Bye, Brad,” Mike interrupted but didn’t move an inch.
Like always, all Brad could do was sigh and pulled him into a tight hug.

His friend should stop worrying about him. It’s not healthy at all.

He's fine. He really is.

“Mike?” calls a faraway voice as he locks the front door. “Is that you?”

“Yeah!” he replies, pulling his shoes off his feet.

“I’m in the bathroom. But uh… I left my towel in my room.”

A quiet sigh of exasperation leaves his lips. How could anybody forget to grab their towel if they
know they’re going to take a shower? It doesn't make sense.

“Where is it?” he asks, placing his shoes inside the shoe cabinet.

“On my bed.”

Mike deposits the paper bag of cupcakes on the countertop before marching over towards Chester’s
designated room.

Much to his surprise, it’s quite tidy. Not as tidy as Mike would have liked but it's adequate enough.
The room doesn't stink of toxic smog, which Mike is thankful for. On Chester’s desk sits a pack of
cigarettes (much to Mike’s disdain), a couple of paperbacks, and a phone. In a corner stands a guitar

A fellow musician. Why didn’t he ever bring that up during their previous talks?

“So he plays?” Mike murmurs to himself, inching closer to the instrument.

“Mike?! Are you going through my shit?!”

Shit.

“No!” he refutes hastily, snatching the marigold towel off the bed before exiting the room. He
probably should’ve been a little quieter, given that the bathroom is just opposite Chester’s room.

Inhaling deeply, Mike gives a couple of light raps on the door. “I’m coming in,” he announces before
swinging it open without receiving an answer.

Which he shouldn’t have done.

He should’ve waited for an answer. In fact, he should’ve just knocked and handed the towel from
the outside.

Because Chester Bennington is naked.

Well not stark naked. Fortunately he has the decency to have a pair of red boxer shorts on. But he
might as well not be wearing them. They hardly leave anything to the imagination. It's the shortest
pair of boxers Mike’s ever seen in his life.

Chester’s back is towards Mike’s, displaying countless of etched ink for Mike to feast his eyes on.
The artist in him marvels at Chester’s back — of the intricate details put into the four-armed creature
at the centre, of the melding colours of the dragons embedded on either side. Since Chester’s busy
tweaking the knobs of the shower, his arm tattoos are harder to see. But from what Mike could tell,
they’re as stunning as the tattoos on his back.

The point is, Chester’s body is a work of art and it’s a shame it can’t be displayed in a gallery. It’s a crime to not show something so beautiful to the whole world.

But the man in Mike brings him back to Earth because he’s ogling his fucking roommate he hardly knows in their shared bathroom.

And now said roommate is now smirking at him, crossed arms over his tattooed chest.

Oh god, this chest is tattooed too.

_Oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck oh—_

Why did he have to be such a sucker for art?

The man in Mike also brings attention to Chester’s well-toned body. Because well…it’s a nice body. Well-toned and tattooed — Mike’s kind of aesthetic.

Immediately he pushes that thought out of the way because _this is not the time to get a hard on._

“I know I have a hot bod,” Chester laughs, cutting Mike’s mental breakdown off. “You can stop ogling now.” He stretches his arms over his head, giving Mike a good look at his front tattoos — a large, monochromatic rose sprawled across his chest. “Or ogle away. I don’t mind.”

_Oh fuck._

Like a magnet, Mike latches his gaze onto the flooring tiles.

This is most likely Chester’s way of getting back at him for being an asshole, isn’t it? He’s going to exploit his sex appeal by fucking with Mike’s head.

Why can’t the floor swallow him up right now? What’s taking so long for the pits of hell to open up?

“Um, Mike?”

Mike cautiously lifts his head, hoping that his voice doesn’t sound like a dying donkey like it always does when he’s on the verge of exploding due to embarrassment or arousal. Or both.

“Yeah?”

Fuck, it does.

Chester shakes his outstretched hand. Despite his teasing smile, his eyes reflect kindness. Or what looks like kindness. “My towel?”

Oh. Right.

“Right. Here. Sorry about barging in.” Mike tosses the towel at Chester’s direction (he hopes it is his direction; everything’s a blur to him) before scrambling out of the room.

He doesn’t mean to but he slams both the bathroom and his bedroom door shut behind him on the way inside his own room. The loud banging echo throughout the apartment, and slowly fades into the distance.

Leaning against the door, Mike inches to the ground. He lets his head fall against the wooden
surface, squeezing his eyes shut in hopes of drowning out Chester’s muffled giggles.

Despite his bedroom being his go-to place for respite, being surrounded by comfort and familiarity doesn’t slow his racing pulse. Or his flushed cheeks. Or his frizzled brain.

At that moment, all Mike could think is that Chester Bennington is a fucking asshole.
act one: scene five.

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for the kudos/reviews! You guys don't know how much they mean to me. Anyway, I hope all of you are doing well, especially since Mike released new music (I'm dead, safe to say lol). Hope you guys like this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They haven't bumped into each other since that incident. For the past several days, Mike makes a point to creep out when Chester's fast asleep and return home when Chester's out at work. It's been tiring and Mike's half-asleep most times. But hey, anything to get out of his apartment and avoid any forms of confrontation.

Which is stupid because it's his apartment. In his name. He can do whatever he wants in his apartment. He can leave and stomp around and make a ruckus around if he wants to.

Much to Mike’s surprise, Chester doesn’t address the incident or Mike’s intentional avoiding in his texts. He still sends him random pictures of stray dogs, cheerful greetings, and an array of emojis.

Mike doesn’t know what to make of it.

But they haven’t bumped into each other since the incident. So it doesn’t matter, right?

Until one rainy Monday morning.

Mike’s busy banging on his cabinet doors, desperately searching for his thermos while waiting for the kettle to boil. He forgets that he’s supposed to be quiet as a mouse with Chester in his room, possibly asleep.

Because he forgot to set his alarm and he’s going to be late. Not to mention, it's raining. Which means he’s forced to drive. And there’s 99.99% chance there’ll be a shitty jam that will most definitely set him back by at least twenty minutes.

He could forego his morning dose and just grab it at the teacher’s lounge later. That would save him some time.

But he hates that wretched place with every fibre in his body. His fellow colleagues, who somehow has time of their hands, would spend their time indulging in mindless gossip and whiny complaints regarding their students. It's something he doesn’t want to participate in. And never will.
Not to mention that the coffee there is instant coffee.

What kind of idiot drinks the bland sludge that is instant coffee? Mike may be particular when it comes to punctuality but even he knows that nobody should drink instant coffee, busy or not.

He’s about to tear his hair out and actually come to the conclusion that he might have to sacrifice his daily fix for the day when a hand latches itself on his shoulder.

“Hey,” somebody breathes behind him.

Mike jerks away, startled. The hand recoils at the sudden movement. It’s Chester, with droopy eyes and his hair tousled. Mike would find it adorable if he isn’t scared to death at the moment.

“Jesus!” Mike exclaims, clutching his hammering heart. “Don’t do that!”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to do that.”

He deeply sighs. “It’s fine. Just...don’t do that again.”

Chester rubs the back of his neck sheepishly. “Sorry.”

“Like I said, it’s fine.”

“Well... I mean, not just for that.”

Deep down, Mike knows what Chester means. Instead of acknowledging it, he feigns ignorance because ignorance is bliss. “What do you think?”

“The towel thing. Few days ago. I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable. I thought it’ll be funny to tease you.”

Newsflash Bennington, it wasn’t.

“No, I’m fine with the...shirtless thing,” Mike says, trying hard to push out the image of Chester’s body out of his head. “I was surprised, that’s all. I should’ve waited for an answer. Sorry about that.”

“It's okay,” Chester says.

Mike turns back to the task at hand. He might have to end up abandoning it after all. The wall clock reads six-thirty and he hasn’t even showered yet.

Yup, he’s screwed.

He pushes a stack of chipped dishes aside.

Or maybe not.

“Oh. But I—”

“Go ahead and strip all you like,” Mike says airily, mentally thanking every single deity in the universe at the sight of his thermos, hidden behind the plates. “I don’t mind.”

“Even if I walk around in my birthday suit?”

Mike pauses. It’s too fucking early for jokes like this.

“I draw the line at topless.”
“You and your stinkin’ rules,” Chester sniffs. “Pretty boring if you ask me.”

“Well, I didn’t. So.”

And there goes his mouth.

Time to find a new topic to discuss. Or bail. Or die.

The last one is preferable.

Thankfully, Chester makes the decision for him.

“Hey, I got you something.”

Mike glances over his shoulder, setting down his thermos. “What for?”

“I’ve been meaning to get it for you for a while now so it’s not just for the cupcakes. Which are great! Thanks for that, by the way.”

Mike twists his body to face Chester. He notices Chester’s right arm hidden behind his lithe frame. “Uh, yeah. But um, you didn’t need to get me anything.”

“No, no. It’s cool, man. I’ve been wanting to get you something anyway. For letting me stay here and stuff. As thanks. So here.”

He holds out a folded T-shirt.

“I didn’t know what you like. Or your size. I figured you’re an M. And—”

“Is this for the coffee?” Mike blurts out. “For ruining my shirt?”

Chester blushes, nodding. “Yeah. I’m really sorry for that.”

Mike is at a loss for words. Never has anybody ever bothered getting Mike a replacement for things they lost or broke. Even when Joe used up all his paints or Brad snapping his prized ruler in half. And these are the two people he’s known for most of his life and who he considers his friends.

But here is Chester, who profusely apologises to him and buys him a T-shirt as a replacement for the shirt he ruined. Somebody who he hardly knows and doesn’t want to know. Somebody that should hate him for being so cold towards.

How is Chester Bennington real?

How?

“I…” Mike chews the bottom of his lip. “You didn’t have to.”

“I didn’t have to,” Chester agrees. “But I wanted to. So.”

So.

What else can he say to that?

“Thank you,” Mike says, still befuddled and touched by the whole thing.

“You’re welcome,” Chester says softly.
And then there’s that smile again.

Mike’s almost about to come up with some stupid excuse to get out of this uncomfortable situation when the kettle suddenly whistles, as if glad to interrupt the two.

The deities are actually treating Mike better than usual. Which is a good thing. A very good thing.

Mike releases a breath he doesn’t realise he was holding. “Um, I gotta get ready,” he mumbles, diverting his gaze to the floor. “Gotta head to school.”

Chester nods. “Yeah, I think I’m gonna go back and sleep.”

“Yeah.”

Neither one of them makes a move. Mike clears his throat. “Um, Chester?”

His ears perk at the sound of his name. The expression he has on is sickly hopeful. For some reason, Mike finds it endearing.

“Yeah?”

“Could you move please?” Mike asks, gesturing to their close proximity. Hell, there’s barely space between them, maybe several inches. He doesn’t remember being sort of pinned to the kitchen sink. He could definitely catch a whiff of nicotine off Chester, which makes Mike wrinkle his nose. "I need to hit the shower."

“Oh right. Sorry.” Chester steps aside, giving Mike the opportunity to bolt.

When Mike reappears in the kitchen again, Chester has disappeared. Weirdly, his thermos is already filled with coffee. Courtesy of Chester most likely. Unless Mike has an invisible fairy godmother he's unaware of.

Mike swears that man is too nice for his own good. Way too nice.

What did Mike do to deserve an angel like him as a roommate? And what did Chester do to deserve a devil like Mike as his roommate?

On a separate note, the usual jam only lasts for ten minutes. That means Mike manages to make it to school fifteen minutes before first period. Which in turn gives him some time to hide in the staffroom,
where there are hardly people at during this time of the day.

The deities are on a roll.

As expected, only a handful of teachers are at their desks, pouring over paperwork. Except the one seated next to his designated spot.

“Well, well,” Talinda says, amused grin masked behind her Pikachu mug as he trudges over. “Look what the rain dragged in.”

Mike removes his damp hoodie from his body, draping it over his chair. “Running out of insults, Bentley?” he quips, unscrewing his thermos. "You're not bringing your A-game today."

“Still early, Shinoda. Wait ‘til lunch.” She gives him a once-over, nodding in approval. “I see you’re wearing Ches’s gift.”

Mike tilts his head down at his top. It’s a black T-shirt, with the words “Today’s not special. I’m mean everyday” in white lettering. Not particularly his taste. He prefers his T-shirts without graphics or words. But hey, it’s a gift. And the statements fit his personality. Might as well not let it go to waste.

Talinda snickers. “So hip and trendy.”

“Let me guess, you chose it?”

“Nope. Well, sorta? Chester was joking about that shirt has a valid option.” She winks. “But I managed to convince him he’ll be making the right choice.”

Mike shakes his head. “You sneaky woman.”

“One of my finest traits.” Talinda gulps down her drink. “Chester was really adamant of getting you that shirt. He felt so bad. That’s all he could talk about the whole time we were out shopping. Pretty annoying, to be honest.”

Mike blinks, not knowing what to say. “Is he always like that?”

“Like what?”

He doesn’t know the proper word either but throws something out anyway. “Nice.”

Talinda snorts. “Fuck, that’s an understatement.” Mike expects a story out of her like she’d always launch into but she doesn’t elaborate further. Instead, she sets her mug down on her desk and regards him with a cold look. “You’re treating him well, aren’t you? Because if you’re not...well, you know what’ll happen.”

Of course, Mike knows the consequences of messing with anything or in this case, anybody connected to Talinda Bentley. He’s not a fool.

“Things are fine.”

Most of the time. Sort of.

Talinda doesn’t look convinced but doesn’t push. “Better be.” Her gaze flickers to the rain pounding against the window pane. “Chester…” she begins, her voice sounding faraway. “Mierda, I think you guys would be good for each other.”
The hell does that mean?

He’s about to open his mouth and ask when the school bell rings, signalling the start of Mike’s first class of the day.

The day turns out pretty well. For once, his students don’t get on his nerves, even the crappiest jokes elicits a small chuckle out of him. It’s all his students would talk about later, declaring that they finally broken through “Mr Shinoda’s Volcanic Phase”. And even the students he sees for consultation after hours don’t try bothering him with inane questions.

Since the day goes smoothly, Mike gets to turn in earlier than usual, having no need to stay out late.

But then he finds his eyes snapping open at three-ish in the morning. And he can’t seem to fall asleep again.

It’s an occurrence that happens once in a blue moon and Mike hates it when it happens. Losing precious sleep is definitely something he despises.

“Fuck’s sake,” he mumbles, turning on his bedside lamp.

Usually if he can’t sleep, he either sketches or plays a couple of songs on his musical keyboard. For this particular instance, he’s itching to do the latter. It’s been weeks since he played.

Unsurprisingly, it’s a little dusty. Mike makes a mental note to dust it during the weekend.

Settling in the stool, Mike turns it on and winds down the volume knob, making sure to not wake Chester up.

Now to play.

But play what?

*Adele? Meh, too moody. System of a Down? Too loud. Don’t want to wake Chester up. ...Childish Gambino? ...Nah...*

He goes through several more songs before settling on one. It’s a song he recalled being played on one obscure radio station he stumbled upon. The song struck a chord in him that he went out and bought the album the next day. And then the album fucked him over harder.

So he plays.
His fingers glide over the keys effortlessly, accustomed with the familiarity of the tune. His lips mouth the lyrics as the chords meld together in harmony.

He paints it all in his head. He can hear the splashes of the guitar, the booming drums, the mournful singing, all slowly burning into a roaring crescendo. It’s so loud, so beautiful.

So Chester.

Wait, what?

All the gears in Mike’s brain screeches to a halt. But the voice doesn’t.

“—countless nights I spent cowering in bed,” it sings clearly, despite the slight muffle. “‘Cause I can't fight the voice that rings inside my head.”

What?

The voice isn’t in his head. It's real and it’s coming from next door.

Chester’s room.

The hell?

His hand falls off its routine, accidentally poking a random key. The sour note it emits echoes.

The singing stops as well, as if it was paused.

What in the world just happened? How could he hear the voice so clearly? Are the walls that thin?

Thank god he hasn’t tried jerking off since Chester moved in.

Mike shakes his head. He’s definitely sure he didn’t imagine that voice. He’s never heard a voice like that before. All the voices in his head are either the original singer or his own.

Not...this.

And shouldn't Chester be asleep? It's three-ish for god's sake.

*Pull yourself together*, he scolds himself. *Just play it off like nothing happened.*

Yeah, pretend like that didn’t happen. Mike’s pretty good at pretending.

And it's Chester. Pure and angelic Chester. Chester is too good and pure to hurt Mike, let alone a fly.

With a sharp intake of breath, he starts from the top.

The singing only comes in during the first chorus. Unlike before, Chester sings cautiously, like he’s harbouring a secret. But it’s no less hypnotic.

Mike ends the tune with a quiet flourish, letting the last set of notes linger in the air before coming down from its depressing high.

For a longest moment, tense silence fills the air. Mike’s ready to crawl back in bed and hide under the covers in embarrassment or when sudden applause resounds from next door.

His ears perk up, feeling his cheeks heat up. Mike hasn’t played for anybody in a long time. The last time is probably when he was horsing around with Brad many years ago, drunk off their asses.
But the whole predicament is too jarring. Mike just played the keyboard, with his unfamiliar roommate, who has an indescribable voice, joining in. From a different room. At...three-twenty-seven in the morning.

In what kind of world does that happen?

*Apparently this one*, he drily thinks.

But despite it all, he’s flattered. Very flattered.

Fatigue abruptly hits Mike like a train wreck, along with feelings of pride and delight. He fleetingly wonders if Chester would bother showing up at his door before deciding to crash on his bed instead.

When he wakes up much later, Mike hears Chester’s door softly close shut, despite the grogginess.

This could mean a lot of things. It could mean that he decided to head to the bathroom. It could mean that he came home from a run, maybe a smoke, maybe even out to do both. It could mean that he decided to get some more sleep.

It could mean a lot of things.

It could also mean that he’s ready to confront Mike about what happened hours ago.

Which is *not* something he’s prepared to face.

Steeling himself, Mike skulks out of his room, making sure his footsteps are light. Which is such a ridiculous thing to do, now that he thinks about it. Like he determined before, it’s his fucking apartment.

Much to his relief, Chester is nowhere in sight. Instead, he finds a mug of piping-hot coffee and a paper bag on the kitchen counter. A sticky note is attached to the flimsy surface of the bag.

*Hope you like it. Thanks for the music. You played beautifully*, it reads with a tiny smiley face drawn next to it.

Mike blinks the sleep from his eyes, making sure it isn't some fucked up dream.

“The fuck?” he mutters, prying the bag open with one hand and lightly slapping himself with the other. Inside sits two delectable cupcakes, the very ones he fell in love with, the same ones he got Chester not long ago.

If the shirt didn’t cement the truth already, this gesture does.

Mike really doesn’t deserve Chester. Nobody in the world deserves Chester. Most of all, Mike. Because Chester’s too pure and too good to have a pessimistic stiff like Mike as a roommate, let alone breathe the same air as him.

He should knock on Chester’s door. He should pull him in an embrace and thank him for treating him the way Mike should treat Chester. He should tell him that

But Mike’s a coward so instead, he strides back to his room and grabs a loose piece of paper and a Sharpie.

*Thank you. Your singing is beautiful*, he scribbles before the logical part of his brain catches up with the emotional part. Mike quickly slides the note under Chester’s door and scurries inside the bathroom.
Chapter End Notes

The song and lyrics mentioned in this chapter is "Happiness" by Deaf Havana (great song from a great alternative rock album about depression, alcoholism and loneliness).

Spanish Translations:
Mierda: Shit
"So let me get this straight, you're weirded out that he ate salad for dinner last night."

"Yeah."

"And he tried to get you to eat it too."

"Uh huh." Mike sighs. "I don't know man. It's weird."

“How is that weird?” Joe asks from behind his easel. "Most people aren’t savages like us. Normal people eat their veggies and go on runs.”

“I'm offended that you would lump me with you in such a category,” Mike notes. "Let alone calling me a “savage” for having Pop-Tarts for dinner. As if you don’t do that yourself.”

“That’s why I grouped us together, you idiot.”

Mike rolls his eyes in response.

“Hey!” Joe exclaims, lifting his head up. “Quit moving. I’m tryna create art here.”

Sure. Art.

Usually Mike isn’t susceptible in squandering to his old roommate’s pleas. The man has a knack for proposing the most terrible and inane ideas (never mention the night of October 12, 1997 to Mike unless you plan to have your eyes clawed out). While Joe has mellowed down since their college days, his current antics could hardly be considered "normal”.

Take what is happening at the moment as an example. Joe had rung him up as soon as Mike gets off work, begging him to be his subject for his next painting. Which is total bullshit because Joe doesn't do painting. He does charcoal. He even had to borrow Mike's set of acrylic paint.

It's an obvious ploy to get Mike to spill. Spill what, he doesn't know. All he can grasp is that Joe’s
always looking for gossip to immerse himself in.

But it’s not like there’s any dirt to collect. Mike knows Joe’s seeking for first-class blackmail, most likely between the lines of “drunk sex” or “midnight blowjobs”. He’s learnt to expect it. It happens every time when Mike forms a relationship with somebody he isn’t related to by blood.

Joe’s on him though. Mike hasn’t fucked his roommate. And never will.

The only reason why he relented was Joe would tell Brad. Knowing Brad, he’d chide Mike for being an asshole and push him forcefully to Joe’s doorstep.

They always pull shit like that. Sometimes, the duo would gang up against him, staging weird interventions for Mike to "go out and smell the roses or kiss the sky or some shit".

Though that’s all on him. One of Mike’s regrets is introducing the duo to one another. Their personalities work so well together that they might as well be one entity. Apart, they’re nuisances. Together, they’re a force to be reckoned with.

It’s already horrible enough Joe and Chester get along very well. How well Mike doesn’t know because Joe doesn’t "kiss and tell", which is hypocritical of him.

On the bright side, he hasn’t introduced Brad to Chester. He can’t imagine the three of them teaming up against him. A ray of sunshine with two children may gel well, but they’re toxic to Mike’s mental health.

“Only reason why I don’t eat proper meals is ‘cause I’m busy all the damn time.”

“The art show’s this Saturday right?”

“Hence why I’m too busy to eat properly.”

"That's nice of him," Joe says. "That he bothers to check up on you."

"I guess."

"What do you mean, "you guess"?"

Mike mulls over his words, unsure whether he wants to unload his feelings on his friend. Sure, Joe and him go way back but that’s the problem too. Joe has seen first-hand all the shit Mike went through back then. He could always sense when Mike is hiding something, just like Brad.

Though at least Joe knows when to take a step back, unlike Brad. He’d acknowledge the presence of the problem but he won’t intervene if Mike doesn’t want him to. Unless it’s of dire circumstance, which hardly happens.

_I need new friends_, Mike concludes in his head. _Friends that are blur as fuck._

"Are you still continuing "Operation: Avoid Roommate"?" Joe inquires. "Which by the way, have I mentioned how stupid it sounds when you say it?"

"Operation: Avoid Roommate" aka "Reminder-To-Always-Avoid-Chester-At-All-Costs-Unless-Mike-Plans-To-Embarrass-Himself". Sounds stupid but well.

“Hey,” Mike defends, catching himself trying to lift his hand up to brush a stray lock out of his eyes. He needs a haircut after this. “That’s the goal.”
“I’m not just talking about the name, genius.”

Mike purses his lips. “That’s rich, coming from you.”

“I know that I may look dumb, with my art degree and dazzling good looks” Joe says in mock seriousness. “But the truth is, Shinoda...” He glances around before cupping his lips with his hands to whisper, "I'm a pretty smart guy."

Unsurprisingly, Mike is not amused. “Hardy ha.”

“Just you wait,” sniffs Joe. "Someday you’ll see the light.”

“Right.”

Joe waves his paintbrush in the air, splattering black droplets around him. “Anyway, did you guys try talking about it?”

“About what?”

His friend huffs. “Don’t play dumb with me, Shinoda. Spill!”

But Mike honestly doesn't know what his friend's talking about. He could be talking about his so-called "sex life" with Chester or

“The fuck you talking about?”

Joe tilts to the side, smirking broadly. "You know...your romantic singalong with a certain roommate a couple nights back?"

Mike's eyeballs almost pop out of their sockets. How the fuck does he know that?

Was Chester singing that loudly? Well, he kind of was, considering Mike could hear him from his room. But to the point Joe could hear.

Unless Joe was standing outside their door. That better not be the case because that's a creepy thought.

"Wait, how did you—" Mike stops himself, the answer dawning on him. Why should he be surprised at this point? "Oh. Of course. Fucking Delson."

"Yeah, yeah. Delson told me. But seriously, what happened?"

"God," Mike observes. "You sound like an impatient teenage girl begging her best friend to recount how she lost her virginity."

"So what if I do?"

Mike shakes his head, not caring that he's meant to stay still. "You're so shameless."

"Yeah, yeah. Everybody knows that. Stop pointing out the obvious." Joe stabs his paintbrush at Mike's direction, as if casting a spell on him to open his big fat mouth. "So?"

Knowing that his friend wouldn't shut up until he gets what he wants, Mike yields.

"Yeah, he tried."
"And?"

Mike shrugs. “Gave him a couple of excuses to get out of the conversation.” Deciding to steer the conversation elsewhere, he quickly says, “Ugh, are you done yet? I’ve been sitting here for an hour and you barely picked up the paintbrush.”

"You're deflecting."

"Hey, I'm a busy man. I got shit to do so excuse me for wanting to bail."

Joe doesn’t look satisfied but lets it go. “I am. Was. Like twenty minutes ago.”

A part of Mike is glad that he can finally get his ass off the uncomfortable stool, the other is ready to strangle Joe. Because, really?

“Well why didn’t you say so then?”

Joe flashes him another grin. “Just waiting to see if you’ll notice.”

The want to toss Joe off the highest cliff he could find surfaces. It’s a typical feeling Mike experiences every time he faces Joe's stupid crap.

"This better be good,” Mike sighs, rising off his seat to see Joe’s new “masterpiece”.

The “masterpiece” being a stickman.

A fucking faceless stickman that could’ve taken a couple of seconds to draw.

And Mike was sitting there for about an hour.

An hour of posing and to be painted as a stickman?

He shouldn’t be surprised. After all, this is Joe. Joe's prone to idiocy. But still.

Still.

"Seriously?"

“What?” Joe exclaims. "I think I captured your essence just right.”

Mike wipes his face, groaning. “He doesn’t even have a face.”

Joe swiftly etches two eyes and a straight line for a mouth. It looks better, but only by a smidgen.

Motherfucker.

“I’m leaving,” Mike announces, turning on his heel.

“What?! Aw, come on! It's just a joke!”

By then, Mike is already out of the door, eager to be in the confines of his apartment and away from lunacy.

According to his watch, it’s 6.22 pm. Chester should either be at work or out on a run. As long as he's not home, Mike's good to go.

Except he’s not. Chester's inside shirtless, gulping down a bottle of Gatorade in the kitchen.
Mike's brain and dick scream in agony at the sight.

Ever since Mike let him, Chester has taken every chance he can to parade around the apartment without a shirt on. When Mike allowed him to do so, he didn't except such an occurrence to happen so frequently.

This is the worst one yet. Because Chester is sweaty and he doesn't have a shirt on and his tattoos, holy fuck how Mike wants to...to...

*Michael Kenji Shinoda,* he vows. *You're not thinking of doing that. You are definitely not thinking of doing such a thing. Nope, no sirree, iya.*

That does it. Mike is going to jerk off after Chester leaves. He's been holding off ever since Chester moved in. It's time to cleanse his system.

“Hey, you hungry?” his roommate asks, cutting through Mike's thoughts.

“Uh, why?” Mike questions, trying very hard not to fixate his gaze on Chester’s chest.

Chester’s bare and sweaty chest.

His dick weeps harder.

If there is any god in this world, they better help him out right now because well, he doesn’t need a hard-on right now.

“I was wondering if you wanna grab dinner together.”

Mike groans inwardly. *Not again.*

“Oh.”

“Yeah…” Chester's lips twist into a hopeful smile. Mike hates it when he does that. It makes rejection harder for him to do. "So you gamed?"

"I thought you have work."

"I do. But Dave doesn't mind me coming in late." Chester grins playfully. "Perks of having a friend as your boss."

A downside for Mike though.

He quickly sifts through his lengthy list of excuses before setting on one that makes sense.

“Uh… I thought of catching up on some sleep,” Mike lies. “Maybe some other time?”

Chester cocks an eyebrow. "It's not even seven."

"Uh... I'm feeling tired today," Mike continues, hoping he sounds convincing. "Been a long day."

“Oh okay,” Chester says, as if he's used to rejection by now. “Rough day?”

“Not really.”

Chester’s eyes narrow, as if he's unconvinced. “Mm hmm. Wanna talk about it?”

“Not really, no.”
“Is it the art show?”

Mike turns away, fixing his gaze towards the ceiling. He doesn't remember telling him about it. Most likely Talinda's work. “No.”

“What is it then?”

That’s it. Mike has a low tolerance for stupid and nosy questions, roommate or friend or whatever. He had to indulge Joe just now. That doesn't mean he has to do the same for another.

“What part of ‘no’ do you not understand?” Mike snaps. “Leave me alone, will you?”

As soon as the words leave his mouth, he regrets it instantly. While he means to tell Chester off, he never intend to say it in such a harsh tone.

For a moment, Chester doesn’t reply and instead gives him a blank look, which is a first. Mike doesn't blame him. He must be too surprised to react.

Or maybe Mike has finally gotten the message across, that Chester is trying to scale walls that are just impossible to climb.

He's finally given up.

*Good.*

Mike manages to move a couple of inches forward before Chester stops him with words he never thought he'd say to him.

“Do you hate me?”

Mike flickers his gaze to Chester. For the first time since he met the guy, a mix of annoyance, confusion, and distraught is written all over his face. Mike doesn't think he’d be capable of displaying such emotions all at the same time.

No, wait. He has. The day they met at Starbucks, where Mike made a stupid comment he doesn’t even remember what it’s about. But it wasn’t any of those three, no.

It was anger.

But that’s beside the point. Regardless, it’s a question that takes Mike by surprise. “What?”

Chester repeats his question, his scowl never straying from Mike’s face. If those smiles of his leaves Mike in a puddle, his tight-lipped expression makes his skin crawl.

*This is it,* he thinks. *This is when Chester proves to me that he’s a deranged sociopath underneath all that sunshine and rainbows.*

*Time to die.*

“No…” he says out loud. “Why would you—”

“No, seriously,” Chester presses firmly. “Do you?”

Mike draws in a breath, eyes glued shut. “No.”

“Look me in the eye and say it.”
He does. Chester shakes his head.

“I don’t believe that.”

Mike's eyebrows knit. Chester Bennington has proven time and time to be a puzzle. Whatever is happening right now is the epitome of that notion. Because they went from an invitation to dinner to their feelings towards each other? What kind of bullshit is this?

“I don't—" Mike takes a step closer, with Chester taking one back in response. "What brought this up?"

Like a bomb going off, Chester flails his arms around and explodes. “What brought this up? What?” He shakes his head vigrously as he paces around the kitchen. "Where do I begin? Oh. You're always brushing me off every time I try to spend time with you. You hardly acknowledge me when I'm around. You don't give a shit when I text or talk to you. You—"

Mike exhales heavily. He doesn't want to drag this up. He doesn't want to explain himself because that involves feelings. And Mike doesn't do feelings. He spent most of his time bottling it up, sealing it tight to not unscrew the cap.

“I'm just tired, okay," Mike says. "Lately—"

“Being tired doesn’t equal being an asshole.”

The comment stings his chest. It’s brutally honest and true. Mike is being an asshole. But that’s him. That's Mike's identity. He wouldn't be Mike Shinoda if he isn't an asshole. All Chester did is point out the obvious.

But that doesn’t mean it doesn’t hurt.

“I thought maybe you have a strange way of showing affection, like buying cupcakes and jamming out at three in the morning—”

“That’s you jumping in,” Mike corrects. “I was playing ‘cause I couldn’t sleep. I do that all the time.”

If Chester had been upset before, he's sunk to devastation. However, it doesn't diminish his anger.

“Fine, whatever. But I did all things for you like make you coffee and bought the shirt for you to, I don't know, maybe warm up to me—”

“I never asked you to!”

”—because maybe you don't warm up to people easily.” Chester continues, ignoring Mike's input. “Every time we made progress, you push me away. Why is that?

Ah, and there it is.

A little of Mike’s anger seeps through his mask. He tries his best to extinguish it. “Did you ever think that you were crossing a line? Did you actually stop to think that I have a right to not talk about myself.” He crosses his arms across his chest. "It's my privacy. I can do whatever I want."

Chester snorts. “Yeah, sure. I don’t need to know whether you have a huge wart on your ass or you sleep with a teddy bear or shit. It's just feel like...it’s…” He gestures at the air around him. “There's hardly a connection. I mean... I feel like we do, we could have one but at the same time...we don’t. And I don't want us to be just two people who share a place.” He inhales deeply, as if worn out. All
of a sudden, he looks a decade older than he should. "I want us to be friends."

Mike's frown deepens, his brain seething in rage.

Friends? Friends? He can't be serious.

Chester is blurring the narrative of the whole picture. How can he not get it? Does Mike have to spell everything out for him? Can't he see that Chester's fucking up an adequate relationship (or whatever the hell they have) at the moment.

Mike would be lying if he said he isn't pissed off at the moment. Despite wanting to tear a new one into Chester, he remembers his manners so all he says is, “Being roommates doesn’t equal friendship.”

“What if I want it to be?” Chester tries.

“What if I don’t?” Mike challenges.

Fire flashes in Chester's dark gaze. Before Mike's brain could comprehend, he finds himself standing face-to-face with his roommate. There's barely space between them. He could feel Chester's breath, catch the whiff of nicotine and sweat radiating off him. Their noses brush against one another.

If Mike isn't so furious at the moment, he'd probably be turned on. All he can do is prepare himself for a punch, most likely in the gut. It'll be painful, based on his prior experience.

“Could you stop being a fucking smartass for once?” Chester hisses, his hot breath tickling Mike's face.

In a perfect world, Mike would back down. In a perfect world, Mike would apologize. In a perfect world, Mike would try to work things out diplomatically.

But this isn't a perfect world because he letting his emotions run wild instead of keeping them in check. So in true Mike Shinoda fashion, he doesn't let it slide.

“Well at least I'm a smartass with a proper job," he sneers. "Not like you who's having a midlife crisis.”

Now, he definitely expects Chester to beat him up.

Except he doesn't.

The heated atmosphere stills. Chester whiplashes as if he was slapped across the face. His fiery rage is doused, replaced with the most wounded look Mike has ever seen. It tugs at his heart.

Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck fuck!

Why did he do that? Why couldn't he take a step back and think his words through? Why is he himself?

He should apologize. He should drop to his knees and beg for forgiveness. He should crawl inside the deepest hole he could find and never come out ever again.

Because he’s Mike Shinoda and he wouldn’t be himself if he didn’t fuck up at least once a day.

“I don't get you.”
Chester's voice is so soft and wounded that Mike almost assumes he imagined it.

You could've said no,” he continues, studying the floor. “Spared us all this trouble. Nobody was forcing you to do anything you didn’t like. I wouldn’t have held it against you.”

Mike’s throat feels constricted, guilt washing over him. “I know that,” he begins, surprised at how timid he sounds. "I—"

“So why?” Chester demands, his voice suddenly close to bellowing. He whips his head at Mike, pinning him with a blazing glare. Mike can't help but flinch. “Why would you agree if you don’t like me in the first place? Why? Less bills to pay? Brownie points? Favours?” He gestures to himself violently. "I’m not a fucking charity case, okay? I can find a place to stay. Hell, I can just go back to living with Tal. I’m fucking forty-one." He jabs Mike in the chest. "No need to think you’re doing me a fucking favour."

Neither one of them speak or move after, the stilted atmosphere silent except for Chester’s panting and Mike’s racing pulse.

You were never there for me, Mike, a familiar voice scolds in his head. You don’t have the right to be upset about this!

He shuts his eyes, mentally willing himself to shut the voice up. This is not the time to drag past shit up.

But it is, a part of him chides. After all, what’s so different from now and then?

Mike scoffs inwardly. The stakes were different back then, much higher. Back then, he was on the brink of losing somebody he truly cared for. What does he have to lose here but a random stranger and a barely formed relationship?

But here he is, slowly descending into a mental breakdown.

No, not a mental breakdown. Just his brain being stupid as fuck. And they say the brain is full of logic. Logic, his foot.

Ugh!

This is really why he doesn't do this, let people like Chester get too close.

Seriously, how the fuck did he get himself into such a stupid situation?

Before Mike could dig himself a deeper grave, the doorbell rings, the shrill sound seeping into the silence.

Chester’s shoulders relax, as if glad of the short moment of respite. His expression doesn’t follow suit though. “You seemed like a nice guy at first,” he says quietly. “But I guess you’re just like everybody else.”

It’s a sentence that doesn’t have to mean anything, an unconscious muse. He's heard worse but there's something in his delivery that feels like an arrow pierced his heart.

“I—” Mike stammers. "I just— I—"

“Fuck you, seriously. *Fuck you.*”

Something must have crossed Mike’s face because Chester’s features soften for a split second. But it
vanishes quickly as if he remembers he’s meant to stay angry. He marches over to the front door, flinging it open. Mike doesn’t bother chasing after him. After all, what can he say that could fix this?

“Hey, Ches—"

“He’s all yours,” he hears Chester snarl. The door slams shut, the bang echoing throughout the empty apartment.

Chapter End Notes

Japanese Translations:
Iya: No
Okay, I do want to start off by saying I’m really sorry for the very late update. For the past week all I’ve been doing is writing four different assignments that were due on the same day (like wtf???). And when you write too much academic shit, you’ll just end up getting burned out from writing XD. But thank you all so much for the reviews!!!!

With that said, Chester doesn’t really appear in this chapter (though very briefly). But I promise you there’ll be more of him in the next ;) (which won’t be soon either due to finals coming up so sorry about that too :( )

Also, sorry if this is too long. Things got out of hand haha. Consider this an apology for updating late.

Nobody utters a single word for what seems like the next minute. Or day. Mike is too stunned to figure out what the fuck just happened.

It’s been a while since Mike fought with somebody like this. Sure, he fights Brad pretty often but never to this extend. And usually he steers clear of any conversation that might lead to squabbling.

But today... Well...

Well.

Mike doesn’t know how long he’s standing in the corridor until Joe’s voice pierces the silence.

“Mikey,” he calls. “Could you open the door?”

Sighing, Mike hollers, “Go away,” because the last thing he needs is Joe jeering him right now. He feels bad enough already.

Bad, he snorts. That doesn’t sound right.

There’s no way of describing how he feels right now.

“Open up or I’m telling Brad.”

Brad.
Part of Mike is tempted to open the door just to slam it in Joe’s face when Brad’s crosses his mind.

He knows Joe is a cruel, cruel man. He wouldn’t hesitate to tell on him to Brad. They’re like brothers from another mother, twin devils meant to haul his ass forever.

_Ugh, fucking Brad._

Making the final decision, Mike unlocks the front door, revealing a smirking Joe.

“You could go after him,” he suggests lightly, his eyebrows waggling. “I heard angry make-up sex is good for the soul.”

Mike’s adamant that it’s a Joe thing but most of the tension dissipates. Mike doesn’t know whether that’s a good thing or otherwise.

Maybe he should’ve slammed the door in his face. That might have been a better option.

“Not now, Hahn,” he groans, striding over to the kitchen cabinet where he keeps his alcohol. The whole debacle is overwhelming for him. It shouldn’t be. It’s a stupid and petty thing to have a huge blowout over. It could’ve been easily solved if Chester would just _listen_ and stop interrupting him. Chester’s being stupid and petty.

He still can’t wrap his head around the fact that his roommate just stormed out. Without a shirt on. Or shoes. Over privacy issues that are not even about Chester’s, which is ridiculous.

What a drama queen.

Mike’s different. Mike’s not a drama queen. Mike’s rational enough not to let little things like that, people like Chester get the better of him.

And yet here he is, taking a swig from a tall bottle of whiskey at dusk. Because the whole thing is giving him a headache and fuck, he really wants to die right now.

Maybe if he drinks the whole bottle, he could die of alcohol poisoning by midnight. Thank god he doesn’t have a high alcohol tolerance.

“I mean, he's already half-naked. Ten percent of the deed is already done.”

Mike squeezes his eyes shut, feeling the liquid burn down his throat and settle in his stomach. “Why are you here?”

“You left your paint.” He hears a quiet thud against the counter, most likely the box of paint.

“Thanks.”

“Welcome.”

The fog in his mind clears a little, the alcohol working its magic. Mike exhaled, eyelids fluttering open. “You’re not calling Delson,” he orders because he doesn’t need a lecture at the moment.

“Lucky for you, I’m feeling a little merciful today.” Joe pauses as he struggles to rid his feet of his sneakers. “I knew it’ll blow up in your face.”

“Gee, what gave it away?” Mike asks sarcastically. “The fact that he looked like he was close to clawing my eyes out?”
“Dude, I thought he was gonna slash my throat open.” He ambles over to Mike, his footfalls heavy on the wooden tiles. “Remind me never to piss him off.” Snatching the whiskey bottle from Mike’s clutches, he takes a long gulp out of it himself. After a long ah, he pins Mike with a knowing look. “You know you’re gonna have to talk to him, right? Sort it all out. Apologize.”

Apologize? Him? Mike didn’t do anything wrong. Except insulting Chester’s job like a fucking snobby asshole. That, he probably shouldn’t have done.

But really, Mike doesn’t have much to apologize for.

“Hahn, the alcohol.”

Joe jiggles the bottle in front of Mike’s eyes, like a owner enticing a dog with a stick. “Not until you admit that you fucked up.”

“I didn’t fuck up!” Mike asserts.

“Even if you didn’t, you should try to sort things out.”

“What if I don’t want it to be sorted out?” Mike challenges. “What if… What if I want him to go and leave me alone? Then he wouldn’t need to ask me stupid questions. And— And why should I apologize? He was the one getting too close, invading my privacy.”

“Define “invading my privacy”.”

“He— He— He asked me about my day. Kept trying to get to open up. I told him I didn’t want to talk about it. And he wouldn’t let it go! Like…I don’t want to talk about things and he likes talking about things like he’d ask me what I had for lunch or if I was sleeping well or if I like certain shade of orange. Does it fucking matter?” He scoffs. "Who is he, my counselor? He wants to be friends, Joe. He's forcing me to be his friend.”

Joe nods in understanding. Mike’s not surprised. They’ve gone down this road before. After all, he was on the receiving end at one brief point in time.

It's also one of Joe's redeeming qualities. While he may make stupid quips and shitty assumptions for the sake of gags, he listens. Brad's always too busy jumping the gun and blaming everybody left, right, front, centre.

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

Joe chews his lip. “Did you...try to make him understand?”

Mike shrugs. “I don’t know. Maybe.”

Silence sets itself in. It’s a little unsettling. Even after all the years of knowing him, Mike doubts he’ll ever get used to Joe being introspective and pondering. It doesn’t fit him.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Joe finally says, fingers tapping the kitchen counter. “And I’ll always be on your side, man. No matter what. But from what I’ve gathered so far, he was trying to be friendly. Not everybody is out to get you, okay?” Mike doesn’t reply. “We’ve been through this.”

Mike heaves a heavy sigh. “I know.”

Joe sets down the whiskey, pushing the bottle towards Mike. He doesn’t bother making a move. The
idea of alcohol isn't appealing at the moment. “He told me, you know. About how afraid he was you hate him.”

“I don’t,” Mike says automatically, heart sinking. He could easily imagine Chester draped over Joe’s couch, with Joe sitting opposite him, examining and listening a psychoanalysis.

_Do you think he hates me, Joe? All I wanted to do is be his friend. I try small talk and I try buying gifts and I try making jokes. But nothing seems to work! Am I such a fuckup that he doesn't like me?

“When did he tell you?”

Joe’s facial features scrunches. “Uh, I think it was...last week? Can’t remember.”

“Oh.”

“He might have crossed boundaries,” Joe continues. “But you shouldn’t have been harsh on him. Well, I’m assuming that you were by the way he was acting.”

“I might’ve taken it too far,” Mike concedes. “I may have made a stupid remark about his job.”

If Joe had been Brad, Mike would've earned himself a front row seat of an atomic bomb going off. Thankfully, it's little old Joe so all he gets is a mocking look of disapproval and a “You fucking elitist.”

“I know I fucked up royally by saying that,” Mike says despite knowing it's only a light-hearted jab. “No need to tell me twice.”

“Then apologize.” Mike opens his mouth to protest but is beaten to the punch. “You don’t have to be sorry for being defensive. You're entitled to have your privacy. And you don't need to be friends with him. But at least apologize for insulting him. And try to work things out. Understand one another.”

“What if he doesn't accept?” he asks, feeling small all of a sudden. "What if he doesn't wanna discuss things?"

Joe shrugs. “Then there's nothing you can do about it. Just know that you did your best and things happen. But you need to try, remember?”

Mike almost bursts out laughing because it's rare that Joe takes things seriously and being the smarter one in the room. “When did you become so smart?”

Joe flashes a crooked smile. “Like I said, I’m always smart.”

Before Mike could take his cockiness down a notch, the doorbell rings.

His heart almost stops beating. Was that Chester? Is he back to work things out? Did he return to grab a shirt and storm back out? Would he say that he’s deciding to move out?

The thought of Chester wanting to move out doesn’t settle well with him for some odd reason.

Fortunately for him, it’s not Chester Bennington.

Unfortunately for him, it’s Brad Delson.

“Joe!”
Mike takes it back. Joe’s still as dumb as a mule. Hell, dumber than one. Joe Hahn is a dumbass and that’s final.

“What?” Joe cries from somewhere behind him. “I texted him before you let me in!”

“As he should’ve,” Brad grumbles, shoving a couple of pizza boxes into Mike’s grasp as he shuffles inside. “Besides, I got y’all pizza so shut your yammer and explain what the hell happened. Joe told me it’s a Code Red.”

“That was not a Code Red,” Mike says indignantly because it’s true. Code Red is reserved for extra cases. Like if Mike gets blackout drunk or anything remotely serious happened. The argument he had with Chester? That doesn’t justify even a Code Orange. Maybe a Code Yellow at best.

“Yes, it was,” Joe justifies from the couch. “Chester looked ready to rip me to shreds.”

“He wouldn’t,” Mike says as he carefully sets the boxes on the coffee table because no matter the crisis, everybody should treat their pizza right. “He wasn’t even mad at you.”

“But he was mad at you,” Brad says with an eyebrow raised and crossed arms.

Mike waves his hand in dismissal. “I had it under control.”

Joe snorts. “Under control, my ass. He could’ve eaten you if he tried. And me.”


Mike doesn’t miss the devious glint in Joe’s eye. He’s pretty sure what’s going to happen.

“Joe—”

But it’s too late. An exaggerated tale of longing and lust falls out of Joe’s lips and Mike is ready to jump him right there and then. Seriously, Chester was not about to fuck him against the wall before Joe rang the doorbell to return the paint he left behind. Not even close.


“That is not how it went,” Mike insists after Joe finishes.

“Well, that’s what it sounded like to me,” Joe says matter-of-factly. “It’s okay to want to get fucked by your roommate. I mean, who wouldn’t if he looks like that?”

Mike massages his temples. “For the last time, we were not going to have sex.”

Brad rises to his feet and starts pacing the living room. Mike hates it when he does that. That means that he’s almost completing his mother-mode. Which means that a lecture is coming up soon.

“Well what?”

Another reason he hates Brad in Mother-Mode. He becomes the most impatient to ever walk the Earth. “Jesus, chill man. Let me get my head in the game first.”
Brad doesn’t reply, only staring holes into Mike like he just burned all the forests in the world. Joe grins like he’s witnessing the most intense wrestling match of his life.

“We… I…” Mike rakes his mane with his free hand. Why is it so difficult for him to spit it out?

After a couple seconds of pin-drop silence, he tries again.

“We…fought. Said stupid things. I said stupid things.”

“What did you guys fight about?” Brad asks, voice strangely gentle. Mike forgets that he isn’t all fire and stone most of the time. But he will be soon.

Mike fixes his gaze back on his T-shirt, twisting part of the hem around his index finger. “That I wasn’t open to him. That I didn’t want to be his friend. But I said being roommates doesn’t mean I need to be his friend. It wasn’t like I was treating him like garbage or anything.”

“It’s a good reason,” Joe pipes up.

“I didn’t say it wasn’t,” Brad says.

“Right.”

“Anyway,” Mike cuts in, eager to wrap things up. “I… I don’t know man. He wouldn’t let me drop it. So I said something to shut him up, which is sorta true. I don’t know. And he just…snapped.”

“What did you say?”

Mike shuts his eyes, predicting the outcome. “I said he was going through a midlife crisis.”

“It’s true though.”

“That’s besides the point, Hahn,” Brad says firmly. He trains his glare on Mike instead. “Fucking hell, Mike! That's a shitty thing to say. Even if it’s true, you shouldn’t have thrown that in.” He stops in his tracks, placing his hands on his hips. “Hell, you guys shouldn’t even be arguing over something like that! He was trying to be nice to you, Mike. Why would you say shitty things to somebody that’s only been nice to you?”

“I know that,” Mike snaps.

“Then why?”

“I don’t know!”

“Is this about—?”

If anybody were to ask Mike why he said the things he said, he wouldn’t know if he's being honest. All he could think of is no, he doesn’t want to think about it and it’s in the past and fuck them and fuck him too.

“Everything doesn’t revolves around them, you know,” Mike growls. “Like I don’t think about them all the fucking time.”

“You're projecting your problems—”

“I am not! This has nothing to do with them!”
Brad steps forward until he’s towering over Mike’s seated figure. “Maybe,” he says with an air of annoyance and anger. Mother Brad is back and coming back strong. “But this defensive shit you’re pulling? It’s so—”

“Say another word about it,” Mike seethes, jumping to his feet to stand toe-to-toe with his best friend. “Or me. And I’ll—”

“Gentlemen, gentlemen. If I may.”

Mike snaps his head towards Joe, who’s already digging into a slice of pepperoni and olive pizza. Typical of Joe to dig in before resolving the problem at hand.

“Delson,” Joe says, cradling the slice as if it is a newborn babe. “Shinoda and I’ve talked about it. They’re gonna try to work things out. So chill man.”

Brad raises an eyebrow. “Really?” Mike nods. “Do it now then.”

“Now?” Mike exclaims, bravado seeping away from his chest, fear staking its claim. “Dude, shouldn’t we let him cool off first?”

Joe leans back, laying his legs on top of Mike’s coffee table. “As much as it’ll be entertaining to watch Chester pummel Mike to the ground,” he says between mouthfuls. “I’d rather keep him around. For entertainment purposes.”

Mike frowns. “Thanks. I think.”

Brad sighs. “First thing,” he says pointedly. “When he comes back.”

*If he comes back,* Mike’s brain corrects but he nods. “I’m sorry.”

Brad’s features soften. “I know. I’m too. I’m just worried.”

“I know.”

For the first time of the day, a genuine smile crosses Mike’s lips. Brad mirrors the gesture.

As much as they can get into fights pretty fast, they make up by working things out at the same speed. It’s one of the perks of having a best friend.

Joe chews noisily, taking Mike out of the moment. He pops a loose olive between his lips. “Good. Great. Great guys. Now quickly kiss and shut up so I can eat in peace.”
Despite his guilt looming at the back of his mind, Mike still manages to find himself letting loose a little and enjoy the little time he has with his two friends. It’s been a while since the three of them could hang out together, eat pizza and play Mortal Kombat X and Injustice 2. Who knew a huge blowout could result in a get-together?

For that moment, he forgets that he’s in a crisis, forgets that he had a fight with his angel of a roommate.

That is until he gets a call from Chester.

Thankfully (he thinks it’s a good thing, who knows at this point), it’s not Chester’s voice that yells and insults him down the phone. But he does come in swinging with a “Shit, Tal! T! Hand my phone back!” overlapping harsh Spanish words hurled at him.

Based on his shitty understanding of the language, Mike swears he was called a goat at one point. (“An adult male goat,” Brad supplied helpfully. “Commonly known as the Spanish version of “motherfucker”.“)

Huh. Well, she’s not wrong.

Besides that, Chester doesn’t return for the night. Neither does he show up when morning comes.

To say Mike is worried is quite an understatement. He’s not only worried but guilty, guilty that he drove

But judging by the phone call he got the night before, Chester has a roof over his head, a person he trusts by his side, and hopefully a shirt on. It makes him feel slightly better.

Mike makes sure to slip into the school building as quietly as possible, avoiding the staff room as much as possible. He figured Talinda would pay him a violent visit during lunch break but all he got were wailing overachievers who gave too much of a shit about the art show.

“It’s just part of your grades, people,” he sighed to them once. “Don’t worry about it too much. I’ll try not to fail you guys.” That was a bad move because all he got was more howling.

He really isn’t fit to be a teacher. He can’t He should just move to New Zealand and herd goats. He doubts he could upset goats the way he upsets his students and Chester.

Speaking of Chester…

He’s all he could about. Even when he’s supposed to be in teacher-mode, all he does is fret about his well-being. And it’s frankly annoying.

But that’s the least of his worries. Snippets of words and visuals of the night before assault his senses. The warm breath tickling his nose, the fire reflecting from his dark gaze, the harsh words that left scorches in its wake. They're all he can think about.

Letting out a loud groan, Mike hits his head against the smooth surface of his desk.

Fuck his life. Fuck everything in life.

God, why is this happening to him?

“Um, Mr Shinoda?”

Mike bolts upright.
He’s ready to hide in the janitor’s closet because it suddenly hit him that he’s still in school after hours. His students are noisily chatting and painting right in front of his face.

On the week of the art show, Mike allows his students to take over the studio to touch their work. Or start painting, in regards to half of his class. Usually he has no need to be around. After all, it’s the final week. Everybody should be ready and finished by now.

But based on decades of experience, he learns that students love bombarding him with endless questions at the last second. Hence, he makes a point to stick around until his brain is dead and he decides that his students should return home and sleep their worries off.

Speaking of his students, one of them stands on the opposite side of his desk nervously, with a small canvas tucked under her arm.

“Um, yeah?”

Raiyah Ahmad shifts her weight to her other foot. “Uh, you asked to see me?”

Mike almost face palms right there. Of course he would have forgotten. Out of all his students participating in the event (which is all of the junior kids because grades), Raiyah is the only person who hasn’t come to him for consultation. Even the football team swung by, though they mostly threw jabs at him to crack a smile on his face instead of trying to be serious.

So whatever. Yeah, he’s worried that she hasn’t made much progress. He’s not the heartless bastard most make him out to be at all.

He knows she’s not a bad student. Tracing back to the rare gossip going around (okay so he eavesdrops on his gossipy colleagues, so sue him) about her, she’s a pretty good writer and a solid student when it comes to psychology. The “new Dickens”, they coined. The new “Freud”.

The latter, he disagrees. Freud was a sex-obsessed weirdo who wanted to fuck his mum. He doubts Raiyah wants to do the same to her dad.

Hopefully.

Maybe Adler? Or Rogers? Or some other random white guy who isn’t Freud and seriously, he needs to brush up on his knowledge in psychology.

Chester would know. If Mike isn’t mistaken, he mentioned minoring in psychology back in—

*Wait, no. No Chester. Bad, Shinoda! Bad!*

But anyway, the point is that her strengths doesn’t lie in art. Not fine arts anyway. Which makes him wonder why she’s even taking this class.

But she has become one of his favourite students so hey, good thing then.

And yes, he has biases. Every teacher does. Sue him.

“Oh right. Uh. Yeah. Sorry, I kinda forgot.” He motions to the easel next to him. “Just unwrap it and put it up here.”

The girl nods, setting the painting on it. It’s nothing much, just simple but messy strokes of varying shades of blue and black. They’re wildly compiled but they blend fine enough. He’s tempted to ask about the meaning behind the painting but he knows that’s for the big day.
“I like the use of blues,” Mike examines, letting his eyes drift over the painting. “The blending is not bad.” He points towards the sides. It stands out. “What’s with the black though?”

Raiyah shrugs her shoulders. “I like black.”

“Oh, interesting choice.”

The girl snorts. “Another word for “shitty”, isn’t it?”

This is why he likes her so much. Judging by his observations during and out of class, she’s very much like him. Pessimistic, aloof, sarcastic. But beneath it all, painfully quiet and shy. He barely heard her utter a couple of words to other teachers before he became her teacher. Oddly enough, she’s much more vocal around him nowadays.

It sounds stupid but he’s actually honoured by that.

Mike cocks an eyebrow. “Remember what I said?”

“Said what?”

“You know what.” When she doesn't answer, he tries again. “We’ve talked about this.”

“Uh…” She rubs the back of her neck. "To not deflect when given a compliment?"

“Exactly.”

She tilts her head from side to side, as if she doesn’t believe him. “Doesn’t make it look any different.”

“Well, I’m your teacher for a reason,” Mike says without a doubt. “I know good work when I see it.”

Raiyah opens her mouth but a knock interrupts them. He might’ve imagined it since he barely picked up on it due to the boisterous chatter around him. But his trusty ears hasn’t failed him yet.

“Come in!”

Every god in the universe must have decided to abandon himself because it's his dreaded fear. Frankly, he’s only delaying the inevitable.

Might as well get it over and done with.

“Hey, Mike. Sorry if I’m bothering you. You busy?”

Mike exchanges looks with his student. There’s nothing much to critique about here, due to the simplicity of the artwork. “Not at all. Just about to finish up.”

Talinda flashes him a quick smile before slipping inside. Other students begin taking notice, chorusing with a joyful “Hi, Miss T!”. Mike isn’t surprised. She’s been voted “Teacher of the Year” for the past six years. The students kiss her feet like she’s royalty. Mike wouldn’t be shocked if she actually is one.

“Did you paint that?” Talinda says, stopping next to Raiyah, who shifts away uncomfortably. “It looks great.” The girl is about to speak but Talinda stops her. “I know what you’re gonna say. It doesn’t suck. It’s really good. Right Mike?”

“Exactly,” Mike agrees, mostly to make sure Talinda doesn’t try gorging his eyeballs out later. “It’s
pretty good.”

“Really good,” Talinda adds.

Raiyah tucks a straying lock behind her ear, gaze on her Converse. “Um, thanks.”

Warmth spreads across his chest. Another reason why he likes his job, that he could make his students feel good about themselves. If he ended up herding goats, he wouldn't get the same response as he could’ve gotten from her.

He flashes her a reassuring smile. He hopes it is one. “Yeah. I think it looks fine. But you need to patch up some of the white spots a bit. I suggest trying out lighter shades just to see if it looks good. If you try using darker blues and it doesn’t look good, it’ll be harder to fix it.” Mike slips an arm under his desk, feeling around. “Do you need more bubble wrap? I got some here if you want.”

Raiyah shakes her head. “I’m not taking it home.” She gives Mike and Talinda one last shy smile, dipping her head respectfully before heading back to her corner, her painting in tow.

Mike watches her leave, unsure of what to do at the moment. “She’s a good kid.”

He doesn’t mean for that to slip out, a musing meant for his brain and his brain alone. He wonders if Talinda is going to ignore that and go straight to heckling him in front of everybody.

Much to his surprise, she doesn’t. “She is,” Talinda agrees. “Nice to see that things hasn’t changed since freshman year. I think.”

“She took Spanish in freshman year?”

“Nah. I’ve met her a couple times before. She’s always hanging at the back of the school with a book and iPod in tow. She always looked lonely. I didn’t have the heart to leave her be. She’s a pretty interesting kid once you get to know her.”

Mike nods slowly. He doesn’t bother venturing out of his office if he can afford to or making small talk with the students. He prefers of the safety of his tiny office and the companionship of none.

“Well,” he says, knowing there’s no point of dancing around it. “Anything I can do for you?”

A smirk crosses her lips. “I think you know what I’m here for.”

Here we go.

“Look, Talinda. I—”

She crosses her arms in front of her chest. “Look, I’m not here to talk long. I have an appointment at five so I’m gonna make this brief. And no, I’m not gonna hang your ass up on the flag pole. As much as I would have like to, I think you feel guilty enough as it is.”

“Uh, thanks?”

Her grin widens. “Though I don't regret yelling at you. You deserved that after what you said about Ches.”

Mike understands. Chester and her share a close bond. Talinda is always defensive when it comes to people like that. It's in her nature.

“But as much as I hate to say this, you’re not wrong, Mike.”
Mike's ears perk up. The fact that Talinda Bentley of all people admitted to being on the wrong end? That hardly ever happens. Hell, it's never happened before, basing on his memory.

“I’m not?”

She shrugs. “Well, not entirely. But we’ll get to that part soon.”

Mike taps his nails against his desk. This conversation isn’t going the way he expected it to go. And he doesn’t have any inkling of what to say. He only came up with a strategy to combat her if she went in guns blazing.

Being nice and diplomatic? No idea at all.

“How’s Chester?”

“He’s fine. He’s calmed down.”

“Oh,” he says, hoping his relief isn't written on his face. "That’s good."

"Yeah." Talinda hurls him a meaningful look. “You really shouldn’t have said that, you know. The midlife crisis thing?”

“I know,” Mike admits, shoulders slumped. “I wasn’t thinking straight.”

“Yeah. It’s one of the things he’s insecure about.”

Chester? Insecure? Mike can't picture it. Those two words are like puzzle pieces that don't fit. The man that oozes of sunshine and charm insecure?

No way. That can't be right at all.

And not just over one thing. There's more than one.

Mike lifts an eyebrow. “One of the things?”

She hesitates, eyes sweeping around the studio as if somebody is eavesdropping on their conversation. “It's not my place to tell you the details. What I can say is that things that happened in his past made him a little insecure, no, very insecure about himself.” Talinda brushes the dark locks falling across her face. “There are things you don’t know about him.”

_Isn’t that the same for everybody_? He wants to say this out loud but holds his tongue. It's already a miracle that Talinda is siding against a good friend, let alone Mike himself.

Somewhat.

“Like what?”

“You know...things.”

A tiny quirk of her lips tells him that he’s not going to get a proper answer from her. He groans.

“Why do you always have to be so vague all the time?”

“Hey, I may have known you for ten years.” She gestures to herself and Mike. "But Ches and I? We go way back. Hence, my loyalty lies with him. Ask him yourself.”

Mike throws his hands up in submission. Why should he be surprised at this point?
“Fine.” A sudden thought streaks through his mind. "Is he…?"

Talinda bobs her head. “I dropped him off in the morning.”

"Does he have the—?"

"Key? I was going to ask him about how he’s gonna get in since he didn’t have it on him. But he said something about a hiding spot?"

Oh right. The doormat. He remembers showing it to Chester on the day he moved in.

"Isn’t that obvious?" Chester had asked.

"It’s a cliché," Mike said. "People don’t do clichés anymore. People won’t be looking for clichés.”

Chester had snickered and teased him to no end.

Oh how times have changed.

"So unless he decided to join the circus trope, he should still be there.” Talinda adjusts the handbag on her shoulder, as if she’s ready to leave. “Just...take it easy on him. He feels guilty too. Just talk to him. He’s always been more for diplomacy.”

Mike nods vigourously. “Yeah, of course.”

“He can be overwhelming at times,” she admits. "He’s always been a stubborn one, always wearing his heart on his sleeve. Too trusting. Too eager. Too friendly. Sometimes, I wish he would take a step back and not jump into things headfirst. Just like I wish you’d stop overthinking things and get your head out of your ass and let loose.”

“So like, you want us to be the opposites of each other?” Mike asks.

“Something like that.”

“You can’t force that.”

“I know. I’m just hoping you guys would be good influences on each other.”

And there she goes with that "meant for each other bull". He doesn't waste his energy asking it again because he knows the response he'll get. “Yeah, I’ll talk to him.”

“Good, good.” Talinda turns her head, pinning Jacob Whitmore with a scowl. "Didn't your parents teach you to not listen in?"

Mike blinks. He hasn’t realized they have an audience, too focused in surviving Talinda's gentle wrath.

Jacob isn't a shitty kid. He knows he won't go around badmouthing Mike.

But fuck, what if he decides to do just that this time? If the whole school finds out what an asshole he is...

Then again, it’s common knowledge here. It’ll just be added to the list of evidences of “The Times Mr Mike Shinoda Was An Asshole” list.

“Hey, Miss T!” greets Jacob, bouncing on the balls of his feet. “Whatcha both of you talking about?
Sounds serious. This has nothing to do with the graffiti on the boys’ bathroom on the third floor right?"

Talinda shakes her head, pinning him with an unimpressed look. “No, Jacob. And stop outing yourself, Jesus. Just because I said I won’t stick my nose up your business, doesn’t mean I need to know everything you’ve been up to.” She nudges her head towards Mike. “I’m trying to get your favourite art teacher to make up with his boyfriend. And you know how Shinoda can be.”

Jacob’s expression lightens. "Wait really?"

"Jacob, I don’t—"

But it’s too late. The whole room explodes.

Chapter End Notes

Some of the dialogue between Mike and Raiyah are inspired by a conversation between one of my Psychotherapy lecturers and a friend of mine who has the tendency of deflecting and cracking jokes when she gives him compliments.

The people Mike compares Raiyah to in order is: Charles Dickens the famous writer, Sigmund Freud, Alfred Adler, and Carl Rogers who are some of the pioneers in psychotherapy. And yes, I’m not Freud’s biggest fan (google “Psychosexual Stages” and you might figure out why).

And yes if you guys haven't guessed it by now, I'm a psychology major XD.
act one: scene eight.

Chapter Notes

Hello, everybody! Thank you for being patient with me! I really appreciate all of you! There’s one more chapter before the end of the first part of this story. The first part wasn’t supposed to be this long but oh well LOL. Anyway, hope you guys like this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It takes about five minutes for Mike to get everybody to shut the fuck up (He prays hard that he isn’t getting this group for senior year too because god.) and explains to everybody it’s roommate troubles and not boyfriend troubles.

It’s funny how that your students would claim to not hear you give out homework. But all of a sudden their hearing is super sharp when it comes to anything unrelated to class.

“But a roommate can be your boyfriend too!” exclaims Christine Song.

“Ooh, maybe they’re fuck buddies!” Dalton Anderson proposes.

At that idea, the room is filled with more yelling for another couple of minutes.

Amidst it all, Mike is panicking on the inside. Because he has just been outed to his fucking students.

By Talinda of all people. Never does he think this would happen in a million years.

How dare she out him without his consent. For somebody who lectures people on personal privacy and safe spaces. And here she is, doing the exact opposite of what she preaches.

What a fucking hypocrite.

As if on cue, the grin slips off her face, looking sobered. “Guys,” she starts, raising her voice to combat the loud chatter. “Jeez, I was joking! You people take everything seriously.”

The discussion dies down a little. Jacob raises an eyebrow. “So you guys aren’t talking about a boyfriend?”

Talinda shakes her head. “Nope. Regardless, it’s a personal matter between the both of us. And no, it has nothing to do with any of you so chill guys.”
Fortunately, nobody bothers pestering them further. The students resume their initial conversations and activities, as if Mike’s world didn’t experience a little shift in the earth.

With a deep sigh, Talinda turns back to Mike, genuine regret written all over her face. “Sorry about that. I didn’t… I’ll never out you against your will.”

“You know,” Mike admits. “I was actually planning your funeral when you said that.”

“I guess I deserve that.” She sighs again, adjusting her slipping handbag strap on her shoulder. “Lo siento mucho. I was just…”

“Mad?”

A quiet chuckle escapes her lips. “Well, I didn’t get to haul your ass properly for what you said to Chester but that wasn’t the right thing to do.”

Mike snorts. “I think Chester would do that for you, don’t worry.”

“Seriously, Mike. You’ll do fine with him. Don’t worry.” Her gaze flutters over to the wall clock above their heads. “Fuck, I gotta go. I’m gonna be late.”

“See you tomorrow.”

“Let me know if anything bad happens.” She stretches out to rap her knuckles on Mike’s desk. “God forbid.”

A random idea flings itself at him. It might smooth the impending conversation. Hopefully. If Talinda would divulge.

She should though. She owes him anyway, for the scare.

“Can you at least tell me what he likes?” Mike asks. “I thought of… getting him something. As an apology.”

Talinda purses her lips. “If it helps, he likes chocolate chip cookies.”

Huh. Simple enough.

“Oh okay,” he says, grabbing a sticky note and a pen to jot the information down. “Arigatou, T.”

“De nada. Hey, Mike?”

He lifts up his head.

She flashes him a smile, laced in sincerity. “Lo lamento por lo antes, eso no es típico de mí. Y buena suerte con Chester.”

Mike’s eyelids blinks, as she strides over to the door. Despite the years of hanging around that woman, he’s still not fluent in Spanish. He could only catch bits and pieces of what she said. If Brad would here, he’d get it.

Though one thing he knows about Talinda is that she’s sincere when she’s speaking in Spanish. But judging by the latter statement, she really wants him and Chester to make up.
The journey home is busy and cluttered, with varying thoughts and assumptions swimming in his head. Most of them are unsurprisingly negative.

A part of him wishes he could teleport himself home and get the whole making-up-thing over and done with. The other just wants to curl up in a ball and hide in the janitor’s closet.

That very part of him is especially grateful for the detour to the coffee shop he has a love-hate relationship with (it’s only now that he finds out it’s called *A Thousand Suns* which is the most hipster and stupidest thing he’s heard) to grab their cookies. It helps put off the inevitable. But not the anxiety, sadly.

That’s why he decides that fuck it, he’s going to get himself a cupcake so he can numb the uneasiness and maybe even wallow in sweet misery tonight. If things don’t go well, anyway.

But he finds out that they’re sold out for the day because some idiot decided to buy the last three they had. This is definitely a sign that this day isn’t going to go well.

So much for his date with misery. Well, sans the sugar anyway.

It’s thoughts like these that unsettles him and freaks him out and well, what do you know, he almost collides with his front door.

*On the bright side,* Mike considers as he rummages his pocket for his key. *I won’t be having a crooked nose.*

He twists his key at a snail’s pace, hoping on the inside that Chester is not home. He shouldn’t be anyway. He should be at work now.

Mike’s stomach flips at the thought. But that would mean that he’ll have to confront him tomorrow.

*Ah, fuck it.*

He flicks his wrist, turning the doorknob.

As soon as Mike pushes the door open, he’s greeted by quiet strumming and mumbling.

So he’s home.

Lucky him.

Chester is seated cross legged on the couch, eyes trained on the neck of his guitar. He doesn’t look
He possibly didn’t hear Mike come in.

“—F… Is this…? Wait, no. Ugh, fuck my fingers.”

Mike stifles a chuckle as he pulls his shoes off his feet. It’s an adorable sight — Chester in an oversized hoodie and a pair of glasses perched on the bridge of his nose. From afar, he looks like he just rolled out of bed.

“Fuck this,” Chester continues, volume rising. “Fuck my life. And fuck the F chord. And fuck my fingers.” He unceremoniously drops his guitar on the couch and jumps to his feet.

That’s when their eyes meet.

Mike doesn’t know how long they stood there, gazes never leaving their faces. An hour? A century? He wouldn’t put it past him.

Amazingly, it’s Mike who breaks the tension. “Hi.”

“Hey.” After a short pause, Chester gestures to the dining table. A paper bag sits on it. “I got you some cupcakes. From the same place you bought them for me the last time? It was the last three too. So.”

Mike bats his eyelids. “How did you know where they’re from?”

“The paper bag said so?”

He almost bashes his skull against the nearest wall. Of course that’s it. Hell, the paper bag he’s holding has their fucking brand on it.

“Oh. Thanks.” Mike holds his bag out. “I got you cookies.”

“Cookies?” Chester echoes with a sudden smile. It’s the same one that fucks Mike over. Per usual, it does its work.

“Uh yeah. It’s, uh, chocolate chip.”

“Ooh, cool. Thanks man.”

“Yeah, no prob.”

“Yeah.”

Another long pause stretches between them.

This time, Chester pipes up. “I—”

“Wait,” Mike cuts in, unsure why his mouth suddenly moves. Now there’s no turning back. “Um, can I say something first?”

Chester nods. “Sure.”

Great. Fuck his life.

*Here goes.*

He takes feeble steps over to the living room, closing the distance between Chester and him.
Mike means for it all to be worded gracefully, all poise and delicate. Heck, he even rehearsed it all in his head beforehand.

He would start off with a heartfelt apology, followed by a list of reasons why Mike’s in the wrong. And as much as he still stands by his privacy issue, it doesn’t warrant for him to be an asshole. At the end of it, he would express his hopes to remain in a civil relationship with Chester, while maybe trying out a friendship. And it would put everything to rest.

It's the total opposite of the word salad he ends up vomiting out.

“My full name is Michael Kenji Shinoda. My dad’s Japanese and my mum’s white. So yeah, I’m biracial if that isn’t obvious by the name and my face. I have a younger brother who annoys the fuck out of me but I love him anyway. I’m an Aquarius though I think horoscopes are bogus. I like heavy rain during cloudy times and not drizzles or rain when the sun is up because they leave a shitty smell. I have a huge weakness for sweet stuff but mostly those cupcakes you got me. I'm bisexual and no, before you ask, it's not a phase and I'm not indecisive. I can like guys and girls at the same— Wait, what the fuck? Why’re you laughing?”

Chester has fallen back on the couch, guffawing. Mike almost leaps over to strangle him.

What did he say that’s wrong that made him laugh? Mike’s well-aware he’s a total mess, thank you very much. He doesn’t need somebody else reminding him.

A fleeting idea pops up in his mind, which makes the blood coursing through his veins grow cold.

He better not be laughing at Mike’s bisexuality. It’s not that he’s insecure of his sexuality. He was once, years and years of battling with himself before he could look himself in the mirror and call himself “bisexual”.

But Chester shouldn’t be biphobic. If he is, he wouldn’t have dated Talinda, who's obviously bisexual.

Unless that’s why they broke up.

But knowing Talinda, she’ll never stand for any form of biphobia in any form. She would definitely cut them out of their lives.

So what gives?

And even if Chester is biphobic, well Mike just outed himself. He may be fine with his sexuality, he doesn’t plan to be subjected to ridicule and the like. For all he knows now, Chester has some defense for murdering him, albeit a very discriminatory one.

Safe to say is he is screwed. Why did he say that? Why the fuck did he say that?

“I’m sorry,” Chester chokes, clutching his stomach. “I just— I— I didn’t get half of what you said and—”

Mike’s cheeks begin to burn up. This is pointless. Talinda said he’d listen, even calling him a diplomat. And now he’s laughing at him?

This is the opposite of diplomacy.

“You know what?” Mike bites, prepared to release his shame and frustration in the confinements of his bedroom. “Forget it.”
Instantly, Chester’s grin vanishes, morphing into a thin line. “I didn’t—I was kidding. Look, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

“No!” Judging by Chester’s jolt, he didn’t expect the outburst. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to—I’ve never been one for feelings. I’ve always been more...controlled and…” Mike lets out an unsatisfied groan, fingers curled in his thick mane. “Fuck!”

What is he doing? He’s going off the rails. This isn’t what Chester is trying to say.

And even if he was, why can’t Mike articulate his feelings properly? It’s not rocket science. Hell, it’s not even a painting. All he needs to do is talk.

Chester, bless his heart, doesn’t seem to be irked by Mike’s flailing. He credits the psychology minor. “Take a deep breath, man. Take the time to compose yourself. You can start over. It’s okay.”

Mike does what he’s told. He dips his head with his eyes shut.

“It's been a while,” he says slowly. “I mean, I had friends but you know, you get used to being around them after a while and...and…”

He knocks his head with the side of his fist. What the fuck, brain? You almost got it!

“You forgot how to make friends?”

A blush creeps up Mike’s neck. Now that he hears the words being flung back at him, it sounds incredibly stupid as fuck. “Well, kinda?” His eyes flutter open. Chester fixates him with a curious expression. “Sorta? But not what I was going for.”

Chester leans forward, his right knee jiggling. “You mind if I try something?”

Mike shrugs his shoulders nonchalantly. “Sure.”

“So what you’re trying to say is that,” Chester clasps his hands. “You’re not good with relationships and with the relationships you already had, they’ve all been made a while back?”

“Almost-ish. I think.” Mike pauses to gather his thoughts again. “I mean... I guess it was easier before because all of my other friends? They made the moves first. Like you?”

“But they weren't intrusive like me?” Chester guesses.

“Yeah,” Mike admits. “But, I’m not saying you’re bad at making friends! It’s just that…”

“Yes, I get it. I’m sorry about that.”

“No, it’s not. I—”

Chester holds out a hand. “No, it is my fault. Let me explain first. Please?”

Mike wants to argue further but ends up relenting. "Alright."

Rising to his feet, Chester careens over towards the kitchen. Mike follows after him, dropping the paper bag on the dining table along the way.

“You had a right to be angry with me. It’s your privacy and I shouldn’t have pushed you to open up when you weren’t willing to.” Chester swipes a Starbucks coffee cup from the kitchen counter. “You were uncomfortable and really, I'm such a dumbass. I should've realized. You don't have an
obligation to be friends with me. I don't want to make you do something you don't like. I don't—"
He stops abruptly. His eyes dart down to the cup as if it'll finish his sentence for him.

Mike frowns. “Don't what?”

Chester doesn’t reply immediately, shaking his head. “Never mind. It’s nothing.”

As always, curiosity tempts Mike. The only reason he doesn't indulge is that they’re already on thin ice (well he thinks so anyway). He doesn’t want to make a bad situation worse by invading his privacy.

And besides if they make it out of this alive, they might have time for that one day.

“But you were trying to be friendly anyway,” Mike puts in. “I was the one with the walls and—”

“Yeah. But you have the right for those walls.” Chester pauses to take a loud sip. Why the man slurps when he drinks remains a mystery. “And here I am thinking I’m an entitled asshole.”

“But—”

“You don’t owe me anything.” He lets out a snort. “It’s funny that I minored in psychology and yet I can’t even put those skills to use. I mean, it’s a minor. Didn’t learn lots of shit. But still. Jesus, I suck ass.”

“No you don’t,” Mike says automatically. “Sometimes it’s hard to apply everything you learned into practice. Things aren’t always simple.”

“No,” Chester agrees. “They’re not.”

They fall into a steady silence, saved by Chester’s mindless drumming on the counter. He stares up at the ceiling, as if pondering on what has been said so far. This provides Mike a window to give him a proper once-over.

He looks drastically different up close. While Chester hasn’t been graced with the typical tan that most Arizonans would have, he’s paler than usual. There’s faded eye bags under his eyes as well. Light stubble covers his chin and around his lips.

Mike finds it odd that he’d stress over a disagreement like theirs. Not to say that Mike has been in a lot of fights. Okay, they were more like petty squabbling, courtesy of people like Brad and Joe. Hardly much that escalates.

Maybe that’s it. Maybe Chester hasn’t had many arguments in the first place.

“Why?”

Chester snaps his gaze back to Mike’s. “Why what?”

“Why did you want to be friends with me so badly?”

Chester chews the bottom of his lip. “I was just afraid that you…”

“You what?”

His dark orbs flicker away for a brief second before returning back to Mike. His voice comes out as a whisper, laced with fear. “Hate me.”
The revelation hits Mike like a ton of bricks. It’s weird enough that Talinda told him of Chester’s insecurity. But for him to be subjected to it? It’s bizarre.

“I don’t hate you,” Mike says softly. “I never did. I’m just… I’m a pretty private guy. And I mean.” He gestures at Chester. “Who could hate you?”

Chester scoffs. “Lots of people. For starters, my classmates. My ex-wife.”

Mike whips his head in surprise. If he went to check himself in the mirror, he’s positive his eyes are as wide as saucers. This is a new fact to say the least.

“You were married?”

“Once,” Chester replies darkly. “A long time ago.”

Since he doesn’t elaborate, Mike decides not to push. He doesn’t seem comfortable touching the subject either. And as he maintained before, this isn’t the point of the conversation after all. Instead, he jumps to a different statement.

“Classmates from high school?”

A smirk etches itself on Chester's lips. “For a private guy, you’re pretty nosy aren’t you?”

There you go again, Shinoda. Can’t really help yourself, can you?

“Sorry.”

“It’s cool, man. I was just teasing.” Chester pauses to gulp down his drink again. “All schools. Except college because you know, not everybody knows everybody so it’s easier I guess.”

Mike’s heart aches as if stabbed in the heart. He feels him. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It’s not your fault.” Chester palms his cup, passing it between his hands. His face crumbles, twisting the invisible knife further in Mike. “I guess I thought if I became friends with you, it’s more likely you wouldn’t hate me. I don’t know. It’s stupid when you think about it. I mean, people can hate people that they’re friends with.”

Watching Chester go from shrieking with laughter to deflating like a popped balloon does things to Mike. He’s never seen somebody go from happy to sad in a span of minutes. It’s unnerving especially since it’s Chester the Sunshine, of all people.

He never wants to see that again.

Who broke him so deeply that he had to hide his sorrow behind soft smiles? Who wrecked him so hard that he had to mask his insecurities with twinkling eyes?

Most of all, how did he do that? How could he still come out like a literal rainbow and be so trusting of people when he got hurt? Mike couldn’t do it. So how did he?

This is the testament to their differences. But maybe to the little similarities they somehow share as well.

“Well,” Mike starts, taking a couple of steps forward. His heart wants to pull his roommate into his arms and comfort him. His logical brain rules over it per usual. “I’m here. And I’m saying that I don’t hate you.”
Chester raises his head, their eyes meeting one another again. It’s only now that Mike realized the proximity between them, how close their faces are from one another. He could detect the strong nicotine off Chester.

“Thank you,” Chester says quietly.

“For what?”

“Not hating me. Even after yesterday.”

Mike chuckles. “Dude, if somebody should be thanking somebody over that, it should be me.”

“You had the right to be angry,” Chester concedes.

“But that didn’t make it right for me to insult you. And—”

All of a sudden, Mike is silenced by Chester’s finger against his lips. It’s an unexpected gesture that even Chester seems astonished. He doesn’t address it though.

“Okay!” he exclaims. “We really need to stop apologizing. How about… How about we start over?”

Start over? Yeah, he could do that.

“Yeah,” Mike says, nodding his head so hard that he swears his head would fall off any second now. “Yeah, I’ll like that.”

His roommate beams at him, holding out his hand. “Chester. Chester Bennington.”

It’s another precious sight and Mike's heart swells, the gaping hole filled. “Michael Shinoda. Call me Mike.”

For some unexplainable reason, they don’t shake hands. Instead, they hold one another delicately. Chester is warm against Mike’s clammy and cold hand. It’s a wonder that he hasn’t pulled away in disgust yet.

But it feels nice. Chester feels nice. Mike doesn’t want to pull away.

And god, isn’t this awkward?

As if he read his mind, Chester laughs nervously. He retracts his hand before moving towards his Starbucks. “Nice to meet you, Mike.” He gives the cup a brief inspection. “Thank fucking god this thing has a lid.”

Mike couldn’t help but let out a loud chortle. Instinctively, his palm flies over to cover his mouth. Chester breaks into a grin of his own. It’s a brief break from the awkwardness that plagues the whole conversation.

It’s done. They did it. They finally made it out alive. They made up and nobody needs to be pissed off at one another again.

But a part of Mike senses there’s unfinished business. Maybe it’s that nagging thought that plagues him for the last five or ten minutes.

Would it be offensive if he asked that? Would Chester revert back to the Hulk and go all-out on Mike?
“Okay, this is going to sound really random but...I need to know.” Mike crosses his arms in front of his chest. Please don’t get offended because I just…”

Chester nods in understanding. “Fire away.”

Mike inhales. “Are you biphobic?”

He's not supposed to say it so bluntly but oh well.

Why is he like this?

Chester freezes, as if taken back before the most offended expression replaces it. “What? Fuck no! I'm pansexual. So obviously I’m not gonna go all biphobic on you. I’m not that kind of guy.”

Instantly, Mike feels lighter. That means he won’t be subjected to any form of discrimination today. That’s good. That’s really good.

Though the fact that Chester just confirmed his own sexuality to Mike is a plus, a huge step in the bridge they’re forging together.

Or maybe he isn’t as private as Mike is about it. But still.

“Oh good,” Mike says, hoping his relief isn’t as transparent as he thinks it is. “I didn’t mean to offend you. I just…”

“Yeah, I know,” Chester says. “Safe zone, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t worry,” Chester confirms. "Your secret is safe with me. I’m not gonna out you to people if you’re not comfortable.’’

“I’m fine with my sexuality.” Mike slips his hands down into his the pockets of his jeans. “It’s just something I see no point in telling people.”

“Sure. Consider it our little secret.”

“Good.”

“Good.”

For the millionth time today, they fall into another bout of silence. Mike wonders when Chester would tire of this cycle and just head to work.

He hopes he doesn’t. This conversation, talking to him? It’s not as bad as Mike thought it’ll be.

Frantically, he searches for something to talk about because he really sucks at starting conversations. All he could come up is one thought, an invitation. Which is weird because Mike doesn’t do invitations. And yet, here he is.

“The art show is this Saturday.”

Chester cocks an eyebrow. “Wow, really? That’s pretty quick.”
“Yeah. Time flies, huh.”

“Yeah. But why Saturday though?”

“The principal doesn't want anybody skipping class just for one event,” Mike explains. “He said it’d be pointless. So.”

Chester shakes his head. “So typical.”

“I know right?”

“Yeah. But good luck man. I'm sure it'll turn out great.”

“Thanks.” Mike rubs the back of his neck, desperately trying to get his point across. “But uh… Shit, this is… Oh my god, somebody kill me.”

“Hey man, take your time,” Chester assures him again. He’s a god among men to put up with his sputtering (even if those last words aren't meant to be said out loud). “Don’t sweat it.”

Running his fingers through his scruffy mane (he needs a haircut soon), Mike paces around the kitchen. “I was wondering if...you want to, uh… come. If you’re free! And in the neighbourhood! Like I don’t want you to get up and come all the way just to see… Well… Yeah.”

Chester’s other eyebrow arches. “You want me to be there? Am I even allowed in in the first place?”

“It’s open to the public. So everybody’s grandma is gonna be there.”

“Seriously?” Chester asks, amused.

“Well, not everybody’s grandma. But there has been grandmas hanging around. Like a couple years back, there was this middle-aged mother squabbling with her own mother over me.” Mike could barely suppress a shudder. Some things are not meant to be remembered.

Chester buries his face in his hands for a brief second. “Oh my god.”

“I know!”

“I can’t imagine the embarrassment the kid had to go through.”

Mike snickers, shaking his head. “Believe me, it wasn’t pretty.”

Chester smirks. “Okay.”

“Okay what?”

“Okay, I’ll be there.”

Mike’s stomach does another jumping jack. “Really?”

“Really,” Chester confirms with a broad grin.

“Oh. Great. Cool.” Mike says, feeling not remotely close to cool at all. “It’s at nine in the morning. At the school gym. I’d take you there myself but I need to be there a little earlier just to check in and help out. You could ask Talinda to help you get there. But if it’s too much of a hassle, it’s totally fine and—”
Chester’s hands latch themselves over his, halting Mike’s braying. “Mike, Mikey, it’s cool. I’ll be there. Promise.”

“Oh,” he says, blinking continuously, trying hard to ignore Chester’s holding him again. “Okay. Yeah. Sure. I… I’m not good at this friendship thingy.”

“We’ll figure that out then,” Chester offers. “If you want.”

“I do. I want to.” Mike clears his throat. “To try this friendship thing with you, I mean.”

“Yeah.” Chester’s grip slackens and he inches away. “But don’t feel like you’re being forced to do this—”

Mike doesn’t. It’s strange. It’s been a long time since he wants to try connecting and maintaining a relationship on his own accord. Everybody else crept onto him.

But maybe it’s not so different. Chester has crept onto him, in an unexplainable way. Or maybe it’s about time for him to open up a little. Obviously, he’s not gonna dunk his head first but maybe dip a toe in. But there’s something about Chester that wants him to try. He’s not sure if it’s guilt or he genuinely wants to. He supposes he’ll find out soon.

“I don’t.”

“Okay.” Chester bobs his head. “I’ll take things slow. Baby steps. Tell me if you’re uncomfortable with certain stuff and we don’t have to—”

“Yeah!” Mike quickly interjects. “Yeah, sure!”

“Okay.”

“Yeah.”

“Great. I—”

"Take the little devil to the river, baby. I don’t mind…”

Chester pulls out his phone from his pocket. “Fuck, that’s Dave. I’m late. Ugh, I haven’t even gotten ready.”

And there he goes.

Mike had figured this conversation has to be cut short. So why is he feeling disappointed?

“As much as I’d like to keep talking to you, I have to get going,” Chester says apologetically. “We can talk again tomorrow? If you like?”

“Okay,” Mike says. “Sure.”

Chester shoots him a polite smile before stepping away to make his way towards the bathroom.

Mike should let him go and make himself presentable. But somehow, he doesn’t feel satisfied.

“Hey, Ches?”

He glances over his shoulder. “Yeah?”
“We’re good?” Mike queries. “We’re okay?”

Chester smiles brightly. Mike could only wish to measure up to his level of confidence. “We’re okay.”

Mike exhales through his nostrils, the tension and his troubled thoughts being breathed out.

*Baby steps.*

Yeah, he definitely could do baby steps.

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**Chapter End Notes**

The conversations about “outing” Mike with both Talinda and Chester were inspired by a recent “outing” of an actor, who was forced and harassed by a journalist to do so. I think it's horrible that something like that happens against your will. It's people's privacy and it's their right to not divulge.

Chester’s ringtone is “River” by Civil Twilight.

Spanish translations:
Lo siento mucho.: I'm really sorry.
De nada.: It's nothing.
Lo lamento por lo de antes, eso no es típico de mí. Y buena suerte con Chester.: I'm sorry about before... that was very unlike me. And good luck with Chester.

Japanese translations:
Arigatou.: Thank you
Saturdays are heaven sent for Mike. It’s one of the two days that he could take things slow, roll around in bed to his heart’s content, and wake up at an indecent hour in the morning. Or noon, depending on his brain.

Except for a particular Saturday because his brain likes coming up with stupid ideas to make his life harder. That Saturday happens to be today.

Sure, it’s an annual thing and sure, maybe it helps the kids in some way (Public speaking? Art? He’s clueless.). But the meetings and the briefings and the shit he has to put up with leading up to it. It’s detrimental to his physical and mental health.

He needs to come up with a different approach, one that doesn’t make him want to punch himself in the face daily.

Maybe a presentation among the class? It’s almost the same shit anyway. Except without twenty percent of the student body and annoying parents hovering around. Or Shawn. Yeah, that’ll be a good idea. Less pressure on the kids too.

Mike shoves the last of his Pop-Tart in his mouth. A burst of sugary strawberry and warm pastry crust fills his senses. He almost moans out loud, caught off-guard having been too focused in his thoughts.

Chester would throw a fit if he caught him wolfing one down, let alone four. Why that man has problems against the pastry, Mike will never know. It’s not like he’s some crazy health nut that pelts him with lengthy lectures of the causes of countless diseases. He has Pringles and Cocoa Puffs to his name stashed in one of the cabinets, for Christ’s sake.
Speaking of nuts, a different thought crosses his mind.

*Or I’ll just tell them every class activity accounts to their grades or some shit.* He nods to nobody in particular, pursing his lips. Yup, he’s definitely thankful Chester isn’t here to witness this. He’d think he has gone insane. *Yeah. That way, they’ll actually pay attention in class. They’ll hate me for sure. But it’s probably for the best.*

Dusting the crumbs off the counter, he tosses them in the trash can before rinsing his empty mug. Unlike most people he knows (which isn’t many for starters), Mike seems to be the only one who likes doing the dishes. In a twisted way, it’s therapeutic, just him and the sound of running water and suds. Nothing else.

The downside of it is that his brain would drift off to distant and funny lands. Today’s Chester. It’s a land that Mike finds himself frequenting lately.

Though it’s not all bad thoughts now. Mostly they’re decent, just like their current relationship.

Their interactions could still be considered strained, no thanks to Mike and his ineptness in social interaction. But he thinks they’re cordial enough. They’ve traded pleasantries the day before and divulged in some small talk about the lack of food in the fridge.

They’ve had conversations like these before their argument. But it was different now. To both of their credits, they made good of their apologies — Mike doesn’t try running away and Chester doesn’t pry or overstep his boundaries. Mike doubts things would revert back to the way it was. Things have been said and done. Most definitely they’d have some impact on them.

He supposes that it’s something — progress. Anything is better than tearing each other’s throats. Though it might take some getting used to.

But it’s only been less than two days since they made up. They have time.

Before he leaves, he brews a cuppa because Chester takes green tea every weekend morning. Based on his observations anyway. Chester’s possibly fast asleep, having not seeing or hearing a peep out of him throughout the hour Mike’s awake. Worse comes to worst, it’ll be lukewarm by the time Chester pops out of his room. Somehow, Chester is an early riser (why would anybody want to wake up at seven on their own accord blows his mind). Unlike Mike, he loves the sun. He’s not surprised though. Chester could the embodiment of the sun if he wanted to be.

He scribbles a *Have a great morning! Hope you see you later :D* and sticks it on the side of the mug. It’s a cheesy and corny, and pointless thing to do. Mike whacks his head against the door as punishment.

Though in his defense, he does have a weakness for handwritten notes.

From what he heard from some of his students, Saturdays at the school gym are unusually chaotic. And it’s all thanks to the school’s basketball and volleyball teams’ rivalry.
They’d spend their time quarreling over who should use the space instead of engaging in practice. Sometimes, it’d devolve into a free-for-all dodgeball competition. Mike’s certain they’re just exaggerations. And since none of his students are part of either teams, he can’t confirm this.

But then, he has witnessed worse things going on in the school grounds.

Since his art class is occupying the place, the athletes are obviously nowhere to be seen. Mike wonders where they are today since his class is taking residence. Possibly taking a much needed break, considering a couple of them are in his class.

Though he wouldn’t put it past him that they’re having a showdown at the football field at this very moment.

He surveys the setting around him. Mike has to admit, he doesn’t frequent the school gym often. Not that he has any reason to. But even when there’s school games and competitions held here, he’d steer clear of them.

But it’s still weird to see the space filled with portable display walls, tables, and easels displaying various works of art. What makes it even more jarring is that there’s plagues of the school’s achievements in athletics pinned to the walls, football, track, basketball...

And then, there’s the art display.

Unlike him, everybody else doesn’t seem to be affected by the stark contrast. The room is bustled with students and visitors alike, either conversing loudly or silently observing the displays. In all his years of hosting, Mike doesn’t think he’s seen so many people here in a short amount of time. And it’s only been...

Mike sneaks a glimpse at his wristwatch.

10.29am.

Soon, he’ll be grading everybody, which is the least of his worries. As much as he gives his students a hard time, he’s confident they’ll be able to pull it off and pass the class.

But what worries him is…

Well, he has no reason to worry. The guy’s a grown man. And anyway, it was an invitation and invitations aren’t compulsory to accept.

But he can’t help but wonder where Chester is.

Mike scans the room again before checking the time again.

10.30am.

Maybe he decided not to show up. Maybe he thought the whole thing banal and dumb and—

Or maybe something came up, the rational part of him offers. Maybe he got lost. Maybe he decided to come at a later time. He wouldn’t leave anybody hanging.

Would he?

Mike pulls out his phone, in case Chester sent him a notice. Much to his disappointment, he doesn’t have any unread messages.
If he wasn’t coming, shouldn’t he send me a text to let me know?

But then again, it’s an invitation for Pete’s sake. Chester doesn’t need to let him know that.

Right?

Mike sighs. Why should he even freak out over things like this? He has worse things to fret about. Like whether the event would go smoothly. But that’s the last thing he’s worried about at the moment.

Well, doesn’t he have his priorities fucked.

He almost fires a text to Chester but chickens out. Would it be weird to do that? Are things good enough for him to do such a thing?

He really needs to stop thinking about it.

So like an idiot, he slips his phone back in his pocket and waits for Chester to materialize.

He loses hope at 11.56am. He puts it at the back of his mind at 12.24pm.

Mike’s attentively listening while rolling his eyes mentally at Jacob Whitmore’s dramatic retelling of the inspiration behind his fruit basket painting (somehow it involves an ice cube tray, a donkey, and a potato and honestly he doesn’t want to know) when he feels a tap on the shoulder.

“Hold on,” he says as he jots down a critique before turning around. “Uh yea…”

His heart pounds against his chest, the shock coursing through his veins. It’s stupid how he’s surprised considering he’s expecting his presence. Or was. Then again, he’s Mike Shinoda for a reason.

Chester has his hands buried inside his pockets, dressed in a grey Henley and flashing him a timid smile. Mike supposes he has to get used to his smiles being bashful and sweet. It’ll be awhile until he gets to see Chester in sunshine mode. In the meantime, he’ll take what he can get.

“Oh hey,” Mike says, his voice an octave higher than a normal human should be. “Hey! You came.”

“Yeah…” Chester trails away, sounding sheepish. “Listen, I’m sorry I’m late. Something came up at the bar so I had to check it out.”

“Oh, it’s cool,” Mike says, trying to sound nonchalant. Inside, he’s screaming, He actually came! He didn’t forget! Holy fuck! Aloud, he continues, “I mean, you’re here already. So it doesn’t matter. How did you get here?”
Chester jabs a thumb behind him where a sea of people are grouped at. “Tal gave me a ride.”

“Oh. Really? Yeah. Wow. That’s nice. Great.” Mike cranes his neck to catch a glimpse of his co-worker. “Where is she?”

“Somewhere inside that blob of people. Hopefully not swallowed up. Or trampled over.”

“T will be fine. She’ll beat their ass if anybody step on her toes or whatever.” When Chester doesn’t laugh, Mike quickly averts his gaze. He channels his focus on hooking his pen onto his clipboard. It’s only been a minute and he’s already said something stupid. And of course he can’t think of anything eloquent to say. A thought comes to mind and he says it without thinking. “So how you’d like the show so far?”

Chester shrugs his shoulders though there’s interest reflected in his eyes. “I mean I just got here so I can’t tell you much. But it’s been cool so far. We never had something like this back at my old school. And I’ve never been into art so I never bothered going to an art gallery. So this is pretty neat. It’s...different.”

Mike raises an eyebrow. “You’ve never been to an art gallery?”

“Nope.”

“Dude, you’re missing out.”

“Well, I just lost my art gallery or show virginity thanks to you,” Chester notes. Mike almost chokes on his saliva at that. “So no, I don’t think I’m missing out. But I was though.” He nods his head towards Mike’s clipboard. “You’re grading now?”

“Yeah.”

“Mind if I hang around?” Chester asks, sounding hesitant. “You, I mean. While you grade. I mean, if you don’t want...”

Mike blinks, trying to not let his surprise show. Chester’s request puzzles him. Why would anybody at an art show want to keep him company, especially since he’s never been to such a place before? Take it from him, Mike’s the most dull thing in this room at the moment.

But if Chester wants to tag along, he’s welcome to. Mike would end up feeling self-conscious throughout the whole ordeal. But he could let him know that if that happens.

Can he?

“Uh, yeah sure,” Mike replies. “If you want? I mean, personally I wouldn’t want to hang around me ‘cause I’m grading these kids and asking them boring questions. So if you really want to hang out with me, prepare to be bored.”

“I doubt hanging out with you is boring,” Chester objects.

“That’s true. Nothing about Mr Shinoda is boring,” Jacob adds. Mike forgot that he’s right there, who’s observing the exchange with an impish smirk. Knowing that boy, Mike and Chester’s conversation would be the talk of the class for next week. “Once, Miss Bentley asked him to—”

“No,” Mike intervenes. He knows where this is going. And the last thing he needs right now is to be humiliated by a teenager in front of his roommate.
“The principal—”

“You’re not saying that either.”

“He—”

“Whitmore.”

“Fine.” Jacob pauses before declaring in a rush, “He let us out of class half an hour early ‘cause he needed to let out a huge fart.”

Immediately, Chester bursts out laughing. Mike wishes for the floor beneath him to disappear.

Of course he’d bring that up. People won’t talk about the good stuff about him. They love getting into the humiliating stuff, don’t they?

“No, I—” he splutters. “That is not true and—”

“No, it wasn’t,” Jacob counters. “Most of us stayed outside just to see whether he’s prankin us and lo and behold!”

Chester cackles, delighted to no end. Mike drowns in embarrassment.

“You know I could send you to detention if I wanted to,” Mike threatens.

“It’s not a school day, sir,” Jacob retorts, forever the smartass.

“Ugh, why do I even—” Mike cuts himself off, his gaze landing on his roommate’s convulsing body. “What’s so funny?”

“You’re adorable,” Chester says, after gaining his composure. Unfortunately, he’s still grinnin. “You’re as red as a tomato right now.”

Mike doesn’t have time to blush harder because Jacob has resumed talking. “Ooh speaking of tomatoes, once —”

Mike inhales deeply, ready to break somebody’s face (though realistically he won’t because he’s him). Make no mistake, he does like his students. Very much. They’re all unique individuals who deserves the world. But sometimes…

Oh sometimes.

“Whitmore, if you try that one more time, I will fail you.”

Jacob grins slyly. “You won’t. I doubt you’d want me in your class for another year when you can pass me off to twelfth grade.”

Chester laughs. “Hate to be that guy but he’s got you there.”

Mike shoots him a scowl. “You too? I’m gonna eat all the Cocoa Puffs if you’re keeping this up.”

“Hey, I can always eat your Pop-Tarts.”

“You hate them.”

“Yeah, and you hate Cocoa Puffs so we’re at an impasse.”
He is about to cast another point when Jacob pipes up, “Um, Mr Shinoda? Mr Shinoda’s Roommate, sir? Or boyfriend? Roommate-boyfriend? As much as I hate to interrupt your moment, we need to get to the heart of the matter — my grades?”

*Your moment.*

Was it? A moment? What even is a moment?

It’s only now that he realises that it’s the first conversation they’ve had that flowed well since...he doesn’t even know. What they had just now felt natural.

It felt...right.

God, why is he even thinking about this? Now’s not the time for this.

“Right. Sorry,” Mike apologizes. He takes in a deep breath, pulling out his pen. “Now where were we?”

The rest of the day is a breeze.

Having Chester around is one of the best things ever. Mike could barely recall the last time he laughed and smiled so much at any of the art exhibitions.

Unsurprisingly, Chester gets along well with his students. He trades witty remarks and chats animatedly, his mouth never stops to catch a break. He brings the introverts out of their shells and discusses literature with several others.

Mike has to admit, he’s a little envious of him. How he wishes he could share conversations as effortlessly as Chester can.

Because of Chester's motor mouth, his presence attracts those within the student body. He doesn’t even go unnoticed by the principal, who makes an unexpected and rare appearance.

If Talinda is the best out of his coworkers, Shawn Carter is second. Despite the power distance between the two, they seem to get along well. Though Shawn is only second by default because Mike doesn’t see the man often. But when he does, he doesn’t feel like strangling somebody. There’s a huge improvement compared to the rest of the other teachers.

The fact they have the same taste in music is a large bonus.

“Roommate?” Shawn repeats, eyebrow raised after Mike explains Chester’s appearance. “*Just* a roommate?”
Mike’s brow furrows, latching onto Shawn’s teasing tone. “Am I thinking what you’re trying to imply, sir?”

Shawn snorts. “How many times did I tell you not to call me that? Makes me feel goddamn old.”

The man is several years older than him. Mike doesn’t know if he should point that out in case Shawn docks his pay. They may get along well but he doesn’t know Shawn well enough to gauge his sensitivity towards age.

“Probably a thousand times,” Mike says drily. “And you’re avoiding the subject.”

“I’m not. I’m just tryna point out something.” Shawn answers defensively. “And what I meant is that, you’re...a lil’ less tense than all the other years.”

Oh.

Huh.

This is new. They've never discussed their love lives and the like. So why start now?

“I’m not fucking him,” Mike denies.

The principal chuckles. “Hey, you said it. Not me. Anyway, it’d be nice to have something like that in our faculty. He seems to get along well with the students here.” His eyes is now trained on Chester who’s deep in conversation with Raiyah Ahmad. The fact that Chester could get the girl speaking with such buoyancy blows Mike’s mind. Chester’s known her for a couple of minutes. Mike’s known her for a year and yet he’s never elicited such a reaction from her.

Shawn’s right about one thing. It would be nice to have Chester around. And he does get on with everybody.

Well maybe.

But Mike is too distracted by some of Shawn’s words to speak of Chester’s teaching experience. At the very moment, all he wants is to put his mind at ease.

He offers a lame excuse to leave Shawn’s presence before scampering. Instead of darting over to the toilet like he said he would, he corners Talinda at the sculpture section.

“You told him,” Mike hisses in an accusatory tone.

“Told him what? And who’s him?” Talinda asks, barely sparing him a glance. She’s too enthralled with the mini figurine of one of the members of One Direction. According to the cardboard sign, it says “Niall Horan”. Truthfully, Mike doesn’t see the resemblance, even if it’s a caricature. Though he’s not qualified to make that conclusion since his knowledge in boy bands are low.

“Shawn,” he says, lowering his voice to a whisper in the case anybody overhears him. Considering the steady buzzing around them, he doubts he would be heard.

But it could happen.

With that in mind, he leads her over to a less congregated spot in the gym — at the side of the bleachers. He’s thankful they can’t stand under it because that would weird from a third-person’s point of view.

“He thinks I’m fucking Chester,” he explains. "And that somehow relates back to me being less
stressed out or some bullshit. Which is a lie ‘cause I still feel like dying.”

“And somehow that means I bitched about you two to him,” Talinda comments in disbelief. “What makes you think I mentioned anything to him? Though he’s not wrong.”

“Wh—?!?”

“I meant the stressed out thingy, idiota,” Talinda sighs, exasperated. “And before you start thinking about gossip and shit, I don’t need to gossip to know you’re always a ticking time bomb during crunch time. Heck, you’re tensed even during the event itself. But I don’t think I’ve seen you so…”

“Relaxed?”

Talinda’s lips quirk to the side. “That’s stretching it. I was about to say “neutral with a side of hot-temperredness”.”

“Hardy ha.”

“But seriously though.”

“Thanks,” Mike says, frowning. “I think. I can’t tell whether I should feel insulted or not.”

Talinda pats him on the shoulder, turning to leave. “For both of our sakes, it’s a compliment.”

“A backhanded one.”

“And now I’m taking it back,” Talinda says, twisting her head to the side. “You’re still a tense asshole. Shawn’s blind.”

“Nice to know.”

“Though I’ll say one thing.” Talinda turns to face him again, crossing her arms under her breasts. All of a sudden, her expression is serious. “I’ve never seen Chester so happy in a while.”

Mike raises an eyebrow, confused. “Isn’t he always happy?”

Talinda shakes her head. “It’s called a facade, Shinoda. Thought you of all people would know.”

She saunters off, leaving Mike to ponder her words.

And there she goes again speaking shit he hardly understand. Why can’t she just speak plainly for once?

Bottom line is, Mike needs to get the hell out of his forsaken school. That way he could get away from conspiring students, nosy coworkers, and muddled sentences.
They wrap things up at five in the evening. By this time, most of the visitors have disappeared, saved for families and friends lingering. Since the janitors are in charge of clearing the furniture, Mike is free to leave as soon as the exhibition ends. Though he sticks around for a couple of minutes to make sure he graded everybody.

He’s surprised that Chester never left, though he credits for his students for swarming him. Even when Mike and Chester are about to depart, they’re swarmed by farewells. The more enthusiastic ones are evidently for Chester. Mike doesn’t mind. There’s something about watching Chester’s cheeks colour that tickles his heart.

What he minds is the knowing smirks some of them are sporting. Mike knows he’s in for it come Monday.

But for now, he’s not going to stress about it. He’s finally done for the semester. He can finally kick back.

“Well, aren’t you Mr Popular,” Mike teases as they step outside. The warm Los Angeles air is a complete 180 to the gym’s cool air-conditioning. He welcomes the change with open arms.

“Watch out,” Chester jokes. “Looks like I’m here to replace you.”

“Please, be my guest. I would love a break.”

“If you want to clean up vomit for a change, that’s fine by me.”

Mike opens his mouth to throw another jest at him when Talinda sidles up between them.

“Hey there chicos,” she greets, draping an arm over each of their shoulders. Mike shrugs her off but Chester doesn’t seem to mind, leaning into her touch. “Aren’t you two getting chummy.”

An easy laugh leaves Chester’s lips. “Yup, we’re best pals now.”

“Well,” Mike corrects. “We’re getting there. Sorta.”

It’s not false. Throughout the day, their relationship has gained a little boost. While they still bump into the occasional roadblock, things have been more smooth sailing than normal. The dialogue between them isn’t as stilted. Mike even sneaks a jab or two in, which is highly unusual for him. Generally, he needs an average twelve months to be comfortable enough to be himself.

And yet here he is — the result of the wonders of Chester Bennington the Sunshine.

“Well whatever it is,” Talinda says, cutting through Mike’s train of thought. “We can figure it out later. We’re grabbing Indian, okay? All three of us.” She shoots Mike a pointed look at “all”.

Before Mike could respond to that, Chester makes the first move. “T, I have work.”

“No, you don’t. I called Phe. He’s letting you off for the night.”

Chester eyes narrow at her. “Seriously?”

“Yes, you dork.” She removes her arm from his shoulder, casting a nudge at his ribs. “When was the last time you went out and enjoyed yourself properly since you got here?”

“But—”

She doesn’t let him answer, quickly adding, “Anyway, I’m asking but I’m also telling. We’re taking
my car.” She strides off swiftly, possibly towards the staff’s parking lot and leaving the two men behind.

“Figures,” Chester remarks as they start after her. “She’s always like this.”

“As long she’s paying,” Mike says.

Chester arches an eyebrow. “Seriously?”

“Seriously what?”

“You’re going?”

Mike shrugs his shoulders. “I mean, it’s not like there’s anything in the fridge right now.”

“True. We need to buy shit tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” Mike echoes, reluctant. “Ugh, I just wanna sleep in tomorrow. Sleep and video games.”

“What about food?”

Mike waves his hand in dismissal. “I could order pizza.”

Chester’s brightens at that. “Hey, we could totally do that. That’ll be fun.” All of a sudden, his grin dims as if he’s sobered up. “Unless you’re busy. Or you don’t want to. I completely—”

“Ches,” Mike comforts. Part of his brain catches on the fact that he just called his roommate by some bizarre nickname. It may have not been the first time he has done so. God knows at this point. “We could do that. I’m free tomorrow.”

Chester nods slowly, a soft smile etched on his lips. “Cool. You know, I had a great time today.”

Mike freezes in place, the sudden change of subject leaving him dumbfounded and speechless. “Really?”

“Yeah,” comes the cheerful reply. “I really had fun with you. Wouldn’t be half as fun if you weren’t there.”

In that very moment, Mike can’t think straight, which just shows how dumb his brain is. Just a little compliment by Chester Bennington could leave him a mess. He doesn’t get it at all.

Maybe it’s the words Chester chose. The fact that Mike is considered “fun” to be around astounds him, especially since he’s known to be a downer.

Chester’s grin widens before breaking into a run. “If we’re playing Injustice 2,” he shouts, getting farther away from Mike. “I got dibs on Green Arrow!”

Mike watches him dash off, his insides warming. It’s been a while since somebody made him feel this way — happy and confused and touched. It’s a nice change.

Even if he thought Chester nosy and childish and annoying at first. But right now, in that moment, Mike can’t seem to see a link between Chester and all of those traits.

Maybe things would be okay. Maybe things are looking up for him.
And Mike doesn’t mind anyway. He likes playing as the Black Canary just fine.

Unable to fight off a smile, he takes off after them.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact, The Green Arrow and Black Canary are married in the game. So make of that what you will. XD

Spanish translations:
Idiota.: Idiot.
Chicos.: Boys.
One of the many things Chester is sure about himself is that, he isn’t a religious man. Not by a long shot.

It’s not a black sheep of the family kind of thing either. His family weren’t the religious sort. He could barely recall the last time he’s been inside a church. Senior year of high school?

But that doesn’t mean he doesn’t believe there’s no higher being in the universe. He’s definitely sure there is. Earthlings, whoever the high being is, and aliens. The universe is too vast to not have some random species floating in the vacuums of space.

Though that’s not the whole point. The point is, Chester isn’t partial to any religion. But if there’s one religion he’s interested in, it’s being Cocoa Puff-ist.

Okay, that may be a stretch. He doubts there’s even such a thing (one that he’s not aware of anyway). Who’s insane enough to start a religion over a breakfast cereal?

But the sweet, sweet, sweet—

The sound of something dropped onto the dining table snaps him out of his reverie.

“Are you daydreaming about Cocoa Puffs again?”

Chester whips his head upwards, meeting the eyes of an inquisitive Mike Shinoda, his roommate of two and a half months? Three months? Chester isn't much of a timekeeper.

Things have been great so far. While they do still have their disagreements (though that's normal with people of differing personalities), they haven't torn each other to pieces. Since their fight anyway. Then again, there's hardly any points to use over cigarettes (which Mike still hates with a passion) and choice of breakfast (Pop-Tarts still suck).

Considering it's the summer holidays, Mike has been around the apartment more often. If he's not
painting or banging on his keyboard, he'd planning for the upcoming semester. Sometimes he’d be away to department or school meetings, which Mike claims makes a perfect place to nap at.

But when he's not busy doing any of those things, he'd join Chester, which is a major surprise to him. No longer does Chester need to ask him to hang out. He'd be the one doing the initiating. Like Chester might be playing video games and Mike could settle himself next to him, either yelling at the screen or sketching him. Even if Chester would be the one doing it, Mike wouldn't brush him off before, either agreeing or giving a legitimate excuse to not spend time together.

He's touched that Mike really does want to hang out with him. It's been a while since he met somebody who wanted to hang out with him on their own accord or entertain his conversations.

Talking to Mike has been fascinating to say the least. As Chester got to know him, he noticed how similar they were in terms of humour, style, and perspectives, albeit some differences. It's nice. He could listen to Mike go on about anything for hours. He's quite captivating when he's out of his shell.

Except his sarcasm. Fuck Mike Shinoda's sarcasm.

“What?” Chester vehemently denies. “No!”

“You were,” Mike insists, lips quirked to the side. It’s close to a smile as he could get. Smiles from him is a rarity. He taps the corner of his mouth. “You got some drool over there.”

Immediately, Chester’s hand goes flying towards his own lips. It’s dry.

“Lame,” he grumbles. “Your jokes are lame. Uptight people suck at making jokes. And anyway, this is all your fault.”

“Hey, you’re the one that lost the bet, not me. Plus, you started it.”

Despite wanting to counter that, it is the truth. A week ago, Chester had proclaimed that Mike could not live without eating Pop-Tarts. If he managed to do so, Chester would go a week without Cocoa Puffs. Much to Chester’s astonishment, Mike took him up on the offer without a question.

Now he knows why.

“You’re the one who agreed to do it,” Chester huffs. “I wouldn’t be mooning here if you turned me down.”

“So you were daydreaming about Cocoa Puffs.”

“Oh fuck off.”

Mike snorts, gesturing towards the paper bag he suddenly dropped in front of Chester. “You’re welcome.”

Curiosity getting the better of him, Chester snatches the bag up and peers inside. Immediately, he’s greeted by the scent of heaven.

What an asshole. What an angel.

What even is Mike Shinoda?

“You’re a dead man, Shinoda.”

“Hey, I went out early to get that for you,” Mike defends. “Woke up at eight and shit to do that. And
this is how you repay me?”

Chester pulls out one of the cookies from the bag and takes a large bite. As always, the gooey chocolate and chewy texture sends him into euphoria. If Chester hasn’t been suffering through Cocoa Puffs withdrawal, he’d say these cookies were miles better than the cereal. “Fine,” he sighs between chews. “You’re forgiven.”

“Don’t—”

“Baby, take me to the feeling—”

Chester stifles a laugh. For the past couple of weeks, Chester has been pestering Mike to change that pesky but amusing ringtone of his. Mike had rolled his eyes and insisted that Carly Rae Jepsen is one of the best pop artists and she deserves to be his ringtone. Chester would’ve laughed his ass off if that statement was wrong.

“Huh,” Mike comments. “Unknown number.”

“Probably shouldn’t take that,” Chester suggests, mouth full of chocolatey goodness. He chews as he speaks. “Could be a scam.”

“Don’t talk with your mouth full unless you wanna choke.”

Chester nods vigorously, swallowing it all. “I said that you shouldn’t pick that up. It could be a scam.”

Mike stares down at his phone. “Could be urgent. Maybe somebody changed their phone number.”

“Hey, it’s your funeral.”

Mike rolls his eyes. “If I die, I want my coffin to be made out of glass. Anything transparent. That way you can see my dead body flip you off.” Ignoring Chester’s offended protests, he swipes his finger over the screen before lifting the device to his ear. “Hello?”

Chester expects Mike to follow with a “Sorry, wrong number” or a “I’m not interested”. He doesn’t expect Mike’s cheeks to be drained of its colour and stumbling over his words.

“Oh, hey!” he greets, his voice too chirpy for Chester’s liking. “Hey! Uh, wow... Wow, it’s been a long time.” Without sparing a glance at Chester, he moves towards the living room, possibly for more privacy.

So it’s somebody he knows, Chester thinks as he watches his roommate careen away. Huh.

If Chester wants to eavesdrop on Mike’s part of the conversation, he could. Instead, he tunes it out. As much as he’s curious, it isn’t his place to know. It must be a private matter since he went to the other end of the apartment.

Anyway, back to the task at hand.

Rising to his feet, he skips over to the fridge to extract a carton of milk.

That’s Phase Two. Now for Phase Three.

A minute later, Chester is sticking his spoon into his best creation of all time — chocolate chip cookie pieces in a glass of milk. It tastes as heavenly as it sounds like. A strangled moan slips out of his mouth as he lets his senses be overwhelmed by the godlike combination that is milk and
chocolate chip cookies.

Okay so there’s another god he’d worship in a heartbeat — the god of chocolate chip cookies. No questions whatsoever. Hands-down.

Well, he could be a worshiper of Cocoa Puffs and chocolate chip cookies. Best of both worlds kind of thing. Lots of people hold several beliefs at once.

He’s about to take another glorious spoonful when his ears pick up a distant but familiar voice.

“—Chester.”

The spoon almost slips out of his grip.

*Wait what?*

It must’ve been a figment of his imagination. Why would Mike randomly mention Chester out of the blue, especially to some random person on the phone?

Chester snaps his head in Mike’s direction. Any uncertainty vanishes as soon as his eyes meet Mike’s. His roommate looks startled, as if surprised his words caught his ears. Flashing him a grimace, Mike stalks off towards his room.

As soon as the door shuts behind him, the gears in Chester’s mind start shifting.

Mike hiding out in his room is not abnormal for him. He’s aware that Mike is one of the most private people on the planet. If it’s something that he doesn't want Chester to hear, that’s fine with him.

But what he doesn’t get is why Mike looked so worried? Who was that on the other end that could’ve spooked him out so much? Mike paled when he heard whoever is on the other end speak.

And why was Chester brought up?

*Maybe he’s just telling them about his new roommate,* he concurs. *I mean, why else would he bring me up?*

Several more alternatives materialize in his mind, all of them not as positive. He quietens his brain at the sound of a twisting doorknob. Mike’s shaky voice fills the apartment.

“...yeah. Oh okay! See you then. Yeah… Uh...right. Bye Ann.” Chester hears him exhale deeply, his footsteps approaching. He quickly returns to his meal, feigning blissful ignorance.

*Ann, huh? Never heard that name before.*

“That looks disgusting,” Mike remarks from behind him.

Chester glances behind him, following Mike’s line of sight. “No it doesn’t. You’re just jelly,” he says, ignoring Mike’s reprimand of talking with his mouth full. Again. He holds out his glass. “Want some?”

Mike arches an eyebrow, wrinkling his nose at Chester's concoction. “Jelly? Really?”

“Aren’t you? And really, do you want some? ”

Mike shakes his head, striding over to one of the kitchen cabinets. “I’d like to go through the day without barfing,” he declares, his face obscured by the door. “So no. But thanks anyway.”
Chester shrugs his shoulders. “Suit yourself. More for me.” He swallows before speaking what’s on his mind. “Who was that?” he asks casually.

He almost cringes as soon as he utters those words. He doesn’t have a problem with trying to sound nonchalance. He could nonchalance well, very well if he does say so of himself.

It’s just that he should’ve minced his words before saying them. Now Mike would definitely pick up that he overheard the conversation.

But he already knew that, didn’t he? They were looking at each other at the same time when Mike said his name.

“Oh, uh…” Mike fumbles with the jar of coffee grounds, avoiding eye-contact. Judging by his trembling stance and reddening ears, Mike’s definitely harbouring a secret.

It’s something that Chester picked up over the past couple of months — Mike’s body language. When Mike tells a lie, his ears turn a bright shade of red. It’s one of his more adorable characteristics.

“Just an old friend,” Mike finally answers. “She was...just asking about stuff. Y’know, catching up. Same ol’ shit.” He pauses to pull out a stack of coffee filters. “I, uh, was telling her I got a roommate. Recently. That’s why I said your name.”

“Oh okay,” Chester says, not knowing what else to add. A part of him wants to ask about it, maybe question if Mike divulged about Chester’s breathtaking good looks or bitched about him behind his back. But the poor man looks so stunned that he doesn’t have the heart to poke him. “That’s cool.”

“Yeah.” Mike’s gaze drifts down to the electric kettle, brow creased. “Is the water still hot?”

“Think so.”

“Okay, cool,” Mike replies without moving a muscle.

Whoever that messed Mike up, she messed him up big time. In the months he’s known him, Chester hasn’t seen him this...shaken up.

Mike has never been one to crumble over something like that. He's detached and cool-headed. He wouldn't let anything get in his way.

Unless they're social interactions. But hey, everybody has a couple of weaknesses.

Chester gives him another once-over. Based on what he's seeing, Mike is showing a couple of signs. He's not sure whether his hunch is right. It seems mild even. But it's better to help him through it than being a bystander even if it's just an educated guess or slight problem.

“Mike, I don’t think you should be drinking coffee.”

“Why not?” Mike asks, eyes still glued to the kettle.

“You’re shaking.”

“I’m fine.”

Chester rises to his feet, taking small steps towards his roommate. ”Mike, is it okay if you come over with me to the couch?”

Mike frowns. "Why would it be a problem?"


"I don't want to freak you out." Chester's gaze travels down to Mike's fingers, which are curled around the edge of the counter. "But I really want to help you. Is that okay?"

For a long moment, it seems like Mike's having an internal war with himself but eventually he relents. "Sure. Okay."

Chester leads the way towards the couch, the both of them sitting on opposite ends. He makes sure to leave some space between them. He doesn’t want him to feel claustrophobic. His ears tell him that Mike’s breathing is becoming shallower by the second.

He could do this. It’s been a while. But he definitely could do this.

"I need you to calm down,” Chester instructs gently. “Take deep breaths, Mike. It’ll pass. I’m here. I’m not leaving you."

Mike nods his head slowly, gulping as much as he could. He ends up breaking into a small fit of coughs.

"It’s okay. Take your time. There’s no rush.”

Mike bobs his head, doing as he’s told.

Chester’s hand inches closer towards Mike. One thing about Chester is that he’s a touchy person. When he sees somebody upset or worried, he’s always there with a hand to hold and shoulder to cry on. But Mike has never been susceptible to touch, tending to shy away from it. Every time they accidentally brush hands, his cheeks turns a faint shade of pink and he’d start acting weird. Chester doesn’t want to put him on the spot.

So he spends the next couple of minutes providing him with assurances in hushed tones. Mike begins to relax a little, though his breathing is still too shallow for his own liking.

“Can I…?” Mike harrumphs, eyes trained down to his feet. “Um...this is so embarrassing. But uh…”

Chester shakes his head. “There’s nothing to be embarrassed about. It’s okay. You don’t need to tell me if you’re not ready.”

“No, it’s just…” Mike raises his head, brown meeting brown. “Can I…?” He pauses to heave a sigh and squeeze his eyelids shut. “When I’d… When I’d get these attacks, Brad would hold me. It sounds really— It’s really stupid and dumb… I— Is it okay if you would…?”

Chester blinks, his jaw heavy all of a sudden. It’s an odd request, especially from Mike. Mike Shinoda doesn’t ask to be held. Never.

Then again, he only knows him for several months. And who is he to turn him away?

“Er… I mean, yeah. Yeah! Sure.”

A soft smile spreads across Mike’s lips. Chester’s breath catches in his throat.

“Thank you,” his roommate says quietly. He scoots closer to Chester until their thighs brush against one another. For a moment, Chester expects him to take his hand in his.

Instead, Mike does something very unlike of him.

He leans his head against Chester’s shoulder.
Instantly, sirens sound in Chester’s head. His pulse begin to steadily. Hopefully, Mike doesn’t take notice.

Unfortunately, he must have. He pulls away. Chester’s heart silently mourns the loss of contact. “I’m sorry! I didn’t—”

Chester wills himself to relax. He shouldn’t freak out or read too much into this. Mike is having a panic attack. It may be mild but he needs Chester’s full attention. He needs him through this.

“It’s okay,” he promptly answers. “That was okay. Don’t worry.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah,” he answers, making sure to balance his gentleness and firmness in his tone. “It’s okay.”

Mike doesn’t seem convinced but he lays back down. They stay like that for a while. As in on instinct, Chester wraps an arm around his shoulder. For a split second, Mike’s body tenses but eases up. He almost retracts his arm.

“Is this okay?” Chester asks softly.

Mike nods.

For the next several minutes, neither of them utters a word. In the midst of it, Mike’s breathing calms.

Chester has never been fond of the quiet. The quiet has always made him uncomfortable. It’s why he revels in noise. Noise doesn’t make him lonely or cause some form of distress.

But there’s something about the silence, with a warm body and slow breathing for company. It’s soothing. It’s calming. It’s nice.

He hopes Mike knows that he’s being genuine. While his psychology part of him is taking control, he’s still him. He’s still Chester, the man whose concern is of the well-being of his roommate.

“I’m sorry,” Mike breaks the silence moments later. Chester’s not sure how much time has passed. But he’s sure his cookies are a pile of mush in his glass right now. For the first time in awhile, he doesn’t care.

“Don’t be sorry,” Chester replies. “It’s okay.”

"Thank you," Mike whispers after a brief wordless moment. “For… For not judging. Or something.”

"I’ll never judge you,” Chester sincerely assures. “I’m just glad you’re okay.”

They resume their silence. Instead of letting the peace sink in, a lone thought runs wild in Chester’s mind.

Who the fuck called Mike and left him like this?
Chapter End Notes

To those who liked Mike's POV, I'm sorry to change that XD. But Chester's POV suited the way things would be framed here. Hopefully. I'm trying to find my identity writing him so I apologize if he comes across as flat or anything haha. Mike's POV will come back in Act 3. Haven't decided if Chester's POV would appear as well but we'll see how it goes.

Also, I can’t confirm if Cocoa Puffs are amazing since I’ve never eaten it before. I'm not American haha. Also the cookie in the milk thing is what my younger brother likes to do. It looks disgusting.

Mike's ringtone in this chapter is "Run Away With Me" by Carly Rae Jepsen.
out of all the days, Wednesdays are Chester's favourite days. For work anyways. If it's overall, Saturdays still come up top. Hands-down.

Not many people frequent the bar on Wednesday nights. The place isn’t filled with deafening chatter like Fridays or Saturdays but isn’t as quiet like Mondays. It's a mix of both, though mostly leaning towards the latter.

Tonight is like any other Wednesday. The only rumble comes from a gaggle of college kids trying their hands at darts. Besides them are a couple of men dressed in sharp suits, murmuring to one another in a booth. On one end of the bar sits three women giggling as they whisper in animated tones.

An ordinary night for an ordinary Wednesday. It’s fitting. Calm and peaceful. Everything Chester isn't. It's nice for a change.

Though it’ll be way better if Mike’s phone call hasn’t been running circles through his mind.

For the rest of the day, Mike pretends the call hadn't bothered him, that he even received a call at all. He spent most of the day locked up in his room, yelling that he's busy every time Chester knocks on the door.

It's like a stab to the heart. It made him think of the initial days when Mike actively ignored him and the his dread worsens.

But Chester is an optimist so when Mike shows his face in the afternoon, he lets out a big declaration during lunch.

"You know you could come to me," he told him between bites of macaroni and cheese. "if you ever need to talk to someone."
Mike had stared at him like two other heads sprouted out of his neck.

“Yeah,” he said slowly, skeptical. “Sure.”

That was weird. It’s like he’s never been offered an ear before. But I doubt that. I mean, he has Brad and Joe. Maybe T. I’m sure he’s talked about his problems to somebody. I hope he’s okay. I hope he’s not doing anything stupid. But I doubt he’ll be doing anything stupid. He said he’ll be working on a new painting. He better be doing that because if he isn’t, I’ll—

He stops himself, a different idea conjuring in his head.

Or maybe Mike’s talking about him behind his back. That’s why he brought Chester up. That’s why he ran off to hide in his room when Chester heard him.

That’s why Mike freaked out. Maybe he’s afraid that Chester’s aware that Mike doesn’t…

He furiously shakes his head.

That can’t be right. He doesn’t seem like he hates me. Hell, we buried the hatchet months ago. Why would he think that?

But the whole anxiety thing. While it was mild and thankfully not a full-blown out attack, it brought out memories from Chester’s own past. Except without the niceties because fuck, Sam.

Seriously, fuck Sam. The less I think about her, the better. Because fuck Sam. She doesn’t deserve any ounce of—

“Hello? Earth to Planet Bennington?”

Chester jerks away from the waving hand shoved in front of his eyesight. “What the fuck, man?! You gave me a heart attack!”

The owner of the hand retracts his hand, eyebrow raised. “Jeez, just checking on you. You were spacing out. Something on your mind?”

Chester brushes it off. “It’s nothing.” He picks up the damp rag draped across his shoulder and begins wiping the counter.

“I doubt it’s nothing,” Dave notes. “You don’t stare off into space unless you’re worried about something.”

The lone customer at the bar hails Chester, requesting for a rum and coke. Chester hollers that he’ll be ready with his order soon.

He’s hoping that Dave would leave him alone now since he has to work on an order. But his friend watches him, expectantly with crossed arms and with an inquisitive look.

Okay, now Chester is starting to resent Wednesdays a little. Dave wouldn’t be spending his time studying his handsome face if it’s a Friday.

“I know I’m devastatingly handsome,” Chester comments offhandedly, plucking a bottle of Coke from the fridge. “I mean, tell me something I don't already know.”

“Sarcasm, Bennington?” Dave notices. “Didn't expect that from you. But seriously, what’s up?”

Chester pauses pouring the rum, giving his friend’s question a thought. He could ask Dave about it.
Maybe he might know this Ann. After all, Dave knows Mike longer than him. Not as well but there’s a chance he might know Ann too.

“You know Mike, right?” Chester starts, as he resumes his task. “Personally?”

“Not really. I know Brad better.”

“Right, right.”

Whoever called Mike, it’s definitely not Brad. For one, Brad isn’t called “Ann”. Unless it’s a nickname. But Mike referred to her caller as “she” so Chester doubts that. Secondly, Mike pointed out he hasn’t spoken to Ann in a while. So that definitely rules out Brad. And third of all, Mike wouldn’t freak out like if Brad called him.

Well, he could ask Brad himself. But based on word of mouth, Brad is unhealthily protective of Mike. He wouldn’t impart any of Mike’s secrets. 

Unless I tell him how dire the situation is, Chester muses. He mentally shakes his head. 

Nah, he won’t believe me. Or would he? Would it be weird to ask?

But maybe...

“I was just wondering, has Brad ever mentioned somebody named “Ann”?” Chester asks as he slides the drink towards the customer.

Dave frowns, stroking his stumpy beard. He looks like a pudgy dwarf out of a Tolkien movie. If a dwarf could be taller than four feet. Or a balding leprechaun

Chester is tempted to whip out his phone to capture the moment and post it on Instagram. Maybe even attach a LOTR dwarf or American leprechaun? Discuss! along with it. Problem is that he’s asking Dave for a favour and he’d rather not incite his wrath on a nice shift like this. He could throw a mean right hook if provoked. And that's not even speaking from personal experience.

“Not that I can recall. Why?”

Before Chester could answer to that, a familiar voice beats him to it.

“Oh, I know who that is.”

Joe Hahn sashays over to the bar, wide smirk plastered on. Chester isn't sure whether he should laugh or groan.

Ever since Joe found out that Chester works at one of the more decent bars in town, he’s made a point to swing by at least once a week. “All in the name of being neighbourly,” he claimed. “Have to support us neighbours, eh?”

Chester doubts that’s it, considering Joe hasn’t done much of being a good neighbour. While he’s a good person to banter or trade inane jabs with (Dave likes to scoff at their brilliant ideas. Chester thinks he has a stick up his ass.), he’s not exactly reliable when he’s paying his tab and he has an annoying habit of requesting for a free drink. Joe hasn’t been remotely subtle about the latter.

Like right at the moment.

“If you promise to give me a free drink, gentlemen,” Joe announces, plonking himself on the stool. He flips his newly grown ponytail to the side, as if it’s a Pantene commercial. Chester has an urge to
snark at him but holds his tongue. “I might indulge in a secret or two. Mike Shinoda’s dark past all laid out for the world to see. For a price, of course.”

Chester groans in protest. “Come on, Hahn. Help a man out here.”

“Hey, info can’t come cheap, ya know. Nothing comes cheap.”

“But—”

“For the last time, man,” Dave interrupts, barging into the conversation. “Just because Chester’s your neighbour, doesn’t mean you get a free drink.”

“But it’s common decency!”

“Neighbours doesn't equal free drinks.”

While Joe and Dave embark on their typical squabbles, a light bulb pops up in Chester’s head. It's a stupid idea but hey, desperate times, right?

“How about a dollar?” Chester suggests as he rummages through his wallet. “instead of a drink?”

Joe shoots him a dirty look. “Just a dollar?”

“Better than nothing, right?”

“True.”

“Ches, I thought you were giving up being a nosy ass,” Dave reminds him, shooting him a look of disapproval.

“Hey, I wanna know why Mike’s so troubled by her,” Chester justifies, pushing the crumpled note towards his neighbour. “If there’s something I can help him with, I wanna know.”

And if there's a chance he's talking shit about me.

“But—”

Joe’s grin widens like a Cheshire cat’s. “Wise choice, my friend.” He snatches the money off the counter, making a dramatic display of holding the bill up to the light.

If Mike hadn't told him that Joe has a graphic arts degree, he'd assume he's a drama graduate.

Chester taps his foot impatiently, eager to know. “Well?”

“Well,” Joe begins, squinting up at the note. “it’s genuine.”

“That’s not what I meant and you know it.”

“No shit.” Joe slams the paper down onto the counter, earning him a couple of looks from nearby patrons. He ignores him. “Ann is someone Mike knows.”

“And?”

His grin doesn’t waver, pearly whites shining under the lighting. “Another buck and I’ll tell you.”

Chester’s eyes narrow.
What the hell? Of course. Why should I be surprised at this point?

That's what Chester was afraid of — being scammed. He should've known better by now, that Joe is always out to profit and leave everybody else in the dust.

That's what he gets for seeing the best in others.

Chester throws his hands up in the air. “Seriously?”

“Hey, you asked for info. I gave it to you.”

“Info about stuff that I don't already know!”

“Well maybe if you would've been clearer about that,” Joe argues, his voice maintaining its playfulness. “We wouldn't be in this situation.”

“But—”

“And I’m not gonna divulge Mike’s private life without his say-so. You know how much he hates that. Thought you had this pep talk.”

“You cheated!” Chester accuses.


Since wringing a customer's neck is out of question, Chester resorts to the next best thing.

“Phe!”

“Don’t drag me into this!” his friend hollers from the other end of the bar, refilling one of the Gossip Trio's shot glass.

“But he stole money from me!”

“That’s between you and him, man.” Dave saunters over to the two of them, whiskey bottle in hand. He pushes it towards Chester. “Anyway, you agreed to it.”

Chester lets out a dramatic moan, ignoring the stares he receives from some patrons. All he could hope is that they won’t lose customers over something stupid like this. “I swear to god if Mike’s been talking shit about me, I—”

“Nah,” Joe says airily. “Mike isn’t that kind of guy. Most of the time anyway. If he does talk shit about you, he’d make sure you’re not in front of his face.” He waves the dollar around. “Hey, Davey. What can I get a dollar for?”


“A Bud Light? And ooh, peanuts too. Put in on my tab.”

“Sure,” Dave says, moving away to grab the aforementioned items. Chester catches him grumbling under his breath as he passes by, muttering words like "tab" and "ass".

“Hey, I wouldn’t worry about it too much,” Joe suddenly pipes up. He inclines his body, arms resting on the counter top. “He likes you, you know?”
As much as Chester would like to believe that, he doesn't. Not all of it anyway.

“Yeah, I guess. It’s just that…” He worries his bottom lip with his teeth, unsure whether he should indulge in his roommate’s private life.

*Maybe Joe could help? As much as he gives Mike a hard time, he definitely loves him. Yeah.*

“He looked spooked when he got the call,” he explains as he stows the whiskey away. "From this Ann person. Like he saw a ghost.”

Joe tilts his head to the side, pursing his lips. “How about you start from the top?”

Chester shrugs. “There’s nothing to it. He got a call, freaked a bit. He mentioned my name. He went inside his room to finish the call when he noticed I heard him. And he called the person “Ann” before hanging up.”

Joe’s eyebrows knit. “Did he say what it was about?”

“Just that they were catching up. He told me that he mentioned to her that I’m his roommate. I didn’t wanna ask too much. Wasn’t my place.”

Dave returns, with the beer and peanuts in tow. “Huh,” Joe states, claiming the alcohol with stubby fingers. “I could try to pry it out of him. Just to see what’s up.”

“Don’t,” Chester chides him automatically. “If he wants to talk about it, he’ll talk about it. You know how he is.”

Joe lights up, eyes sparkling. “Ooh,” he proclaims in a sing-song voice. “Sounds like somebody’s gotta a crush.”

Chester blinks, unsure of what to make of that. Only Joe Hahn could make such a drastic change in conversation topic. "What?"

"You know..." Joe waggles his eyebrows. "You. Mike. Crush."

“I *do* not,” Chester vehemently denies because *what kind of bullshit is that?*

Joe sends him a wink. “That’s what somebody would say if they have a crush,” he proclaims before jumping out of his seat, setting his sights on the trio of women patrons.

For some reason he can’t explain, that sentence sticks out in Chester’s mind for the rest of the night.

It’s not that he’s confused. He’s not. He definitely doesn’t have a crush on Mike Shinoda.

Not that that means that he’s ugly. In fact, Mike’s not bad looking at all. From an objective standpoint, he’s *very* good-looking. Aesthetically pleasing. It's a hard, cold fact, like how the grass is green and the sun sets in the West. As his designated roommate and maybe friend, that’s all Chester could see him as.

Sure, he’s made a couple of passes at him — little teases just to rile him up. But that’s what they are — empty teasing. If he seriously acknowledges that Mike is fuckable, things won’t end well. Because Chester is an all or nothing kind of guy. For him, either he fucks somebody or he doesn’t. And as hot Mike is, he doesn’t want to fuck Mike if things will change for the worse.

Though, he’ll admit Mike has a nice smile. A lovely smile. The problem with Mike is that doesn’t smile often. His face is always plastered with that resting bitch face.
But hell, when he does...

Chester shakes his head, willing his thoughts away. He doesn’t have a crush on Mike Shinoda. At all. He's positive. Without a doubt. There’s no inkling of attraction. Not at all.

“Remind me to ban him for a month,” Chester mumbles later after Joe takes his leave. "He planted some stupid shit in my brain."

“As much as I'd like to pin the blame on him,” Dave says. "you let yourself be influenced by his shit."

“He stole my money!”

“That’s hardly stealing, Ches. Take responsibility for your actions, Jesus.”

He’s definitely not wrong. But Chester is nothing but stubborn and he feels like blaming somebody tonight. “But don’t you not want to see him for a month?” he tries coaxing him. “I hear time from Joseph Hahn is good for the soul.”

Dave casts him one last eye-roll, turning his attention to a patron who’s currently lamenting about his crushed dreams to be an Olympic swimmer at the top of his lungs. It's a rare occurrence on a Wednesday. Quite unlikely that they’d even have drunk customers on one.

Then again, if there’s Chester has learned for the past hours since he woke up, no day is a calm day. Not even a Wednesday.

“Fine!” Dave calls over his shoulder and above the drunkard's sobs. “A week!”

After calling the drunk customer a taxi, Dave chases Chester out too.

“You’re no used to me half-dead on your feet,” he told him but not unkindly. “Go home and sleep it off or jerk it off or whatever.”

“It’s only ten, Dave. I just got some things on my mind.” At Dave’s dubious expression, Chester adds, “C’mon, I’m functioning fine. Like a well-oiled machine.”

“First of all, it’s 10.15pm. Second of all, I think you almost stepping onto the vomit outside confirms that you need more oiling. Or sleep. Or somebody to talk to. Probably somebody to talk to. If you won’t tell me, call T or something.”

Chester wanted to argue further but Dave is an insistent man that he was compelled to leave. Not to mention that Dave threatened to get Talinda to haul his ass home. Chester has to give him credit. he knows his weaknesses very well.
At any rate, he’s not calling Talinda about his thoughts. Or anybody except Mike because Mike’s the one with the problem.

Unless he could get a hold of this Ann figure. Maybe tell her to fuck off or something.

That would be a wonderful idea.

When he swings the front door wide open, he expects his roommate to be cooped up in his room with music playing faintly in the background.

Contrary to that, Mike’s leaning against the kitchen counter, phone pressed to an ear and deep in conversation.

“Trust me, alright? He’s not gonna like it. I mean, who would?” Mike pauses, leaning his weight on his other leg. For a split second, Chester’s stomach does a flip, thinking the caller might be Ann. If it is, he’s ready to snatch the phone out of Mike’s grip and tell her to never call Mike ever again. His roommate puts his fears to rest when it’s his turn to speak.

“Brad, that’s crazy talk. I can’t— ...That doesn’t mean he’ll be up for it.” Mike threads his fingers through his hair, huffing in frustration. “But— Fuck, why did I say that? Why the fuck did I say that? God!”

Chester could not help but jump at his sudden rise in volume. Mike’s gaze flickers over to him, finally recognizing his presence. He blanches. “Er, I’ll call you back,” he tells Brad, tearing away from Chester. “Yeah... Okay, bye.”

Mike presses the screen with his thumb before slipping the phone back into one of his jeans’ pockets. Mike heaves another sigh before forcing himself to meet Chester’s stare.

“Hey,” Chester says.

“Hi.” Mike reaches behind him to hold out a PlayStation 4 game. Its plastic wrap is still intact. Emblazoned on the cover stands a white dude in the middle of the jungle with a gun in hand. “Wanna try this out?”

Chester doesn’t end up trying it out because unfortunately for him, his Achilles heel are video games.

Without a doubt they’re fun. Chester loves fun.

But just because he finds something fun, doesn't mean he's any good at it.

No matter the numerous times he’s proven this to Mike, the stubborn mule refuses to trust his own pair of eyes. He manages to put it through his thick skull when Chester pretends to fail the opening
section of the game. Despite that, Mike is hesitant to accept such a fact.

They’ve been glued to the television screen for the last couple of hours, watching Mike control the protagonist who somehow is a discount Indiana Jones. Or a humanoid monkey. Or the luckiest man alive.

Seriously, how has this man not fucked up yet? No mortal could slide down a rocky path, toss their grappling hook towards a fraying wooden beam, swing over towards a craggy wall, and flawlessly grabbed a hold of it.

Without fumbling or stumbling.

And yes, it’s a video game.

But still. How?

Besides such unrealism, the story is engrossing, the graphics are life-like, and the characters are compelling. Chester finds it funny that all those things were much more in tune with realism. Nevertheless, he has never been enraptured by a video game as much as this.

That is until Mike reaches a section that he somehow seems to mess up at.

It’s a simple jump. All he needs to do is leap towards the ledge in front of him. But for some unexplainable reason, Mike keeps fucking up. He’d send discount Indiana Jones plummeting to his death. Again and again and again and—

“Fuck this shit,” Mike swears, tossing the controller carelessly onto the coffee table. It clatters loudly onto the surface. “Ugh, I can’t do anything right today.”

“It’s just an off-day, man. You’ll get it right next time.” Chester tucks his feet beneath him on the other end of the couch. “It’s a new game anyway. You’ll get used to it.”

“I’ve played the previous three before,” Mike grumbles, pushing his slipping glasses further up his nose. “Gameplay is about the same so I doubt that’s it.”

“Then it’s just an off-day.”

“It’s not— ” He cuts himself off, frowning down at the controller. After several seconds, he picks it back up and dangles it in front of Chester. “You wanna a go?”

He shakes his head. “Nah, I have butter fingers. He’ll just end up squashed on the pavement.”

“No, you don’t,” Mike says, dumping the controller back onto the table. Chester’s certain they’ll need to replace it at this rate. Poor Mr Controller is getting a lot of boo boos tonight.

Or today? Is it even morning right now? Chester has lost track of time as per usual.

“You have nimble fingers,” Mike blurts out all of a sudden. “They’re long and— and…” He doesn’t finish his sentence, a faded blush settling on his cheeks. Chester has a feeling to what he’s thinking. Because Chester’s mind is constantly swimming in the gutter.

"And what?” Chester questions, lips quirked to the side.

Mike forces out his words, looking at everywhere but Chester. “And uh, nimble.” His voice falls into an audible whisper. Chester almost doesn’t catch it. “They’re long and nimble. Yeah.”
Chester taps Mike on the shoulder, compelling his roommate to refocus his attention on him. He wiggles his fingers. “Wanna find out?”

Mike shoots him a glare. Despite trying to ooze seriousness, he seems to be fighting off a mortified look. “No, you are not putting them in me.”

Chester blinks. That is certainly not what he means. Despite the loss in translation, Chester has learnt something new today.

And that is Mike isn’t a bottom. A strange revelation. But hey, Chester doesn’t mind. He wouldn’t mind letting—

Okay, brain. Stop acting horny. This is not the time.

“Hey, I’m not putting them in you,” Chester corrects him. “I’m putting them on you.”

It happens in a whirlwind. One moment they’re sitting on either end of the couch and the next, Chester has Mike pinned onto his back. His thighs clamp around both of Mike’s sides, holding him down while his fingers attack, desperate to find his roommate’s weak spot.

Mike’s laugh is one of the most melodious sounds Chester has ever heard in his life. It’s so infectious that Chester can’t help but do the same.

“Stop!” Mike wheezes between laughs when Chester finds his weak spot — his neck. “Holy shit, Chester! Get off me!”

Ignoring his request, Chester takes the opportunity to lean towards Mike’s ear. His lips barely ghosts it.

“How’s that for nimble?” he murmurs.

That’s when things take a turn for the weird.

It’s meant to be an innocent taunt, all in the name of fun and games. He’s uncertain whether it’s the way he says it or the compromising position they’re in.

Amidst Mike’s shaking body and quaking laughter, Chester feels it.

The skip of the heart. The tremble down the spine.

Chester halts his movements, his fingers brushing Mike’s neck. Mike stills underneath him.

Now that they’ve stopped shifting, Chester could see Mike. Hell, not just see. His senses are now enveloped by Mike. All he could see is the coffee flecks in Mike’s walnut orbs. All he could smell is the hint of spearmint and lavender. All he could feel is the warmth radiating from the body beneath him.

All of this just solidifies the fact that Mike is beautiful. He’s the most beautiful person he’s had the pleasure of laying his eyes on.

It’s also now that he realises the lack of space between them. If he leans an inch closer, their noses would brush against each other. If he pushes more forward, their lips would touch.

And he doesn’t know what to do about it.

And god, his—
Suddenly, the body underneath him rolls away, sending Chester landing on the couch. Mike isn’t as lucky. He ends up crashing onto the floor.

Thankfully, he doesn’t smack his face into the table. Instead, he lands squarely in the space between the coffee table and the couch. Chester’s thighs must’ve loosen their grip on his sides. Otherwise, both of them would’ve ended up on the floor with a concussion each.

“Jesus, Mike!” he exclaims. “Are you okay?”

“Mm hmm,” Mike answers, voice muted by the wooden flooring. “Just leave me to die here. That’ll be great.”

It’s possibly a self-deprecating joke. It wouldn’t be the first time Mike has made one. Chester doesn’t treat it like such. “I’m not leaving you to die.”

“Why not?” Mike demands, sitting upright. Seeing him wedged between furniture would’ve been a more comical sight had the atmosphere retained its lightness. The abrupt change places Chester on high alert. “It’ll be great. Then I wouldn’t… I wouldn’t…” He falters, staring down at his hands.

“Mike,” Chester says, moving to sit upright. “You can talk to me. If you want to. You know I’m here to listen, right?”

Clambering back up onto the couch, Mike slumps against the back of it. “But that’s not… That’s not why…” He exhales heavily. “I just have some things on my mind.”

“You can tell me.”

“I fucked up. I did something bad. Really, really bad.”

“Let me be the judge of that.” Chester pauses, recollecting himself. As much as he wants to share Mike’s burden, he doesn’t want to drive him away by appearing assertive. It won’t end well for either party. And Chester knows that Mike needs help as much as he’d prefer playing the tough guy. “That is if you want. We don’t have to do this if you’re not ready.”

He receives a shrug as a reply. “Well, I’m gonna have to tell you sooner or later. Might as well be now.” Mike doesn’t continue, eyes glued to the ceiling. “Yeah,” he says after a wordless moment, sounding more like he’s talking to himself. “Maybe tomorrow. Or later in the morning. It’s like one right now, right?”

“Yeah,” Chester confirms without checking the time. He’s probably an hour off.

“Alrighty then.” Pushing himself off the seat, Mike strides away without sparing Chester a backwards glance. “Goodnight.”

Before Chester could utter a single syllable, Mike shuts the door behind him.
Chester’s deep in the dream realm when he’s pulled out of it by a hiss near his ear. He almost tackles the intruder to the ground, ready to give them a piece of his mind.  

Because seriously he just won a lifetime supply of Cocoa Puffs and he was about to approach the countless trucks carrying the cereal and then this jerkass decides to ruin everything.  

Through the fog of darkness, he finally comprehends the identity of the intruder. Unfortunately, he’s too soft-hearted to stay mad, even if this is the second heart attack he’s gotten in the last twelve hours. Maybe even less.  

“Fucking hell,” he yelps, rubbing a sleepy eye. He pushes himself upright. “I could’ve killed you, you know? Give me some warning next time.”  

“Sorry,” Mike mumbles. “And you couldn’t kill me. I know karate. You don’t know any martial arts.  

Letting a yawn escape his lips, Chester taps his cheeks lightly. If they’re going to have a conversation, he’s going to need to be fully attentive. “You underestimate me.”  

“Same here.”  

Chester shakes his head, whiling the last of his drowsiness away. “This is weird,” he announces. “I’m gonna turn the lights on.”  

Mike’s fingers clasps themselves around his wrist, deterring him. “I’d rather we talk like this.”  

The only source of light at the moment is from the street lamps, the lighting bathing the room poorly. But it’s enough for Chester to discern Mike in the dark. Well, he could tell Mike is wearing his glasses despite the lighting and his lack of proper sight. It'll do.  

“Oh, Chester says slowly, perplexed. He pries Mike’s grip off him and reaches for his own pair of glasses. “Sure,” he says, putting them on. "So what’s wrong?”  

He must’ve done something wrong because Mike backs towards the door. “God, I’m an idiot. I shouldn’t have woken you up. It’s like three in the morning. And you were working late. And yeah I know you came back early but still. I’m sorry I’ll—”  

Well. Time to put on my psychology hat again. Or try to anyway.  

“Mike, I don’t care about the sleep,” Chester starts, throwing the covers off himself. He’s itching to approach Mike but doesn’t in fear of scaring him off. To make up for that, he musters as much sincerity as possible into his words. “I’m here you listen to you. It doesn’t matter the time or the place. I’m there if you need me.”  

“Really?” Mike peers at him though the darkness. There’s an unreadable expression that crops up his face. It’s the tone of his voice that gives him away. He seems puzzled, as if touched, as if nobody has ever said that to him before. Chester’s heart dies a little at that.  

Shouldn’t he have gotten something like that from his parents? Brad? Joe? Why does he look at me like that every time I say something?  

“Yeah,” Chester affirms aloud, sounding more confident. “So what do you want to talk about?”  

For a while, Mike doesn’t respond. A part of Chester is afraid that he’d just escape again. But then
Mike lumbers over to sit at the edge of Chester’s bed.

“Chester,” he begins lowly, peering at him under dark lashes. Chester likes them — his lashes. They’re long and thick. It’s attractive. One of Mike’s aesthetically pleasing traits.

“Yeah?” Chester asks, barely a whisper.

“Please don’t be mad. Or laugh at me.”

“Why would I do any of that?” Chester asks.

“Just...promise me.”

Without missing a beat, he does so.

So with a sharp intake, Mike drops the bomb.

“Will you…? Will you be my boyfriend?”

Chapter End Notes

I'll be honest, that ending is one of the reasons I wanted to write it in Chester's POV. XD

Also, if anybody is curious, the video game Mike plays is Uncharted 4: A Thief's End. It's one of my favourite games of all time haha.
Truth to be told, that’s the last thing he expected to spill from Mike’s lips because it's just not realistic. What he expected Mike to tell him why that random call he got the morning call uncomfortable. Maybe even the one he got from Brad. But most of all, whatever he wanted to say on the couch. Not...whatever this is. Unless that's what he meant to say. Which doesn't make any ounce of sense.

Because Mike Shinoda asked him to be his boyfriend. Just like that. Sprung out of the blue. At the wee hours of the morning. Chester might be more responsive to it if one, he isn’t at 3.00am (he’s probably wrong but he’s groggy so sue him) and two, he believes him.

Not to say that he thinks Mike a liar. The man isn’t as good as a liar as he’d like to think he is.

Because Mike Shinoda is not interested in Chester Bennington. At all. Not a single hint of romantic attraction at all. It’s obvious when somebody doesn’t respond well to your flirtation. Every person that he’s flirted with could string a coherent sentence. Mike either fumbles with his words or deflects in the most awkward way possible.

So this can't be right. This is likely to be some caught-in-the-moment bullshit. Or some weird defense mechanism of his. That could be. He's stalling.

Whatever that just happened? It doesn’t mean anything.

It must have dawned on to Mike about the content of his words because he unexpectedly leaps off the bed.

“Holy shit,” he says, more to himself. He begins pacing the room. “Wait, that’s not what I— Oh my god! I’m an idiot. Holy shit.”

Chester blinks. Yup, he's really not used to Mike being anxious. It doesn't crop up often.

“It’s okay, Mike,” he says calmly, hoping that another mild anxiety attack makes another grand appearance. “Just—”

“Look, it’s not— I fucked up. I’m sorry,” Mike cuts in. His gaze lands on the bedroom door, his body angled, ready to zip out. He takes a hesitant foot forward. “Just forget about what I said. I
didn’t—”

It’s hard to tell the state Mike’s in in the poor lighting. But from making out his form in the dark, he’s ready to bolt.

But he can’t. Not after he explains himself.

“Mike, let’s…” Chester exhales, as he swings his feet over his bed. “We’re not doing this in the dark.” He's halfway off the bed when Mike makes his move.

“Wait!” Mike protests, arms flailing and suddenly his palms are on Chester’s chest, sending both of them crashing down onto the bed.

If what happened before was intimate, the position they’re in now is a thousand times more worse.

Because they’re lying on Chester’s bed.

Because Mike is lying on top of Chester with his palms against his chest.

His bare chest.

Yup, Chester is unquestionably awake now.

Chester swears his pounding heart is going to break out of his chest. His ears is filled with the unsteady thumps. It’s so deafening that he's positive Mike could hear it too.

The first thought that crosses his mind is to push Mike off him. His second is to roll away, like what Mike did before. His limbs refuse to cooperate, frozen solid.

So he lies there, wondering if Mike would remove himself on his own accord.

In the meanwhile, Chester tries his best not to block out everything Mike from his brain and body. He tries to block out the warmth radiating from his body, the thigh pressing against his hardening groin, the minty breath against his neck.

It’s things like that that makes it difficult for him to imagine a faceless demon in his place. All of his senses are overcame with things that are distinctively Mike.

Since Chester’s a stubborn man (his family and friends can attest to that), he doesn’t listen to his brain. His heart leads the way, guiding his line of sight upwards to meet Mike’s.

It could be the weak lighting or his imagination but he sees a glint of desire in Mike’s eyes.

Chester’s throat constricts.

Their lips are barely inches away from each other. If Chester decides to—

As if burned, Mike draws away quickly, moving back to stand. “Sorry,” he apologizes, clearing his throat as he smooths out his clothes. “I didn’t mean to do that.”

Chester’s sure Mike’s as flushed as he thinks he is. But again, the shitty lighting doesn’t help shed some light on the matter. As much as he wants to brighten the room, there must be a reason Mike refuses to let him do so.

_Vulnerability?_ he wonders. _Maybe he feels safer in the dark. That way I can’t read him properly._
“It’s fine,” Chester brushes off as he sits back up. He’s not uncertain whether he’s addressing that weird moment between them or the lighting. “Just let me put something on.”

Mike bobs his head. “Uh, sure. Okay.”

Clambering out of bed, Chester briskly strides over to his closet in search of a clean shirt.

*Maybe it’s a good thing the lights are off, he thinks as he rummages through his closet. ‘Cause then we can just chalk it up to clumsiness or something.*

His fingers brush against the sleeved cotton of a T-shirt. He grabs the article of clothing and pulls it over him.

*Another note, lock the door. Or wear a shirt to bed next time.*

Shirt or no shirt, Mike was still touching his chest and had his thigh pressed against his dick. Chester’s certain he’s still aroused.

Well if his dick has anything to say about it, it's still poking at the fabric of his shorts. It's in the midst of deflating but not at the speed he’d like.

“I can explain,” Mike says behind him.

“Okay.” Chester spins around. Mike’s fidgeting on the spot, staring down at his bare feet. Maybe it’s the horrible lighting or that strange moment they shared that is addling Chester’s brain but he looks good. Despite the mussed hair and baggy clothes, he’s as attractive as ever.

And fuck, a grown man wearing an oversized Winnie-The-Pooh T-shirt should not be as hot as he should be.

*Or it could be Pikachu, Ugh, can't really tell in the dark.*

They settle back on the bed, their thighs brush against each other. It’s reminiscent of hours before, even minutes ago. Chester pushes it all at the back of his mind in fear of getting hard. This is not the time for that.

Mike inches away, leaving some space between them. Chester doesn't know whether to be offended or relieved.

“Okay…” Mike clears his throat. He’s postponing the inevitable again. Though, they have time. Chester’s dead tired and his bed is beckoning for him to fall back in its arms but he blocks it off. At least his brain knows grasps the concept of priorities.

"I'm listening."

Mike barks out an uneasy laugh. “So...this is gonna sound really stupid.”

Whatever positivity that Chester held is thrown out the window.

“ Asking me to be your boyfriend is stupid?” Chester bites, hoping he doesn’t sound as wounded as his heart is telling him.

Is this a joke they’re playing at? Is Mike here to humiliate him? If he wants to do that, he could just do that when the sun's up. He'll find the humour in it then. There's literally no fucking need for him to be waken up at three in the goddamn morning.
Then the thought of Mike freaking out crosses his mind. He lets guilt course through his veins for a brief moment.

“That’s not what I meant,” Mike amends hurriedly. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that you’re a horrible person or something. I was talking about the reason why I was asking you to be my boyfriend is stupid.”

“I’m sure you ask somebody to be your boyfriend if you’re interested in them.”

And that’s the thing. Mike hasn’t dropped any hints, or showed any signs of being attracted to him romantically. He shies away from anything regarding romance. The idea of Mike even liking him like that is absurd.

Yup, the caught-in-the-moment thing is looking more probable now. And now Mike's here to clear the air.

And hell, why is he so upset in the first place? Fuck, he doesn't even like Mike in that way in the first place.

“It’s… I…” Mike sighs. “This was Brad’s idea.”

Chester cocks an eyebrow. “Brad asked you to ask me to date you?”

With a shake of the head, Mike dispels the notion with several words. “No. Brad asked me to ask you to fake date me.”

After much fumbling on Mike’s behalf and silent analyzing on Chester’s, he manages to get the big picture of Mike’s situation. Well, tries to anyway.

It’s not the whole picture, he’s sure. Mike has a horrible habit of hiding bits and pieces of information. Since he sucks at lying, he could just withhold any information when he’s telling the truth.

But it’ll all come out in due time, wouldn’t it? The truth is bound to unravel on its own. It’s why Chester hates keeping secrets. No matter how much you control it, it’ll come out eventually. At the very least, he could help others learn of the truth instead of the falsified information from other people.

But Mike’s Mike and he had a tendency of keeping secrets and he’s a floundering mess right now. So Chester holds his tongue and listens.

God he really wants a cigarette right now. It'll be easier to deal with whatever Mike just told him.

“So let me get this straight,” he summarizes after Mike finishes. “The call you got was from an ex,
who’s getting married this Saturday. Apparently you were invited but you didn't know since the invitation likely got lost in the mail. And in the midst of it all, you agreed to go to her wedding and told her I’m your boyfriend. By name. And now, you want me to be your fake boyfriend to the wedding reception.” He sucks in a breath. “Am I getting this right?”

Mike winces. “That’s the bare bones version. But yeah. We wouldn’t be in this position if the stupid invitation didn’t get lost in the mail. Or if I hadn't said that shit.”

“‘We’?” Chester blurs out. “What makes you think I’m agreeing to this yet?” He doesn’t give Mike time to explain. “Why didn’t you tell her the truth?”

Mike begins rubbing his thumb against his other palm. He stares ahead. “I freaked, okay? She was asking me if I was bringing somebody since a couple of people RSVP-ed and said they couldn’t make it and— and— I panicked, you know? I freaked an I told her I could bring my boyfriend along and she asked me what’s his name is and I couldn’t— I couldn’t think straight and the first name that came to my head is you.” Mike squeezes his eyes shut, facing away. “I’m really sorry for dragging you into this.”

Chester’s initial reaction should be anger. Or some form of annoyance.

Instead, his heart soars.

Mike’s first thought was him. He was his first thought to be his hypothetical boyfriend.

He doesn’t know what to do with that. It's a little fucked up given the circumstances but he can't deny how flattered he is.

But things are getting muddled by the second. He's so confused right now.

In all the months he's known Mike, he's never known to give in easily. So who is this ex of his that he'd rather go through with a lie than tell the truth? Who's this Ann that has him wrapped around her finger?

And goddamn, he hasn't answered his question.

_Yup, he’s definitely hiding something._

“You could tell her I couldn’t make it myself,” Chester suggests. “Bring somebody else or something. Brad or Joe or Tal or somebody.”

He almost slaps his face as soon as the words leave his lips. After all, this could be his chance at—

_Wait, what chance? You don't like him! It doesn't matter! You'll just make him uncomfortable and that's the last thing you wanna do!_

“Brad has some paperwork to catch up with. Joe’s has his DJ gig on Saturday nights. Don’t know about Tal but...” Mike sighs, bringing his hands up to his face. “You know what, just forget about it. Pretend that I didn’t say anything. Fuck Brad. Why did he even give her my number? And came up with such a shitty idea. It’s so juvenile and high school and ugh, I don’t know what kind of drugs he’s on. Maybe acid or ecstasy or some shit. I really don’t know my drugs because fuck drugs. And—”

The words tumble out of his mouth before he could stop himself. “I’ll do it.”

“—you don’t have to do it. I can just go stag and tell her this is all a mis—”
“Mike.”

"—understanding and I—"

"Mike."

"I—Wait what?"

He's staring at him, as if Chester has toes for hair. In spite of it all, he couldn't help but grin. “I’ll do it.”

He expects Mike to be put at ease. It's what he wants, after all.

It doesn’t. All it does is freak him out a little more.

“No! No! Chester, you—You really—” Mike pauses, trying to collect himself. “You don’t have to do it. It’s stupid and juvenile and I don’t know what I was think—”

Heck, Chester’s not even sure why he agreed to such a thing. Sure, he has prior experience to this kind of thing (though the less he thinks about it, the better) but...this is Mike. Fake dating Mike is such an incredulous idea. Fake dating and Mike shouldn't go together.

But here he is, handing himself on a silver platter. And for what? To put Mike at ease?

Probably.

“If there’s anybody you should ask to be your fake boyfriend,” Chester says. “Your best bet is me. I’ve some experience, right here.”

“Experience?”

Chester shrugs his shoulders. “Yeah. Tal and I used to do it. I pretended to cheat with her on my ex-wife so I could get out of the marriage.”

Mike blinks in the darkness, his eyebrows knitted. “That’s horrible.”

It is. That, Chester won’t deny. But it’s something he had to do at the time. For his sake. For his safety.

For his sanity.

But Mike doesn’t know that. He doesn’t know what Sam is capable of. Which is strange considering he could be a nosy little shit. But all this while, he never brought up the subject.

“If you knew what Sam was like,” Chester says, a little grimly. “You wouldn’t think that.”

Mike turns away. “Oh. Right. Sorry.”

“It’s fine. It’s all in the past. There’s nothing he can do about it. “You didn’t know.”

Mike nods, not replying.

The silence provides Chester with a brief window to check up on Mike's well-being. So far, he seems to be holding up pretty well. Besides the wringing hands and his jiggling leg, he seems calmer now. But it's dark and his eyelids are begging for him to fall back to sleep so his brain is a little messed up now.
“Mind if I ask you something?”

Mike’s glance flickers back on him. “Sure,” he says tightly.

“Are you…?” He taps his foot against the wooden flooring, torn on whether to raise the question. Mike is already uncomfortable. This might make things worse.

But it could be better in the long run. Hopefully.

“Things are fine between you and your ex, right?”

Mike averts his gaze. “Yeah,” he replies shortly.

Per usual, Chester’s confident that’s not the whole truth. He doesn’t prod though.

If this ex of his, this Ann is horrible like Sam was…

But that’ll be impossible. Nobody could match the abomination that is Sam. Not even this Ann person.

At any rate, Mike would flat out refuse to go to an ex’s wedding if they were on bad terms, let alone be invited to one.

Regardless, Chester wouldn’t have Mike in the same building as her if she’s as despicable as Sam. He’s been there before and he’ll never wish his experience of anybody else.

Unless they’re a huge asshole. Birds of a feather flock together, after all.

“You sure?”

Chester receives a nod as an answer.

“Okay.” Since Mike is responsive to that, Chester tries a different question. “Don’t take this the wrong way but…why do you want to go? You know you don’t have to go if you don’t want to. Or if you’re uncomfortable.”

For a moment, Chester assumes Mike doesn’t acknowledge him since he continues to absentmindedly play with his fingers. He almost tries a different assurance tactic when Mike speaks.

“I don’t know,” he says, his head bowed. “I just… Feels right, I guess.” He tilts his head to the side. “I mean, I can always tell her the truth. It’s no problem. Or I can say you have the flu or something and you can’t make it. I’ll think of something.”

Chester shakes his head. He’s not going to let Mike go there alone. What if things turn for worse? It’s not that he doesn’t trust Mike to take care of himself.

But going to an ex’s wedding? When you’re this unsure? Somebody needs to be there. For company at least.

And if that has to be Chester, so be it.

“Where’s the fun in that?”

Finally, Mike lifts his head to face him, scowling. “Should it be fun?”

“Messing with people is fun.” At his roommate’s unimproved mood, Chester tries lightening it up
again. “Can you imagine the look on your ex’s face when she find out you scored somebody like me? Or see you right now? You’ll totally be “the one that got away” for her.”

At the mention of his “ex”, Mike pales but he quickly recovers with a doubtful, “Right.”


“Mike, I can do it,” he assures. He scoots closer to his roommate. To his credit, Mike doesn’t react. “Don’t worry, okay? I’m not offended at all. In fact, I’m kinda flattered you asked me.”

Mike freezes, mystified. “Really? You’re not fucking with me, are you?”

“I’m not fucking with you,” Chester says, injecting as much sincerity into his words as possible. “I mean, you’re a fucking knockout. Looks-wise and personality-wise. It’ll be my privilege to be your fake date.”

Mike snorts in dismissal, rubbing the back of his neck. “Talk to Anna. She’ll say otherwise.”

Chester almost lets out a triumphant cry.

Anna. His ex’s name is Anna.

Which makes a lot of sense, now Chester thinks about it. Why couldn't he just piece two and two together? He'd still have a dollar to his name if he found out about this sooner.

Not that it changes much. He still has no clue on her identity. And judging by Mike's words and reactions, she has some form of contribution to his low self-esteem and negativity.

Meaning that she's as bad as Sam. Maybe not as bad. But she could be.

“Doesn’t change the fact that you’re gorgeous,” Chester refutes, determined to elevate his esteem. “You’re like Aphrodite and I’m Hephaestus.”

Mike raises his eyebrow, unimpressed. "Really? Aphrodite?"

"What? I'm not wrong."

“I meant that you just related our looks with Greek gods,” Mike says. “And please, you’re Aphrodite.”

“Well if you want, I can totally be Ares and you can still be Aphrodite. With the love affair and all.”

They both snort in laughter. The comparison is absurd, the fake dating thingy much more. While Chester prides on being pretty kooky at times, the idea of fake dating Mike Shinoda is bizarre.

People like Mike Shinoda being a part of such a thing, let alone suggesting the idea? It'll happen only if pigs could shit out wings, stick them onto their backs, and try flying.

“Is that what was bothering you?” Chester asks, returning to earth. "That I won’t agree to it?"

The brief buoyant atmosphere lifts, the gloom seeping back in. Mike’s smile flattens into a line. He nods slowly.

Since they're in the dark, Chester can’t tell if his ears have coloured again. Ninety-nine percent of him wants to ask. The other percent ends up winning. He’ll just have to wait for the perfect time to
“Yeah. Kinda. I just… I feel like…” Mike sucks in a breath, studying Chester’s sheets. He traces an invisible line with a finger. “I don't know if it's such a good idea.”

“I’ll help you out. I did pretty good in theatre back in high school,” Chester comforts. Without thinking, he slips his hand into Mike’s, forcing him to meet his gaze. “I’m serious, man.”

“I don’t doubt your ability,” Mike corrects him, not shying away. “I’m just... I don't know It's weird.”

"Do you want to do it? We don't have to do it if you're not comfortable."

"I don't mind. We could..." He heaves a sigh. "Don't feel obligated. I want you to—"

“I don’t,” Chester interrupts. "I'm gamed, man. We're friends, aren't we? And friends help each other out, no matter how weird the situation is, right?"

Mike tilts his head to a side, frowning. "Uh...yeah," he says slowly, sounding puzzled. "Sure. If you're cool with it."

A bright grin creeps onto his face. The final remnants of fatigue has left his body, replaced with anticipation.

“I'm cool. We can like practice and stuff. If you want. We still have time.” Chester pulls away, his hand mourning the loss of Mike’s touch. He needs to stop doing that. It’s becoming a habit. Things won’t end well if this continues.

The problem is that Mike’s warm. And a comfort to be with.

_Yup, very bad._

“Anyway,” Chester continues, injecting as much optimism in his words as he could. “As long as we hold hands and kiss, it’ll be fine.”

Mike's laugh is laced with nerves. "Lucky you, I'm not a PDA-kind of guy. So we don't need to do any of that. Ann would be suspicious if she saw us holding hands and stuff."

Chester's smile widens. "Even better," he says, even if he's a little disappointed. "See? It'll all work out. I mean, what could go wrong?"
“What could go wrong? What couldn’t go wrong?”

Chester rolls his eyes, turning over to lie on his back. His head barely hangs off the edge of the bed upside down. This is most likely why his brain is filled with inane stuff. The blood pressure in his head is too high.

“Every time you say that, shit goes down. It’s like a jinx. You need to stop saying that.”

“It’ll be fine,” he says dismissively. “Don’t be such a downer. I mean we did something like this before. I’m sure it’ll work out fine.”

Talinda continues rummaging through her wardrobe, flipping through varying articles of clothing. “Yeah but that's to get you out of a toxic marriage. Not to lie to an ex.”

“It’s about the same, isn’t it?”

She sighs heavily, pausing her actions to shoot him a glare. “You know what I mean. And plus, we're in our forties. Who in their forties would pull something like that?”

In fact, Chester doesn’t know what she’s implying. Okay, maybe a little. But seriously, they’ve done it before. It worked out fine since he’s out of that hellhole. Sure it’s been years but they could do it again.

Well, he. No longer is Talinda in the picture. His new partner-in-crime is Mike.

"I'm sure there's loads. For all we know, Carter's wife is his beard."

"Please, as if somebody like Beyoncé would even think of being anybody's beard."

The image of their boss's wife crosses Chester's mind. "Okay fine. I'll give that to you."

"As you should."

Chester flops back down on his stomach, making a face. “Why’re you so worried? Are you afraid I’ll end up dating Mike or something?” A different thought pops up in his head. “Are you interested in him?! I knew it!”

Talinda ignores that, picking out a hanged dress. She spins around, holding out a knee-length black cocktail dress. “How about this?”

“Ew. Too plain.” He makes a thumbs-down gesture. “That’s a no from me.”

The smile she shoots him is radiant. “Tienes razón. Es perfecto.”

He sighs, exasperated. Again. He fell for it again.

For decades, this has been going on. When Talinda has some function or date to attend, she’d drag Chester over to her place for opinions.

Like now for example. Apparently she has a date with some nurse from the nearby hospital tonight. How she even got a nurse's number he'll never know. Talinda's tight lipped like that.

Chester was lazy to leave the confines of his apartment, having only gotten several hours of sleep. Also, he wants to stick around, just to see whether Mike hasn't changed his mind. He only relents at her promise to make him his favourite pancakes for breakfast. And of course to top if all of, she boosted his ego.
He has known her long enough to know her tactics. He saw it all from a mile away.

But hey, she said he has “exceptional” taste. That’s very difficult to argue against.

But there are times when she ends up picking something he’s against. Why? He has no clue. He chalks it up to her wicked brain.

So here he is in her apartment. Prior to this, he left a little note on the kitchen for Mike, which has become a strange tradition in their household. Every time one person has to be somewhere, they'd scribble a message on a sticky note and stick it to the fridge door.

Today, Chester leaves a *Out to Tal's. Wardrobe crisis. See you in the afternoon. Will bring back cupcakes :D*

To summarize it all, bribery is a pain in the ass. But hey, he gets pancakes so all's good.

“Why you’re asking for my opinion, I’ll never know,” Chester declares. “And you didn’t answer me.”

Talinda tosses the dress onto her bed carelessly. It lands on Chester’s head, obscuring his vision and filling his nostrils with lavender. “That’s not what I’m worried about.”

“What? My opinion?” he asks, picking the dress gingerly off him and laying it next to him. Talinda never has a sense of respect for clothes.

“No, idiota. I meant the dating thingy.”

“That you like Mike?”

“I don’t like Mike. I like him but I wouldn’t want to fuck him.” Talinda spins on her heel, arms crossed. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

Chester shrugs his shoulders. “I don’t see why not.”

“You could get in trouble if anybody finds out.”

“It's not like we're breaking the law. It's not illegal, T.”

"Okay, fine, that's true," Talinda purses her lips. “I can’t believe he said that.”

“He panicked,” Chester says, springing to his roommate's defense. “It’s not his fault, T. I mean, you know what he’s like.”

Talinda exhales. "I know. I didn't mean it like that. Just didn't expect something like that from him. How’s he doing, by the way?"

"Good. Well, I hope he is. I mean, he seems worried about it. And we're talking about Mike here. Like Mike and fake dating? Doesn't go together. But I mean, he seems up for it and well, I haven't seen him since that night, morning, whatever. But I think he's okay and...why are you grinning at me like that?"

There’s a wide smirk plastered on her face, a Cheshire grin. “You’re wearing that look again.”

Chester shakes his head in contempt. She’s at it again, teasing him on his supposed attraction to Mike Shinoda. Which is non-existent. And she’s been doing it for the past couple of months, ever since the art exhibition.
And every single time she brings it up, he rebuffs it. Because he does not. At all.

*God, Joe and Tal are gonna be the end of me.*

“Ai am not.”

“Mm hmm,” Talinda hums, an eyebrow raised. “Look in the mirror. Then, we talk.”

Letting out a loud groan, Chester plops back onto his back, choosing to stare at the ceiling instead. “I don’t like Mike. Mike doesn’t like me. I’m not gonna date Mike for real. *Nunca.*”

“Why not?” Talinda asks. “I think you’re pretty good together.”

“Are you trying to set me up?”

“Just pointing out the obvious.”

“Right,” Chester says in disbelief. “Anyway, look what happened the last time I genuinely dated somebody I was fake dating.”

“Things ended well enough,” Talinda points out. “Let's be real, we were better of friends.”

But that’s what troubles Chester. Things turned out for the better then is because she’s Talinda. Talinda isn’t somebody like Mike. With Mike, relationships are harder to navigate with. If Chester adds another complication to their relationship, Mike would sprint off. And maybe kick him out of the apartment in the process.

“No offense to Mike, T, but you’re not him,” Chester lifts himself up to sit cross legged on her bed. Talinda is now squatting, her back turned facing him as she scans through her numerous pairs of shoes. “He won’t see it that way. And even if we don’t date, it might make things awkward. And if we do end up fighting or breaking up or whatever, he’ll kick me out of the apartment and I’ll be a fucking nomad.”

Talinda jumps back to her feet, holding a pair of heels in each hand. She pins him with a knowing look. *“He visto la forma en que lo miras, Ches.”* She holds out the shoes. In one is a pair of red pumps. The other is a strappy black heels. “Which one?”

Chester points at the red pair. “Not that. I think it’ll look weird with the dress. And I don’t look at him the way you think I do.”

Miraculously, Talinda takes his advice. She places the chosen pair onto the ground and bends to keep the other. “Right. And I’m Jesus reincarnate.”

“See Mike has rubbed off you,” Chester observes. “Sarcasm isn’t an attractive look on you, *querida.*”

“Neither is denying your attraction, *querido.*”

Chester snorts. If Talinda isn't his best friend, he would think her random language switching a little off-putting. But it's a characteristic that's unique to her. And often it crops up when she wants to get her point across. Apparently, she’s not pulling his leg over this attraction thing.

But that can’t be right. Sure, the both of them have went out to lunch several times together with Mike over the past months. But from what he can recall, nothing out of the ordinary happened. Mike acted like Mike and Chester acted like Chester.
“Look, even if you think I look at him funny or whatever, nothing would happen,” Chester retorts. “Know why? ‘Cause he doesn’t like me like that.”

Talinda places her hands on her hips, shaking her head in possible disappointment. “Lo dudo.”

“What makes you say that?” Chester queries, eyes narrowed. “It’s not one of your stupid riddles again, is it?”

Instead of answering like a normal person, Talinda flashes him a sly smirk.

Letting out another frustrated groan, Chester drops back onto the bed. “Mierda.”

All he receives is a laugh.

Chapter End Notes

Spanish translations:
Tienes razón. Es perfecto.: You’re right. It’s perfect.
Idiota.: Idiot.
Nunca.: Never.
He visto la forma en que lo miras.: I’ve seen the way you look at him.
Querido/querida.: Darling.
Lo dudo.: I doubt that.
Mierda.: Shit.
Chester likes a lot of things.

He likes watching the sun rise above the horizon and the smell of blooming roses on the first day of spring. He enjoys creating groan-worthy puns and tasting gooey chocolate chip cookies. He adores the crinkle at the corner of Mike’s eyes and the blush that adorns his cheeks when he smiles.

So all in all, Chester likes a lot of things.

Ties are most definitely not one of them.

Ties are the bane of all things good in the world. Ties bear misery, discomfort, and bitterness. Ties constrict movement and breathing ability, two essential parts of living on this godforsaken planet. Ties are created by Satan himself. And everything related to Satan needs to be avoided like the plague.

Or he’s being melodramatic and the only reason he hates it is because he can’t tie a tie to save his life.

Throughout his whole life, he's always been hopeless with the tie. It's not that he's incapable of knotting one. He did learn to tie one in the later years of his life. But growing up as a kid, one of his parents would take on the role to secure that piece of work around his neck. But as he grew up, he learnt that abandoning that forsaken thing is one of the best decisions he’s ever made in his life. Though then, his clothing preferences (or lack thereof) doesn’t warrant his extreme prejudice towards the piece of fabric.

But if Chester was given the freedom to point fingers at the cause of it all, he’d point them at Satan’s daughter in a heartbeat.

Satan’s daughter being Sam.

Every single time there’s some glamorous party going on, Sam is up and ready to go, dressed to the nines. And every single time he declines to go, she'd start shrieking like a banshee. It doesn’t matter that he has paperwork to complete or is too tired to socialize. She’d badger him over and over before going all ape-shit on him. Even if he does end up agreeing, she’d find some fault with him as always. One of them, of course, for refusing to wear a tie.

“It's a fucking formal party!” she screeched to him once. “I told you so many times already to put that goddamn thing on. But why should I be surprised? You’re a fucking sack of shit who won’t listen to
reason, to your wife! And I can't believe you forgot about it! I told you this morning, Jesus fucking Christ. I can’t believe you’d rather sit on your ass and grade fucking papers! This is fucking important to me and I need you to come with me, you insensitive asshole!” She had let out the most artificial sigh and snarled. “This is what I get for marrying a fucking schoolteacher who only gives a fuck about work than his wife! Now put on the fucking tie and let’s go!”

Chester only rams his head into the mirror. Why did he even bother revisiting such a memory? Sure no longer does it piss him off as it should. But it doesn't justify the headache he's going to have soon.

And that’s just one instance, not even the worst one too. Sam has said way too many things to him that just evolves into a punch-Chester-fest. It’d just be one little thing and it’ll snowball from there.

But that's Sam. Always the bitch.

So as much as Chester’s distaste for ties are silly, he has a perfectly valid reason for not wanting to wear one. Context is always important in a narrative.

But here he is, standing in front of the bathroom mirror, fussing over a tie. Miraculously, he hasn’t fainted from the Vietnam flashbacks he's been getting.

Oh, the things he’d do for Mike Shinoda.

“Please behave,” Chester reprimands his tie as he tries to unravel the thousandth unintentional knot he’s made. At this point, he doesn’t know whether he’s the most clueless person on the planet, he repressed his memories of tying a tie at the deepest depths of his mind, or that his fingers really despises ties.

He could read and watch tutorials online. The magic of the Internet and such. Technology in the twenty-first century is pretty remarkable. Several drums of the finger and a couple of clicks and voilà!

But why would he go out of his way to learn how to wear something he hates? It’s such a waste of time.

As if being a clueless and stubborn idiot isn’t.

Puffing out a loud exhale through his nostrils, Chester yanks the fabric off his neck. He pins it with a steely glare. It’s a tie he’s worn all these years — a plain crimson that matches his pants and jacket. The tie and him, they've been through a lot of shit together, including all the horrible parties he's been to with Sam. He would’ve disposed it away had it been not a gift from his father.

Why the fuck did you give me a fucking tie, dad? You know how much I hate them.

Since his father is six feet under and Chester refuses to make a mess of the bathroom, there’s only one safe way to unleash his annoyance now.

He’s in the midst of whacking the sink with his tie for good measure when he hears a soft knock on his bathroom door. Immediately he freezes, arm in mid-air and tie clenched in his fist.

Thankfully whoever is at the door has the decency to knock. Otherwise, this might look awkward.

“Uh…yeah?”

There’s quiet shuffling on the other end of the door. “It’s me,” a muffled voice announces. “Mind if I come in?”
Immediately, Chester relaxes his limbs. He doesn’t even know why he tensed up in the first place. After all, who else could it be at the door but his roommate?

“Come in!” Chester calls as he scrambles to make himself presentable. Presentable meaning checking if he isn’t disheveled like a caveman and that his shirt buttons are in the right holes.

It’s not that he's ashamed of his body. Hell, he’s never been bashful about flaunting his body for all the world to feast their eyes upon.

But there’s something about Mike that sends him reeling and self-conscious.

Even the time when Mike walked in on him half-naked, there was a part of him that was nervous and exposed.

Yes, the great Chester Bennington was freaking out over somebody seeing him half-naked.

What a world they live in.

But he can't deny that it was scary. Beneath all that bravado, Chester was afraid. Never has he been before.

Until that very day, that is.

Over time, he's reverted back to his old self and unfortunately, Mike has grown immune to his dazzling chest as well. He probably has seen it one too many times to freak over it. But it was amusing to watch Mike getting all flustered and bothered.

Well, it was fun while it lasted.

The bathroom door swings open. Mike steps through the doorway.

“Hey, you ready?” he asks. "You've been in here for quite some time. And I swear I heard some—"

Chester’s brain barely recognizes the question because he’s too caught up in well…

Well.

It's not like Mike is dressed oddly. He looks like any ordinary Joe, dressed in a white buttoned up and royal blue slacks. His typical messy mop is gelled back and his beard is neatly trimmed. Like Chester, he has forgone his glasses, opting for contact lenses. His wristwatch, which he’s now fiddling with, is tightly coiled around his left wrist. Much to his surprise, there is no tie in sight.

A normal look for a normal man. It's fitting.

And it's not an abnormal sight for Mike to be dressed well. Chester’s seen him in such attire a couple times before.

Chester can’t seem to pinpoint it. Maybe it’s the compact confinements they’re in now. Maybe it’s the ambiance that seem to cast Mike in a different light. Maybe it's the impending union they have to fake soon.

Whatever sorcery it is, it certainly has a tight hold over Chester. Various thoughts start speeding through his brain, ranging from mere compliments to lust-charged fantasies.

Seriously if they were in a seedy bar and he has just met him, Chester would have him against the wall and—
“Oh no, please. Take a picture,” Mike says sarcastically, snapping him out of his reverie. “I insist. It’ll last longer.”

Chester closes his mouth, having not realized it was wide open all this time. “No, it’s just…” He swirls his tongue around his chapped lips (since when are they chapped?), racking his brain for a coherent answer. He comes up empty-handed so all he could offer is a short and simple, “Fuck.”

Mike's eyebrows narrow, quizzical. “Uh, is that…? What?”

“Nothing. I was just spacing out,” is what Chester should say. Or “Just thinking about how we’re gonna fool the fuck out of everybody later!” All appropriate answers. All less likely to elicit a stupid response.

Instead he blurts out, “You look fuckable.”

Instantly, the blood coursing through his veins turns cold before flowing south. His brain frizzles out. He did not just say that. He did not just say that. Out loud. In front of Mike.

Chester just broke the rule. He isn’t supposed to admit that Mike is fuckable. Because if he does, things get complicated. And the last thing either one of them need is complication.

Well, isn’t he fucked.

Unsurprisingly, Mike is no better. His cheeks are redder than blood. If that’s even possible. He tugs his collar with a finger, with his gaze drifting up towards the ceiling.

“Uh, yeah. Sure. Right,” Mike coughs out. “I’ll believe it when I end up sleeping with somebody by the end of the night.”

As if by magic, the awkwardness dissipates. Chester's blood rushes away from his dick and returns to its proper channels. His brain rewires itself.

“Hey, I’m always gamed,” he says easily, sending Mike a wink. “I mean, I’m a little rusty but I think I can still blow your mind. Never had any complaints.”

Like all the results to Chester's teasing, Mike colours. He rolls his eyes, trying to radiate contempt and not fluster. He's obviously failing. “As tempting as that offer is, I’m gonna have to turn you down.” He gestures towards the strip of fabric in Chester’s grip. “Need a hand?”

Chester exhales in relief, tossing the cursed material towards Mike. He expected the sensation to settle in. But he never expected its intensity.

Maybe it's because Mike didn't make fun of his inability of completing such a simple task. Sam used to do it all the time, constantly calling him names and whipping him with the tie in return.

It's definitely a 180 and Chester has never been relieved to have Mike Shinoda as his roommate.

“Please, I insist,” Chester says. "I was one step away from throttling its neck.”

“Ties don’t have necks,” Mike chides as he unravels Chester’s shabby handiwork. Somehow there’s three knots in different parts of the tie. Chester swears on his life that it wasn’t there before. “I mean, they’re for necks. You know. ‘Cause, necktie?”

Despite his lousy attempt at making a pun, Chester couldn’t help but crack a smile. “You need to work on your puns or jokes or whatever that was.” He shakes his head in mock disappointment.
“This is what happens when you’re too deadpan.”

“Hey, deadpan is a valid form of humour too.”

“Sure, sure. Regardless, your puns…” He heaves a weary sigh. “Horrible.”

“Tell me something I don’t already know.” Mike steps closer towards him until they’re at arms length. His nails brush Chester’s neck lightly as he laces the tie around Chester’s neck, eliciting a shiver out of him. If Mike notices, he doesn’t point it out.

What he points out is Chester’s restlessness. “Jesus, stop squirming.”

“I can’t help it,” Chester says defensively, shuffling his feet on the spot, avoiding eye-contact. A part of him is ready to bolt. “This is so fucking weird.”

“What? Me tying your tie or this whole function or what?”

It’s the fact that you’re standing right in front of my face in the freaking bathroom and I don’t know whether I should fuck you right now or not.

Fortunately, the manual switch in Chester’s brain has flipped back on. “Don’t know,” he lies. “Maybe all of the above.”

Mike loops the ends together. “You don’t go to formal stuff often, do you?”

“What makes you say that?”

“Your lack of knowledge in knowing how to tie a tie,” Mike replies. He loops both of the ends together. “I’m not judging, by the way. Just a thought.”

“None taken,” Chester disregards. Mike’s not like that. “But I mean, I never liked ties. Ties make people look like snobby asshats.”

Mike pauses to regard Chester with a cocked eyebrow before resuming. “If you hate ties, why bother wearing one now?”

Chester shrugs his shoulders. “I don’t know. You look like the kind of guy who likes dudes in ties.”

All of a sudden, Mike’s fingers still. He doesn’t meet his gaze.

It’s a strange position they’re in — a tiny bathroom by the sink. Mike has Chester’s on a leash. If he yanked it, their lips would definitely brush against one another, considering the lack of height difference between them.

“No really,” Mike finally speaks, voice eerily leveled. “I prefer guys without one. And the collar unbuttoned.”

Chester’s breath hitches, his brain short-circuiting again.

What the fuck? Is he…? Did he just …? Oh god.

Mike didn’t just say what he just said. Mike just confessed to him— What?

What? Is he playing me? Oh no.

He knows Mike’s not like that. Mike doesn’t tease and flirt. He’s guarded. He’d never say something
unless he felt like he should have. Or if he accidentally did.

But this isn't an accident, isn't it?

Chester knows Mike. Mike would've start yelling for the hills if he let that slip out. Neither is he scrambling to collect himself. He has his detached mask on, finishing up on his task.

But anyway, Chester was acting on a stupid assumption, which doesn’t have much basis in the first place. Mike has never been hot and bothered by dudes in ties. For all he knows, Mike is a better liar than he gives him credit for. Or he’s deadpanning again.

So... what?

Since Chester’s lineage is of the arts, he easily slips on the suave mask that he typically wears. “Oh really?” he says, feigning ignorance.

Mike’s brow creases, finally looking up. “Uh...yeah. Why?”

“Ohmm. Well, in that case.”

Chester pries his roommate’s hands off him before carelessly undoing Mike’s hard work. He flings the tie over his shoulder and pops open his buttoned collar, adjusting it to make sure parts of his chest tattoo is visible.

Just the way Mike likes his men.

“There.”

Now Mike’s eyes are widened. His lips form a small “o”, as if mind-blown. “Uh, I, uh… Why?”

“You said you like your men dressed like this,” Chester says flippantly.

“I do. Did. Yeah.” His eyelids flutter several times. “But... I mean, does it matter? I mean, it’s not that anybody knows about my preferences.”

He has a good point. Hell, Chester doesn’t even know why he unraveled poor Mike's hard work in the first place.

So what the fuck?

Maybe if he has more time to do some introspection, he’d find the answer. But right now, they have a wedding to attend to.

He waves a hand in dismissal before forging a path out of the bathroom between Mike and the sink. “Well, whatever. As long as we’re both aware of it, it’s all good.”

He doesn’t bother to check if Mike follows him out. But he’s ninety-nine percent confident that Mike’s checking his ass out as he walks away.

Chester doesn’t mind in the slightest.
They take Mike’s car because obviously there’s no way they’d be walking to their destination dressed like that. And not to mention that it’s a fifteen minute drive away, twenty-five in LA traffic.

That’s according to Google Maps anyway. Google Maps are usually at least ten minutes off. Because LA traffic is the worst. It’s one of the things that contribute to Chester’s longing for Arizona.

But he could live with that. Chester has no need to head uptown anyway. He doesn’t own a car, much less know how to drive. He should learn to. Whether he plans to uproot over to LA or return to Arizona, it’s a useful skill to know.

Just like the owner itself, Mike’s car is understated. It’s a modest black Toyota, with a couple of scratches across its body. But that’s understandable. Teachers aren’t the most wealthy bunch around. Chester could attest to that.

And the seats are comfortable enough so that’s already a big plus. Comfortable seating are essential in getting through shitty jams.

That, good company, and music, which is what they all have in the car right now.

Speaking of music, Mike’s music collection is fascinating. It’s extensive, ranging from mainstream hip hop to 80s rock to 2000s country. Despite Chester’s insistence on Nine Inch Nails, Mike remains firm on leaving The xx to play in the background.

“Wow,” Chester notes as he continues to browse through the various CDs in the glove compartment. You have...quite the collection.”

“Shitty?” Mike suggests as he pulls out of the parking lot.

“I’d say “eclectic”,” Chester says. His phone vibrates on his lap. A quick scan indicates he’s received separate texts from Dave and Talinda.

Cool, no prob man. No worries, I got a replacement. Dont be late tmr. ;), writes Dave.

Lmk if you need anything or somebody to kick ass. Dont have too much fun. ;) , Talinda scrawls.

Chester resists an eye-roll, pocketing the device.

It's already bad enough both Joe and Talinda has been harping on him and Mike. But Dave? Never did Chester see that coming.

He blames Joe and Talinda for getting him on the hype train. They must've implanted some shit in his brain.

Mike lets out a snort, interrupting his thoughts. “That’s the nicest thing anybody ever said about my music taste.”

Chester frowns in disbelief. That can’t be right. Even if a person isn’t a fan of bubblegum pop or indie folk, nobody could deny that Mike has a wide taste in music. People who embrace different
genres are the best kind of music lovers.

Unless the people that Mike has spoken to are music haters, who are non-existent because who the hell could hate music?

“No way.”

Mike nods. He takes them out from the basement and out to the open. “Yup. Not kidding.”

“How could—? What the fuck is wrong with them?”

It’s a blink-and-you’ll-miss-it moment but Chester picks up on the slight tension in Mike’s shoulders. His eyes are still pointedly glued to the front. “I don’t know. Somebody told me once that my music taste is shit because I like Biggie and Depeche Mode. Apparently, you can only be a fan of either.”

Whoever that said that, Chester will whoop their ass into the next millennium if he ever meets them. Because why would you say such a shitty thing to somebody?

The sudden urge to embark on an hour long rant boils at the pits of Chester’s stomach. He pushes it down further. He doesn’t want to worry Mike.

But oh, he can’t deny he's definitely furious.

“What’s wrong with your music taste?” Chester fumes. “Music taste is subjective. Just because I don’t like Caribbean music, doesn’t mean that anybody that likes Caribbean music has bad taste. And why should you be shamed for your music taste? It’s what you like! They dictate what you like and what you don't like. I mean, if they don't like it, don't listen. It's that simple.” He shakes his head in disgust. "Jesus Christ, people have no sense of common decency.”

“Tell that to M—” Mike pauses as he shifts in his seat. He glances over at Chester before hurriedly turning away. “Tell that to...people.”

Chester snorts. “I shouldn’t need to tell them. They should know common decency.”

“Thank god there’s people like you,” Mike quips, seemingly trying to lighten the mood. But the tug of his lips seems insincere from Chester’s angle. “You’re doing the god’s work.”

“As flattering as it is to be compared to god,” Chester says. "Being respectful of other people’s music taste shouldn’t be god-tier behaviour.”

Mike shrugs his shoulders. “I don’t know. People can be assholes.” He pauses for a long second to clear his throat. “Which is kinda hypothetical considering I’m one too.”

Chester’s reply is automatic. “No, you’re not.”

Mike doesn’t bother answering that. “So, when’s the last wedding you’ve been to?”

Mentally, Chester sighs heavily. Every single time Chester tries to assure him or prop him up, Mike would deflect or change the subject. Rarely does he acknowledge what has been said. Even if he does, it’s at Chester’s insistence.

What does Chester have to do to make Mike see that he’s worthy of love and compliments? Does he have to be like Atlas, to carry the world or some shit?

Mike deserves everything in the world. Why can't he see he's worthy of that?
But since they’re on their way to attend Mike’s ex’s wedding, Chester lets it slide. Just this once.

“The last wedding I’ve been to?” Chester echoes. He gives it a long thought as he tries recalling. “Uh...Dave’s? I don’t go to lots of weddings.”

“Why not?”

Chester makes a face. “Formality. I hate formality.”

Mike slips out a quiet chuckle. “Yeah, me neither.”

Based on Mike’s personality and his own experiences, Chester’s not surprised.

“What about you? When’s the last time you went to a wedding?”

The car comes to a stop behind several other cars. There’s a red light further down. “Uh...wow. Um...let me think.” Mike’s eyebrows knit together. His fingers drum the steering wheel. “I think I went to a colleague’s wedding? Think it was a couple years back.”

“Probably wasn’t fun if you forgot about it.”

“I mean, yeah.” The light flips back to green. Mike takes them further down the road. “But I mean, I’m not a big fan of weddings.”

“’Cause of the formality?” Chester guesses.

Mike tilts his head to the side, pursing his lips. “That’s one of it.”

Chester isn’t surprised. From what he gathered, conversations with strangers aren’t one of Mike’s favourite things in life. But then, they don’t need to be roommates to figure that teeny-weeny tidbit out.

“Think you would’ve liked my wedding,” Chester starts, glancing out of the side window. They’re now on the highway, with the lampposts lighting the roads. The sun has almost set, its rays barely peeking over the horizon. “It was quite the spectacle. Sam got drunk and threw a champagne bottle at me. Amazing stuff.”

Before his brain could comprehend it, the car jerks to a rough stop. If Chester hadn’t fastened the seat belt over him, he probably would’ve been sent flying out of the vehicle. Instead, his body is lifted a couple inches away from his seat.

It doesn’t ease his pulsing heartbeat, unfortunately.

Luckily for them, other vehicles don’t collide or pile up with them. They swerve to avoid them. A food truck lets out a loud honk and flashes them as it passes them by.

“Shit, you okay?” Mike gasps, guilt and concern written all over his face. He looks as bewildered and terrified as Chester does. Minus the annoyance.

Because why would you do that? Why would you suddenly press the brakes in the middle of the fucking road? Over something like that?

Holy shit we could’ve died, his mind is yelling. We could’ve fucking died.

But Mike is shaken and Chester doesn’t want to add on to his anxiety by saying “Why the fuck did you do that?” Terrifying him further is a bad idea.
Scared Mike is freaking Chester out. If Chester is given a chance to describe him to somebody, "scared" is not something he'd associate Mike with.

Hell, he'd never think that Mike would react to something in such a manner before.


Honk!

A Ferrari speeds past them, its driver throwing them a “Fuck you!” along the way. If Chester's mind wasn't addled, he might've flipped him off.

Mike nods vigorously. “Let me— I— I’m gonna drive really slowly now.”

It wasn’t as if Mike was speeding in the first place either. But a more steady pace would be a better option. They could miss the freaking wedding for all Chester cares. It might be for the best too.

They only get a minute of silent interval before Mike pipes up.

“I’m sorry if I scared you. I was just...caught off-guard.”

“It’s fine. We’re okay so it’s all good.”

“Right.”

The car decelerates, reaching the back of a jam. Chester fights off a loud sigh. This is definitely going to take a hell of a time. Twenty percent of his ass is itching to feel the summer air.

But there’s around thirty different CDs in the glove compartment they could go through and Mike is here to provide good conversation. He’ll be far from bored.

Unless his ass starts becoming sore. Then that'll be bad.

Truth to his assumptions, Mike speaks up. “Why did she do that? Did she hurt you?”

Chester blinks, surprised at the continuation of the subject. After all that shit, he figured Mike would let it slide.

But he's always been a curious guy. And Chester being a fellow curious guy, he knows the difficulty of repressing your piqued interest.

“I was fine. And before you ask, nobody did.” In spite of himself, he snickers. “Good thing I ducked in time. Otherwise, there'll be blood everywhere. That's not something anybody wants to see at a wedding. Unless they're all vampires.”

Mike doesn’t find the whole debacle as amusing as Chester does. “What the fuck was wrong with her?” he demands, his voice laced with anger. His grip tightens around the steering wheel. “Like, what the—? Why would she do such a thing? On your wedding day too?”

Since the event happened on such a momentous day, Chester remembers it as clear as day. There’s a small part of him that wishes he doesn’t. But as stupid as it sounds, he’d rather not. It’s a part of him and an event that shaped who he is today.

“We decided on a plain ol’ butter cake for the wedding cake ‘cause you know, it’s cheaper.”

Extending his arms up in the air, he stretches. Being cooped up in a car has never been good for his joints or the ass. “But I guess she wasn’t happy ’bout it for real ‘cause she started yelling at me about
it. But she was like full-blown drunk. In front of everybody. The way it shattered was kinda cool though. Like diamonds.”

The temptation to burst into the chorus of Rihanna's "Diamonds" crosses his mind. He doubts Mike would find that funny too.

Their eyes meet, brown on brown. Conflicted on relaxed.

Similar. But different.

“I’m sorry,” Mike says, voice barely a whisper.

Chester shakes his head. “Don’t do that,” he reprimands gently. “Saying sorry even though it’s not your fault.”

“Sorry.”

“And there you go again.” Mike opens his mouth but Chester silences him. “Mike.”

They lapse into another bout of silence, save for the vocalists harmonizing quietly in the background.

The car inches forward.

*Heart skipped a beat*
*And when I caught it you were out of reach*
*But I'm sure, I'm sure*
*You've heard it before*

“So,” Chester starts, itching to start a conversation. As much as he’s grown to like silence thanks to Mike, it still unnerves him from time to time. This is one of those times. “Tell me about Anna.”

Mike’s stature stiffens. His gaze returns back to the front. “What about her?” he asks. Unlike his body, his voice radiates calmness.

“What’s she like?”

“Well…” One of Mike’s teeth pokes out of his lips, gnawing at it. “She was amazing,” he says. “She was amazing," he says. There's a distant air to him, as if he's pulled into a memory. "One of the best people I met.”

Chester cocks an eyebrow. “Was?”

Mike exhales. “I mean, she was there for me when things were tough. Really tough. I'll always be thankful for her. If she wasn’t there, I wouldn’t…” His fingers run through his hair, messing up its neatness. Chester makes a mental note to brush it back later. “But now…”

He doesn't finish this sentence. Chester fills in for him.

“I guess it’s hard to stay friends with an ex sometimes.”

“Yeah,” Mike agrees. He snorts. “I mean, the only people I know that are still friends with each other are you and Tal.”

“Well, Tal and I were friends first before we started dating,” Chester points out. “I guess it was easy to slip back to old times. I don’t know.”

Mike hums in agreement. “Maybe. Say, when did you guys meet? Tal never told me.”
A surge of restlessness suddenly shoots through Chester. Opening the glove compartment again, he reaches in and pulls out an unscrambled Rubik's cube. He never knew how to solve this frustrating thing. He only could solve one face, which is infuriating to say the least.

But he has time now. Maybe a miracle would happen and his brain would be able to comprehend how to return it to its original state.

“In college,” Chester answers. Most of his attention is fixated on the Rubik’s cube as he tries to solve the yellow side. “We had the same creative writing class. Got stuck with her on a project. We were buddies ever since.”

“To be honest, that’s more mundane than I thought it’ll be.”

Chester barks out a laugh. “What? You thought she found me in a dumpster? Picked me up and took me home to patch me up?”

Despite the shoddy lighting courtesy of the street lamps and the headlights from other vehicles, Chester’s confident Mike’s cheeks are rosy. The man blushes much too often for his own good. “Wouldn’t put it past her. Or you being in a dumpster.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to think otherwise.”

Mike bursts into a short fit of giggles. Chester’s lips quirk into a smile. He doesn’t think he could ever get enough of his smile or his laugh. It's addicting.

“You wanna know something, Bennington?”

“That I’m the most stunning creature you’ve ever laid your eyes upon?” Chester tries.

“I think that’s common knowledge,” Mike replies, with an eyebrow raised. “I mean, besides that.”

Chester shrugs. “Sure, why not?”

All of a sudden, a shadow falls over Mike. Gone is the humour in him, replaced with a nervous energy. Chester puts himself on high alert.

Taking a deep breath, Mike begins, “I envy you about a lot of things.”

Chester frowns, not knowing what to say or make of that.

Why should Mike be envious of Chester? Of all the people in this world, why him? Hell, Mike shouldn’t even be remotely envious of him. Mike has traits that Chester wish he could embody — rational, creative, witty, dedicated. Undoubtedly, Mike is a dedicated man. Watching him oversee the art exhibition confirms that.

He can play the piano and he can pass through a video game level without swearing. He can whip up a mean macaroni and cheese and he can sketch out amazing portraits.

And he can drive. He can fucking drive.

Chester can’t even do that.

So really, why would he be envious of him? Chester should be the one that's envious of him.

“What—?”
“Don’t interrupt me,” Mike shuts him down hastily. “I’m envious that you’re so confident in how you portray yourself. I’m envious that you’re so relaxed about life no matter how clueless you are of the future. I’m envious that you could make friends with everybody you meet. I’m envious that you could talk about your past without freaking out about it. I’m en—”

“Mike,” Chester cuts in as his confusion melds with fear. They bubble at the depths of his soul. “What’s this all about?”

*I find shelter in this way
Under cover hideaway*

When his roommate doesn’t respond, he tries again. “Mike—”

*Can you hear when I say*

This time, he answers. “I’m fine,” Mike says, barely sparing Chester a glance. “It’s...nothing.”

"I have never felt this way"?

“I’ll tell you. One day maybe. Not now.”

As much as Chester is dying to know, dying to help Mike through this angsty phase he's in right now, he knows it won’t be futile. Because Mike isn’t comfortable confronting his emotions. He won’t immediately spell them out.

Plus, it's not a good time either. They have a wedding to attend, a masquerade to put on. Emotions can come to play later.

*Maybe I had said something that was wrong
Can I make it better with the lights turned on?*

“Okay,” Chester says, trying hard to ignore the sinking feeling in his chest. “Anytime, okay?”

Mike nods. “Okay.”

Traffic has lighten up a little, vehicles motioning forward in a more brisk speed. They reach standstill again after a minute.

Before Chester’s brain could catch up with his heart, his hand slips over Mike’s, which is nestled on the gear shift. He doesn’t miss the startle that he stirs out of Mike. As if like a magnet, his head snaps up to Chester. Their eyes sought each other again.

Chester expects Mike to yank his hand away. Much to his astonishment, he doesn’t.

*Maybe I had said something that was wrong
Can I make it better with the lights turned on?*
Chapter End Notes

Lyrics featured in this chapter are from "Heart Skipped A Beat" and "Shelter" by The xx respectively.
Hello all! I hope this chapter turns out okay. This was very difficult for me to write and edit. Like, there are certain things I'm not happy about but I think that's a constant thing about me haha. And matters discussed here are close to my heart such as bisexuality and racism and these things have cropped up in my life lately. So this chapter is a little personal to be and I hope I'm able to articulate this chapter as clearly as I can.

Also, I've never been to American weddings. The only weddings I've been are the ones from where I come from, which are definitely different from the proceedings in the States and not just from a cultural perspective. But I did some research on it and hopefully, it's accurate enough. Do let me know if it's wrong. I always appreciate feedback!

The hotel where the wedding is at some fancy-schmancy place with a name so lengthy and complicated that Chester doesn’t dare to pronounce it out loud. He might try his hand at it in his head (white butchering it ninety-nine percent of the time. But verbally?

Not a chance in hell unless he'd like to be rich people's dinner. And he likes being alive, thank you very much.

But say if there's a gun pressed against his temple. He might do it.

And then, he’ll get his brains blown out because he offended the wealthy, made its creator roll around in their grave, and desecrated a continent. The usual.

Though in all seriousness, the hotel is swanky as hell. There's large chandeliers that’s most likely made out of diamonds, the marble flooring sparkles like crystals, and the leather seating is definitely not faux.

Even the people inside are dressed to the nines. Or at least dressed in designer clothing. He swears on his father’s grave that the plain white T-shirt of some bearded redneck is Burberry.

Chester could only dream of staying at a place like this, let alone be allowed to walk among these elites in a place like this. The fact that he hasn’t been kicked out yet is already mind blowing on its own.

“Anna’s a pretty popular author,” Mike shrugs at the sight of Chester's slack jaw. “And her family’s
a wealthy bunch. Owns a couple of companies. So I'm sure they could afford to have the wedding here.”

“Pretty popular?” Chester asks as he racks his brain for any authors named Anna that he might've happened at the bookstore.

“Not New York Times bestselling,” Mike says. “From what I can recall anyway. I could be wrong. I don’t keep tabs on that kind of stuff.”

Chester bobs his head, casting an uneasy scan around him. They've only stepped inside and already he feels like a fish out of water. He can appreciate the aesthetic and maybe the gaudiness to some degree. But the glamourous life was never for Chester. Maybe that’s why he and Sam weren’t meant to be.

Even Mike seems uncomfortable, making quick strides as if he’s afraid to be seen by somebody. His hand rubs the back of his neck every several seconds.

He could be worried that they’re late but that doesn’t seem right. Sure, Mike’s always been overly punctual. Heck, they’re half an hour early for god’s sake. So it’s most likely his nerves getting the better of him. It’s not every day your ex invites you to their wedding.

Well at the very least they don’t need to travel from one area to another. Everything is much easier under one roof.

Why couldn’t all weddings be like that?

“Now, heads-up,” Mike begins, closing the gap between the two to avoid a hustling bellhop. Their fingers ghost one another. Chester almost leans into the contact. “I don’t know who’s invited to the wedding. But if some of my schoolmates are here…” He exhales quietly. “Well, they’re not the most open-minded people around.”

Chester snaps his head in his roommate’s direction. Mike’s tooth worries the bottom of his lip, eyes trained to the floor. “What? About sexuality?”

“Um, how do I explain this…?” Mike suddenly comes to a stop. Chester almost trips over himself at the unexpected halt. He follows his line of sight, his eyes landing on a large television propped against a nearby wall. “Oh, it’s at the Dahlia Ballroom...in the Carnation Wing? Are we even in the Carnation Wing?”

“What? The wedding reception?”

“Yeah.”

Chester studies the room for any form of directions. He finally spotting large gold letters plastered over his head. He takes a couple steps backwards to get a better look. “Huh, what a coincidence. What floor is the wedding on?”

“Third.”

“Guess we’re taking the elevator. What ‘bout the dinner?”

Mike huffs. “The dinner’s at the...Marigold Ballroom in the Rose Wing?”

“Guess we’ll figure it out somehow.” Chester shakes his head as they headed towards the elevators. “You know what I don’t get?”
“What?” Mike asks as he jabs the “up” button.

“What is everything named after flowers?”

Mike lifts an eyebrow. “What? The ballrooms? I don’t know. Maybe the owner has a flower fetish.”

Chester snorts, glancing around at the landing indicators. All of them seem to be in use and at least ten floors above them. So much for being punctual. “Bet he’s the kind of guy who gets turned on by the smell of roses. Or rafflesias.”

From the corner of his eyes, Chester notices the slight curl in Mike’s lips. The tone of his voice doesn’t match it, sounding more doubtful. “As if anybody could get turned on by the smell of rafflesias. Dude’s erection would turn flaccid.”

Chester waggles his eyebrows. “Never know, right? People have weird fetishes. I mean, remember the time I told you about the dude with the cat fetish?”

Mike groans, wiping his face with a hand as if erasing the memory off his head. “Please don’t remind me. I don’t need the mental images in my head right now. Why are we even talking about fetishes anyway?”

“Don’t act like you don’t have any.”

Mike rolls his eyes, crossing his arms over his chest. If Mike had looked fuckable without his jacket, he’s definitely more suave here. Blue definitely looks good on him, especially royal blue. He should wear clothes in that shade more often.

“I don’t have any,” Mike says with an air of finality, avoiding his gaze.

A sign of guilt, caught in the act.

Apparently Mike Shinoda isn’t as mundane as Chester coined him to be.

Chester snickers. “Whatever man. It’ll all come out sooner or later. Anyway, you were saying?”

“Saying what?” Mike asks, tapping his foot. He pins the elevator before him with a hard glare. It’s only a couple floors above them. “Jeez, the elevator is taking forever.”

“I know right? And uh, you were saying something about your classmates?” Chester frowns, trying to recall. “I think?”

Before Mike could answer that, the bell of the elevator in front of them sounds with a loud ding. The doors slide wide open. It’s void of passengers.

“Finally,” he exhales in relief, shuffling inside. Chester follows suit, pressing the third button along the way in. Cheap jazz music plays from invisible speakers, which is disappointing. It’s not that Chester hates jazz. He figures they’d play something classical or opera or whatever rich people listen to.

Mike continues, “And uh yeah. My classmates... They’re the kind of people that on the outside, they seem cool with it? Like they’re all for treating normally and stuff?” He lets out another snort as the doors take their sweet time to shut. “But they make the most stupidest and offensive jokes. And if somebody they know is gay or whatever, they flip out and suddenly it’s the biggest problem in the world.”
Chester’s features scrunch in disgust. That’s Sam alright, down to a tee. The insults she hurled at him after he expressed his sexuality to her slides into his mind, melding together into one giant slur. “I hate people like that. They’re one of the worst people around.”

Mike shrugs his shoulders. “Yeah, well…” The elevator starts its ascend. “It’s not just about sexuality. Anything to do with gender or race or…whatever. All kinds of unfair discrimination aren’t your kind of thing, chances are your time with them would be bad.” He shuffles his feet on the spot, as he picks at the lint on his jacket. “I mean not all of them are like that. Just some. Hopefully they’ve changed now. I mean, with the maturing and shit.” He heaves a sigh. “Though I wouldn’t count on it. So hopefully those people aren’t here tonight.”

Suddenly, a thought crosses his mind that alarms Chester.

Because coming out as boyfriends might not be a good idea, especially if the guests are like those assholes Mike describes. Hell, those assholes themselves might be here in the flesh too. The last thing Chester wants is to put Mike in a horrifying spot.

“Shit, what about―?”

“Us?” Mike guesses. He shoves his hands into the pockets of his trousers. His eyes flicker upwards as he contemplates his words. “Whatever. It’s too late for that now.”

"Mike—"

"It should be fine," Mike assures him. Unfortunately for him, he sounds unsure himself. "I mean..." He sighs again. "Whatever."

Chester cocks an eyebrow. It's a little strange for Mike to submit to fate and chance. From what he knows about the guy, he's a massive control freak. He'd always try to find a proper solution and conjure at least ten backup plans should the original go awry.

Unless he's already came up with all this and refuses to tell Chester what they are. Chester wouldn't put it past him. Though judging by his worried demeanor, it doesn't seem as so.

And like he said, it's too late to back out now.

They could go home and forget it all. But Mike seems so determined to get this over and done with that Chester doesn't have the heart to tell him that.

A different thought crashes through his mind instead, squishing any remnants of his previous worries. “What about Anna?”

“She’s not like that,” Mike says firmly, his answer instantaneous. It’s the first time their eyes meet since they got to the hotel. There’s something fiery reflected in his eyes. It reminds him of the flames in Talinda’s eyes every single time she comes up to Chester's defense. He doesn't know what to make of that.

Hell, he doesn't know what to make of whatever is going on right now. The fact that Mike's the one doing all the reassuring and Chester doing all the worrying is scary.

The fire in Mike's eyes doesn't last long. They've extinguished by the time he opens his mouth to speak again. “I can tell you she's not like that. And neither is her fiance if you're about to ask.”

Chester nods slowly, his brain trying to process whatever has been thrown to his face. Since it's still in the midst of doing that, all Chester could muster at the moment is an apology.
Mike mirrors his movement, tearing his eyes away. “I know,” he says quietly, fixing his attention down at the marble flooring. “But I appreciate the concern.”

A moment of silence passes over them. For some strange reason, it’s unsettling Chester. So he opts to say something dumb.

“I wonder what’s her fiance like. He must be a pretty cool guy.” He pauses, not knowing if that’s the right thing to say.

From personal experience with people, some can be sore about their ex’s replacing them with somebody else. Others are cool with it. Chester's not sure if Mike falls in either category.

"Not that you’re not cool. Bet you’re way cooler. And hotter. I mean, nobody has an ass like you. He may be cool but he ain't you, ya know?"

A laugh escapes Mike’s lips as the elevator bell rings, signalling the end of their ride. There’s a glint of hesitation crossing Mike’s eyes. But they’re gone before Chester could fully register it. “Yeah,” he says, sounding faraway. “he is.”

Despite the extravagant location, nothing about the wedding stands out from the crowd. Like every other wedding Chester’s been to, it’s a boring procession. Except maybe his because Sam’s champagne throw was iconic. Terrifying but still iconic.

But even so, that was during the dinner. When the big event was going on, it's the same old thing — everybody would stare at the groom, the groom would stare at the door, and the officiant would stare at everybody else. Then organ would play, and the bride would walk in, either alone or with her father in tow. Then, there's the giveaway and the exchange vows and the kiss, and then everybody starts screaming like they’re at a football game.

Same old, same old.

Maybe he’s clouded by his bad experience at his own wedding (again, it was the dinner, not the real thing. Though Sam was reciting some fake, possessive bullshit that made his skin crawl so that could be a factor). That's not a good thing. He shouldn't be judgmental about these people he hardly know.

Which brings him to the second possibility. It could be because he hardly knows these people. Besides Mike, nobody he’s seen here so far has a recognizable face.

His curiosity regarding the groom is put to rest as soon as they enter the ballroom. The groom comes in the form of a shaggy haired, lanky bespectacled man in a black suit. He’s obviously nervous, shifting his gaze around him. His shoulders are tensed as well, as he’s in deep conversation with who seems to be his best man. Chester could see his appeal. Objectively, he’s pretty cute. But not enough to justify leaving Mike for.
Speaking of Mike, he's not as curious as Chester is. In fact, he has his attention pointed towards a mobile version of Sudoku at the moment. But Chester supposes that's understandable. After all, he just calmed down, having finished seething about a guy named Kyle Christner.

“A big fucking asshole,” Mike whispered into Chester’s ear while their gazes were fixated on the man several rows in front of them. “Used to be the star quarterback in high school. He used to call me shit back in the day. Some racist stuff. But all in the guise of “jokes” of course.”

Chester didn’t bother disguising his revulsion. “Why the fuck is he even here then?”

“Probably thanks to Anna’s dad. Their dads are childhood friends or something. Never sat well with Anna. He was always coming on to her. Fucking creepy I tell you.” His anger morphs into a more amused tone. "Once, she gave Kyle a bloody nose for slapping her ass." A quiet snicker slips out of his lips. "It was glorious.”

That little act alone bumps Anna a thousand spots up Chester's "Best People List".

Speaking of Anna, she’s definitely not what Chester pictured. Based on the high class crowd and glitzy decor, he expects a frumpy woman caked in makeup and a glittering dress, with her nose jutted in the air.

Instead, Anna is a definite stunner as she and her father glide down the aisle. Her dark locks frames her cheeks nicely and the simple white gown suits the nude makeup on her.

But what attracts Chester the most is her smile. It sparkles beneath her veil, a magnet pulling Chester and everybody else in. It does it work well. It’s the only time Mike bothers to pay attention to the event.


Anna passes their row without a second glance in Mike’s direction. His head falls back into a bowed state.

He doesn’t seem to be paying attention to the rest of the event, focusing his attention on unraveling and refastening his wristwatch. Chester’s sure they’ve drawn a couple of dirty looks from nearby guests. He's tempted to throw them a remark about how hypocritical they are for paying attention to them and not the wedding. It's amazing how he manages to still his tongue.

Instead, he lays his hand on Mike’s own in the middle of the officiant's droning. It grabs his attention.

“Mike,” Chester murmurs, trying to push the comfort of Mike’s skin at the back of his mind. “You okay, babe?”

The endearment falls out of his lips before he could stop it. Hell, he doesn't even know why his brain jumped to that first.

God, he's out of practice.

The surprise written on Mike’s face doesn’t go unnoticed by Chester. He’s not sure whether he’s startled by the sudden touch or the random endearment. To his credit, he doesn't acknowledge it out
loud. “I’m fine,” he answers, flashing Chester a fatigued smile. “I’m just tired.”

Chester nods, worrying his thumb over the back of Mike’s palm. “It’ll be over soon.”

He doubts he’s won over any of the eavesdroppers with that kind of reply. He doesn’t care. He doubts they even have by his supposed display of affection.

For the rest of the event, Mike maintains a neutral expression. Chester would’ve figured he’d be sleeping with his eyes open had Mike not frozen up at the exchange of vows.

Chester makes sure to lace his fingers in Mike’s this time, giving his hand a squeeze in reassurance. Mike doesn’t relax. But he responds likewise.

They only let go when the confetti has settled.

The people they’re seated with at dinner are all classmates of Mike’s. Several of them have plus-ones as well, ranging from girlfriends to wives. Fortunately, not all of them are snobby, rich men. Some of them are from the working-class, which blankets Chester with some form assurance. The fact that they haven’t driven him up the wall is a plus too.

The jokes and stories thrown around straddle the line between offensive and juvenile. Thankfully, they don’t crop up as often as he’d thought they would have, which is another good thing.

But god, the way they speak about certain people gets under Chester’s skin. He can’t even bring himself to think of such words. It just makes his stomach flip and suddenly a small flicker ignites at the pits of his gut.

Guess high-class or not, unaware bigots are unaware bigots.

After tonight, he’s definitely going home with a bigger admiration for Mike. Countless of times Chester was close to punching the daylights out of several of them. The only reason why he stops himself from going all out is because he doesn’t want to embarrass Mike.

Though being around them might help build Chester’s filter. He’s positive that’s how Mike perfected his stoic demeanor. Which in turn makes Chester wonder about Mike’s past. Was he subjected to these bigoted behaviour? Was being around these people made him learn to blend into the background? Was that how he became an introvert?

He makes a mental note to ask him when the night ends.

For both of their safeties, neither of them introduce themselves as “boyfriends”. To them, Chester is a
platonic friend keeping Mike company. While most don't bat an eyelids, the more bigoted ones would cast them suspicious glances occasionally. Mike shies away from these people, pointing his attention on his food instead.

But despite the shitty company, it's not a shabby time so far. The food definitely makes up for it. And sure, Mike and him would have to put up their front soon when the newlyweds make their way over. But that's the least of their worries.

Because Kyle fucking Christner comes along, who so happens to be visiting from a neighbouring table. And during the third course too.

It takes all of Chester's might to not swing his fist at him because god his face is so punchable and fuck I just wanna enjoy my seabass in peace.

“The lovebirds are making their rounds now,” Kyle says as a way of explanation. “So I thought of swinging by and catching up with you guys.” His smirk zeroes in on Mike's form and he claps him on the back roughly. Mike jerks in surprise. The urge to wrench Kyle's arm away from Mike is overwhelmingly tempting. “Haven’t seen you in a while, Shi— Shishada?”

“Shinoda,” Mike corrects, adorning his cool mask. “And I’m good, man.”

Kyle nods vigorously, waving a hand in the air. “Good, good. Really been wanting to check in with you. Haven’t heard from you since Anna dumped your ass.” He doesn’t pause to let anybody speak. “So, haven’t seen any of your art hanging in any galleries yet. Assuming you’re still in that art shtick.”

Mike slips out a strained laugh. “Uh, yeah. I mean, no. I mean… I never…” He fixes his gaze onto the cream tablecloth, his food abandoned for the moment. “I’m a teacher now.”

“You’re a teacher?” asks another old schoolmate but not unkindly. Chester can’t recall his name but if he’s right, he’s one of the middle-class ones. “You teach art?”

Mike nods his head. “Yeah. At one of the nearby high schools.”

“What's it like?” one of the plus-ones asks.

“It's fun. I—”

“Well,” Kyle cuts in haughtily, snatching up one of the women’s empty flutes and a bottle of champagne. He ignores her scowl. “No offense, Mikey. That’s pretty dumb,” he says as he tips the alcohol into the glass. “I mean, it’s such a shitty job. A guy with your caliber should be doing great things. I mean, unless they rejected your paintings or some shit.” Shrugging a shoulder, Kyle tips his head back, consuming the contents of the glass. “Which is probable. I mean, remember the skeleton army you painted in sophomore year?” This time, he addresses everybody else at the table. “Fuck guys, remember? We used to say it looked like the aftermath of the Hiroshima bombing. And then I said it was a miracle he’s around since it annihilated everybody there? Like, fuck man. That was hilarious.”

Laughter erupts around the table. Mike and Chester are the only ones who don’t find the supposed joke amusing. Hell, fucking Kyle here can't even retell a coherent joke. Even if the joke wasn't racist, Chester still can't find anything humourous about what he said.

His eyes dart towards Mike’s face, searching for his reaction. He’s greeted by an unreadable expression. Before he could turn away, he spots it.
The crack on Mike’s mask. It’s patched up before Chester could blink.

“Oh man,” a different guy at the table says. “That shit was classic. Good times, man.”

Again, a different crack. Gone before he could comprehend it. The bottom of Chester’s stomach simmers. It almost breaks into a boil.

Chester may be a forgiving person. He may be somebody who searches for the the good in people. He may be somebody who advocates for diplomacy instead of fists.

But this. Oh this.

He could barely recall the last time he became this furious so quickly. Was it when Mike and him fought? When Sam insulted his sexuality?

Whichever the case, it doesn’t deny the fact that he hates this. He hates racist assholes. He hates people making fun of people’s shit. He hates these stupid idiots.

Most of all, he hates that Mike of all people is subjected to such bullshit. He doesn’t deserve all this crap in the slightest. Hell, nobody does.

_Fuck it. I’m gonna say whatever the fuck I wanna say. I don’t need to shout or hit anybody. I can be polite and still defend Mike because he doesn’t deserve any ounce of whatever the fuck this dumbass is pulling out of his ass. Mike’s my roommate. He’s also my friend and he’s my boyfriend for the night._

_And nobody insults my boyfriend and gets away with it._

“Oh really? I’m sure it was a beautiful painting. Must’ve gotten him an A. Mike’s always been an amazing artist.” Chester interjects, raising his voice. He also makes sure to add five cups of charms and a sprinkle of acidic wit. “And that thing about being a teacher? I think passion trumps money every day of the week. And Mike loves teaching. It's his passion.”

As soon as the first word leaves his lips, all heads turn in his direction. He’s met with a mix of reactions, from surprise from most of the table to mortification on Mike’s part to annoyance courtesy of Kyle.

To his expectation, Kyle decides to turn his attention on him. “You buy into that stupid saying? The “money can’t buy you happiness” shit?” He barks out a snobbish laugh. “Whoever says that is lying to themselves. Let’s be real. You think poor people are happy being poor? Like the fucking _poor_?” He waves the champagne flute in his grip, sloshing its contents. Several drops trickle down the side of the glass. "They don’t have vision. They’d rather be stuck in whatever hole they’re in and feed off people who work to get by. Beggars are the worst. They’re all grovelling in the street, begging for scraps from people like me and practically everybody at this table. They think they’re entitled just because—"

“You’re going off course there, man. Nobody said anything about poor people,” Chester explains, making sure his temper doesn’t get the better of him. Although he’s surprised that his voice sounds calm to his ears. As much as he’d like to lecture Douchebag here on poverty, he decides that'll be for another day. “I get that money is important. But it doesn’t encompass happiness as a whole, you know? You could be rich and be unhappy too. You could also be poor and be happy. It differs from one person to another. And Mike likes teaching. It makes him happy. So yeah, he’s not making much but he’s happy and that’s what matters.”

There’s a quiet murmur of agreement from certain parts of the table. A hand falls onto his right thigh.
“Ches,” Mike murmurs into his ear, his voice barely audible. His gaze is pointed at his own champagne flute. “Don’t.”

Chester doesn’t heed him, choosing to prioritise his attention on Douchebag instead.


“Well, I’m definitely not Gandhi. For one, I’m a stupid white guy,” Chester replies, earning him a couple of snorts from the table. “Nope to the therapist one either but,” He holds out his index finger. “I have a minor in psychology. And I used to be a teacher. So yeah, forgive me for being a tad offended by what you said.”

“You used to be a teacher?” questions a different classmate, whose name he also doesn’t know. Chester’s going to have to start labeling them by their article of clothing or hair colour or whatever. Excluding Mike, everybody looks like an average white guy, their faces melding with one another. He’s only taken a couple of sips so he’s definitely not drunk. But he’s itching for a cigarette or two at the moment. Poisoning his lungs sounds like a better prospect than destroying his brain cells arguing with this asshole.

Kyle snickers. “I guess the pay wasn’t doing for you.”

“That’s not it.”

“So what? You’re unemployed now? Living on people’s couches?”

“No,” Chester says, confident. “I'm a bartender.”

Several snickers sound from different parts of the table. Douchebag expresses his amusement the loudest, throwing his head back and cackling. Chester's unfazed. “I just— I—” he wheezes between laughs. “Shidada, w-where’d you find this guy?”

Mike remains cool. But judging by his tightening grip on Chester's thigh, he's holding back from erupting into a nervous breakdown. Chester makes sure to steer the attention back to himself.

“First of all,” Chester starts, gesturing between both him and Kyle. “‘this guy’ has a name. And it’s Chester Charles Bennington of Arizona.” He does a mock bow without rising from his seat. “At your service m’lord.”

Somebody lets out a horribly disguised snicker. This time, Kyle isn’t as entertained. “Well Chester,” he sneers. “I’m sure your friend here—”

“Boyfriend,” Chester corrects, his mouth on automatic.

And that’s when everything really falls apart.

The table falls silent all of a sudden, save for the clink of cutlery clattering against a plate. The colour in Mike’s cheeks drain, his hand falling off Chester’s lap.

Oh shit. Oh fuck.

He promised. He promised Mike he’d never tell anybody, would never out him to anybody without his consent. And here he is. Because in a fit of rage, in the name of integrity and justice, he went against what he strives for, what he held close to him.

What he promised.
All because he couldn’t keep his mouth shut. All because he wanted to protect the person he's been trying to protect. He fucked up and now Mike has to be subjected to the outcome.

Douchebag is the first person to recover from the stunning revelation. “Wait,” he says, his eyes darting between the two of them. “You guys are dating?”

Mike shifts uncomfortably. “Well, I—”

“So the rumours were true,” a redhead utters. He's one of the more bigoted ones. Unsurprisingly, his face holds a disgusted expression. “About what went down between you and Mark.”

The gears in Chester's brain come to a screeching halt. His brain is reeling, unable to comprehend all the shit that has went down in the past couple of minutes. There’s too many puzzle pieces and not enough time to put them all together.

*Mark?* his brain screams. *Who the flying fuck is Mark?*

Whoever this guy is, he's a guest star in Mike's past just like Anna does. But unlike her, the mention of this Mark's name alone sends Mike into full-on fear. He wrings his hands in his lap, shoulders hunched and he's chewing the bottom of his lip.

“Um well—”

Is that why Anna left you?” Kyle bombards him incredulously. “She went for Twiggy because you’re gay?”

“No exactly,” Chester says instantly. He's probably making things worse, especially considering he doesn't know this part of Mike's past.

Kyle raises an eyebrow. No longer does he try to disguise his true colors behind fake smiles and offensive teasing. Not that it worked out in the first place anyway. He plasters on an annoyed scowl. “Well, you guys are definitely *something* because you guys are dating. Guys. Dating. What’d you think I should call you two? “Faggot”?"

Mike flinches. Chester narrows his eyes. “I’m gonna pretend I didn’t hear that.”

Kyle’s nostrils flare, his disgust more apparent. “I mean, then how the fuck am I supposed to call...whatever this is? If not “faggot”, then what? Retarded? Or maybe you like the shorter version. *What?*”

Chester cringes inwardly. They've not only gotten the attention of everybody at the table but from nearby ones as well. All thanks to Kyle's rising volume. He makes sure to maintain his at a steady one.

“Does it matter?”

“Shouldn’t it? Because you’re sprouting some stupid shit right now and I’m trying to figure out whether it’s true or what.” Kyle shoots Mike a fiery glare. “Is what he’s saying true? I mean, I’m not surprised by Superman here 'cause he definitely looks gay.” He switches his gaze to Chester, surveying him as if he's an experiment. "Definitely the girl in the relationship too. It’s so obvious he’s a fa—”

“Don’t call him that,” Mike snaps before Chester could put Kyle in his place himself. There’s something different in Mike's body language now. His fingers are now curled into fists, placed at either side of him. His eyes flash, a deep wildfire ready to run feral.
Even when they fought back then, Mike wasn’t this furious. Hell, he never thought he’d be capable of such fire. Mike’s ice. He's the embodiment of melancholy and winter. But all the cold has melted by whatever has stoked his heart.

And it’s frightening Chester.

Everybody else must’ve recognised the change in demeanor since everybody at the table stiffens. Besides Douchebag of course because he’s a fucking idiot. Or at least, he's underestimating Mike.

“What? Because it’s the truth?” Kyle barks out a scoff. “C’mon, man. Thought you let out that experimenting shit back in high school. But then again, you did turned Mark—"

“You know what.” Mike rises up from his seat, a motion so loud that more neighbouring tables have spun their heads in the direction. “I don’t need to explain myself to any of you. Any of you.” He strides over to Kyle, leaving only inches of space between them. "Nobody changed anybody. I didn't turn Mark gay and Mark didn't turn me gay. I’m fucking bisexual and have always been. So what? How is that any of your business? You wouldn’t be asking me all this shit if Chester’s a woman or whatever.”

Chester’s heart almost stills.

He chances a glance upwards at Mike’s face. He meets him. Brown on brown. Anger on fear.

And everything fades away.

Mike’s features softens, never ripping his stare away from Chester. “But well, he’s a guy,” he says, more softly. “And he’s who I chose to date. Even if Chester’s a girl, I’ll still be with him. You know why? Because I’m bisexual. And as a bisexual, I'm attracted to multiple genders. And Chester’s a guy and he just so happens to be the one I decided to date." He flips his glare onto Kyle, his voice now close to a snarl. "And he’s a better person than you could ever dream of being. He’s the best person I know and he doesn’t deserve to breathe the same air as you, you fucking asshole.”

A strange feeling washes over Chester. In the moment, he can’t figure out what it is. But his heart rate is accelerating and brain is haywired.

_Because what in the world just happened?_

Nobody speaks for a long moment. Chester could barely comprehend the piano piece booming from the speakers above his head. His brain hasn’t returned to its original state yet.

Mike’s breathing is shallower now, as if he has came down from a high. Finally, he turns away, regarding his surroundings. All eyes are now on them. If Chester bothered to crane his neck, he’s sure he’s even grabbed the newlyweds’s attention as well.

_And it’s all my fault. It's all my fucking fault._

He hears Mike clear their throat. “Now,” Mike mumbles. “if you could excuse me.”

Before Chester could stop him, he’s rushing towards the nearest exit. He’d follow suit if his ass doesn't feel like it's glued onto his seat.

“Bisexual?” Kyle exclaims disdainfully as soon as the doors slam shut behind Mike. “Isn’t that what kids these days call themselves when they're confused or can’t pick a side or some shit.”

As if by magic, Chester’s body and mind start working again.
This fucking idiot still hasn’t learnt his lesson. Why is Chester surprised he doesn’t know.

Since Mike had his own outburst, he’s surely safe to sprout out whatever the hell he wants to say. Fuck the fact that it’s somebody else’s wedding. Fuck the fact that Douchebag and his family are here and they could sue his ass at any moment. Fuck all that. He’s going to say whatever he’s going to say. And it’s going to go through Kyle’s thick skull.

With class, of course. Chester Bennington needs to stay classy at all times.

“You know,” Chester says sweetly. “I’d punch the daylights out of you if my parents hadn’t taught me my manners. Since you’ve forgotten yours, you might wanna buy a couple of books on it. I heard they’re a great investment. I mean, you’re a rich guy. Not lowly like an ex-teacher, current bartender like me so it’s definitely within your budget.” He jumps to his feet. “And yeah, might wanna get a bar of soap while you’re at it. Might wanna wash that mouth of yours. It’s filthy, by the way.”

Chester doesn’t stick around to watch Douchebag’s mouth hang open, or address the murmurs of the nosy onlookers, or let his satisfaction take over. Because Mike needs him.
Hey, guys! Sorry for the late update! Anyway, I'd like to thank y'all for all the support. Also, I'll try to reply to everybody's comments from now on. I feel horrible for not replying to any of them haha.

Fun fact, this chapter was supposed to end differently but as I wrote for this chapter, it just became far too long! Hence, I split the chapters up. I mean, this is a pretty long read on its own too so sorry about that haha.

Anyway, happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Mike is nowhere to be seen as soon as Chester bursts through the door.

For a dreaded moment, Chester assumes it'll be an uphill task to search for Mike. After all, this hotel is fucking massive in size.

But after taking the time to survey the floor plan, his worries melts away. The whole floor is only home to ballrooms and a bathroom in at either end of the floor. And knowing Mike, he wouldn’t dare gatecrash any of these places even to hide out.

So that leaves one place.

As he power walks his way towards his chosen destination, he takes the time to sort out everything that has happened in his mind.

Because everything happened in a whirlwind. It's all surreal. He doubts he could even grasp the weight of it all for the rest of the night.

Though if there's anything he's sure of, it's that it's his fault. It's all his fucking fault.

If he had kept his mouth shut in front of Douchebag, Mike wouldn’t have to defend himself and run off. If Chester could've shut him up the right way, Mike wouldn't be in this position.

Sure, they'll have to deal with the newlyweds eventually. But he knows things might not have gotten out of hand in their presence. Douchebag there wouldn't have went off the rails as much as he did.

And if Mike is right about Anna, she definitely would've have stood for her ex being pummeled by a
random guest too. Heck, she might have not even addressed them as "boyfriends".

These are all testaments to Chester's fuckup.

He can't fucking believed he did that. He outed Mike without his permission. Sure, it was an accident and all. But still.

Still.

Chester's definitely going to have to grovel at his feet to even earn an inch of forgiveness from him.

But there's another thing he can't wrap his head around. It may not be as dire and consequential as the outing but it's something.

Mike leapt to Chester's defense immediately.

Even though he's the one that put himself in the danger zone, put both of them in the danger zone, Mike was willing to take a bullet for him.

No nudging or prompting. He just...snapped.

*T was right. Shit does go down every time I say nothing will go wrong. I really need to learn to shut up.

He's definitely grateful for what Mike had done. He didn't need it. After all, he was the one coming to Mike's rescue.

Tried to anyway.

Regardless, Mike came to his defense. Just like that. Level-headed and cool Mike Shinoda verbally stood up for him when he could've kept his mouth shut.

Chester has never been more grateful to knowing anybody in this moment.

Which is why he decides to get the both of them out of here. Damn Anna and her husband. Mike is more important than whatever the hell is going on here. Mike shouldn't need to be exposed to all this stupid shit.

*I'm gonna apologize, Chester thinks as he twists the doorknob. Gonna get down on my knees and beg his forgiveness and maybe get him out of here. We can watch B-rated movies and eat stale popcorn and it'll still be better than this fucking rich-ass place.

As he suspected, he finds Mike inside. He stands in front of the sink, head buried in his hands. He might've mistaken him from someone else had Mike not worn blue tonight. From what Chester could recall, everybody else was wearing black or grey suits.

Besides the sound of running water courtesy of the faucet, it's utter silence. They're alone.

At least, luck hasn’t fully abandoned him.

Chester doesn’t approach him in fear of scaring him off. Instead, he remains at the door, taking a moment to survey his surroundings. Even the bathroom screams of luxury. The walls are painted in the shiniest shade of gold. The flooring isn't any better, paved with marble that sparkles under the yellow lighting. Fuck, even the faucets are gold. The only thing Chester likes about the whole setup is the whiff of lemongrass the air freshener seems to be supplying.
“Mike?”

Startled, his roommate jumps as he whips his head in his direction. There’s beads of water cascading down Mike's startled expression. Most of his hair cling to his forehead, damp. At the sight of him, Chester's confidence wanes, his worry and anxiety slithering in.

But he manages to curl his lips to disguise it. He doesn't want Mike to be as worried as he must feel at the moment.

"Hi," he greets quietly.

“Hey,” Chester replies softly.

Mike flashes him a weak smile of his own before shaking his mane, sprinkling droplets around him. He pauses after several seconds with a frustrated groan and rakes through his hair in annoyance. Facing back towards the mirror, he takes a deep breath as his eyelids flutter close.

“I’m so sorry.”

His apology catches Chester off-guard.

He’s sorry? What does he have to be sorry for? If anybody should be apologizing, it’s Chester. Mike had his back against the wall and his only proper option was defending himself and Chester (which he still can't figure out why). All because Chester made a mess out of things.

Heck, they both wouldn’t be hiding in this gold cell if Chester hadn’t said a thing, if he hadn't outing Mike. Why should Mike feel guilty for something he did not do when Chester revealed his sexuality in front of homophobes and biphobes?

“What the fuck are you talking about? You didn’t do anything wrong. I was the one that fucking outing you.” Chester inhales deeply, trying to search his brain for a good way to phrase his words. His brain draws a blank.

Unsurprising, considering his proneness to emotions.

Guess I gotta freestyle.

Chester leans away, taking a careful step closer. To his credit, Mike doesn't pull away. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said anything. I didn’t—”

Mike sighs heavily. “No, that’s not your fault. I know you didn't mean to. They’re fucking idiots. Nobody would react the way they did if we were straight and if one of us is a woman.” He shakes his head. "We shouldn't need to be scared and hide ourselves from fuckers like them. Wish we could be whoever we wanna be without all the judgment."

Chester's eyelids flutter in disbelief. Mike just forgave him. Just like that?

Without any...what?

It's true that Chester didn't mean to do that. But god, did he put Mike in grave danger.

"Still. I shouldn't have done that. I'll try to keep my mouth shut."

"Think it'll be hard to do that. I mean, Kyle almost broke me multiple of times. Amazing how I didn't burst sooner."
"Well, you've always been the better of the both of us."

A snort leaves Mike's nostrils at that. He returns his gaze back to Chester, fixing him with a forlorn look. It almost shatters his heart.

For somebody who prides on being pragmatic and emotionally-distant, Mike's facial expressions are expressive in nature. Even from side view, there's no denying the anguish and conflict surrounding him. The urge to gather Mike up in his arms surges through his veins. Chester ignores it.

“I’m sorry you had to see that,” Mike continues. His gaze drifts down to his wristwatch and a stray finger begins picking at the strap. "Go through that.”

In spite of it all, Chester couldn’t help but let a grin creep onto his lips. There's another thought, an emotion he has been holding in since Mike got up to his feet and shut Kyle down. It didn’t feel right to express it then. Not even now. But it’s something he has to say, has to let Mike know because god.

He's so proud of him. So very proud. He can't articulate how amazed he is by Mike. But he'll try anyway.

“I need to say this before I forget. You were amazing, the way you shut them down.” He lifts his arms and makes an exploding gesture with his hands, accompanied by sound effects courtesy of his mouth. “Gotta admit, I was a little turned on.” He lets out a laugh at the sight of Mike’s flushed cheeks. “I’ve never… Wow. Remind me never to piss you off.”

Mike shakes his head in disagreement. “I lost control,” he argues. "I let my emotions get the better of me. I shouldn’t have done that.”

Chester mirrors his movement. “Dude, don’t feel guilty for defending yourself from bigots like that. You stood up for yourself and I can’t tell you how proud I am of you right now.”

And he is. He really is. He’s so amazed and elated by Mike and god, he really can’t describe it. He wish he could. All Chester could hope is that the emotions laced in his words are enough.

A sliver of a smile tugs at Mike’s lips but it vanishes instantly. Flipping his body around, he leans against the bathroom sink with his arms crossed against his chest. “Back in high school, I used to tell Anna that I never want anybody to meet Kyle. I would never want anybody I know to be stuck breathing the same air as him and hear the stupid shit that comes out of his mouth.” He waves his hand in Chester’s direction. “And here I am, bringing you to him.” Another sigh leaves his lips. I'm really sorry you had to meet him.”

“Don’t be,” Chester says. “I’m glad I'm here.”

Mike scoffs, shaking his head. “You’re just saying that to make me feel better.”

That's undoubtedly false. As much as Chester hates the glitz and arrogance and the bigoted mentality the rich and famous seems to embody, he would've braved it all for Mike. Not to discredit Mike at all but he could hardly imagine how he'd be without Chester by his side.

Would it be better? Maybe. Mike wouldn't have needed to come out to these stupid idiots.

But would it have been better to keep his mouth shut and endure? In Chester's point of view, not at all. But he's not Mike. He can't speak for him.

“Think whatever you like. But I’m seriously glad I’m here.” Since Mike seems calmer, Chester
strides over to him, only leaving an arm’s length of space between them. Mike doesn’t draw back. “I mean, I got to see you act all badass. That hardly happens. You're a badass, Mike. You seriously are. And this is coming from the King of Badasses.”

Mike doesn’t react, but he lifts his head up to meet his eyes. Behind them, there's a mixture of emotions. Chester recognizes fear and reluctance but not much else.

His voice drops down to a quiet murmur in hopes of comforting. “Thank you for that. Defending me. You didn't have to.”

There’s a flash of surprise that crosses his face, like he's surprised by the show of gratitude. "I..." he begins, his voice cracking. Mike pauses to clear his throat and tries again. “Thank you for defending me too.” The smile Mike shows Chester doesn’t reach his eyes. His heart cracks a little. "You didn't have to do that."

He's fragile. He's not in a good place. He's revealing too much of himself.

They need to get out of here.

As much as Chester’s eager to meet Mike’s ex and learn about his history, Mike himself always comes first. His past can always be unraveled someday when he's ready.

“Let’s go home. We don’t have to meet Anna or whoever else. If she asks where you were tomorrow, just tell her you were sick and needed to go home.” Mike opens his mouth to speak, most likely in protest. Chester doesn’t let him. “You don’t owe her anything, okay? You need to put yourself first in this kind of situations.” A smirk crosses his lips. "And even if she doesn’t believe that, I can always cover for you. I could say that I was in the mood to be...a little frisky with you.”

A short chuckle escapes Mike’s lips, possibly at the last part. “Yeah. Yeah, I could do that” he says, sounding unsure. He seems to be more confident when he echoes the first word a couple times after. It doesn’t last long though, his features returning to a more depressed look. "I’m sorry for dragging you here."

“Don’t be sorry," Chester replies immediately. His voice has lowered again. It's barely audible now. "I'm just glad I was here."

“Me too,” Mike murmurs, his gaze roaming over Chester before stopping at his lips.

Chester finds himself swallowing hard, his own eyes dropping to his lips. Mike's chewing on it, as if contemplating something in his head.

And just like that, he reels him in.

This is also when Chester notices how close they are from each other. Somehow in the midst of their conversation, they've moved closer until their lips are inches away from touching.

They could if they wanted to. They could kiss.

But why should they? There’s nobody to flaunt it to. Outside there, Mike and Chester are lovers. Together, they’re roommates, friends, and fake boyfriends.

They don't like each other. Mike definitely doesn't like Chester like that.

And Chester...well...
Okay, maybe Joe and Talinda are right. Maybe he has a little...

_Ugh, fuck it._

Chester’s about to just give into the pull when the loudest fart tears through the silence and tension. The sound itself is loud enough to resonate throughout the whole room. Mike blinks. Chester tries his best to swallow the urge to laugh.

_What the fuck?_

As much as he’s furious at having their maybe-kiss interrupted, it’s hilarious. Given the circumstances and everything that has transpired over the last twenty minutes, something menial as a fart could somehow elicit a laugh out of him.

Apparently rich people are as much as cockblocks like the little people. Who knew?

Mike doesn’t seem to be as entertained. With a quiet grumble, he shoves Chester towards the door, probably making sure the source of the fart doesn’t get the wrong idea. Which in turn is a good thing because as soon as they’re back outside, Chester starts howling.

“That was disgusting.” Mike remarks, shooting a reprimanding glare. “Seriously, dude. It wasn’t that funny. Why do you look like you’re dying? The fuck?”

“It was hilarious,” Chester guffaws, clutching his stomach. He stops to let out several more laughs. “You— You can’t deny that, man.”

Mike rolls his eyes. “Of course you’d find literal toilet humour funny. I’m fake dating a five-year-old.”

Instantly, he soers up. Chester gasps in mock offense. “Excuse me, Michael Kenji Shinoda. Anybody would be privileged to be fake dating moi.”

“Since when do you know French, Chester Charles Bennington?”

Chester’s about to hurl another retort when he hears Mike’s name being called out in the distance. He almost freezes on the spot when he recognizes the approaching forms.

The bride and the groom.

“Mike!” Anna exclaims, flying towards said man’s direction. Chester’s surprised that she hasn’t tripped over her own train at the speed she’s going at. It’s a good thing she has forgone her veil. It would’ve fallen off her head. “Are you okay?”

Her arms bind themselves around his neck. Mike stumbles at the sudden movement. Chester's eyes don't leave his face, eager to gauge his reaction.

He doesn't care if people might think it's weird he's staring daggers at her. Because this woman may be one of the root of Mike's problems.

There's definitely surprise written on his face. No signs of revulsion or fear though. His body has stiffen up but that's not surprising given his lack of touch be it giving or receiving. Strangely enough, he hasn't detached himself from the embrace, letting her hug it out.

“I’m fine, Ann,” he assures her. "Don’t worry about me.”

Anna sighs in annoyance. “I swear I didn’t even invite that asshole. My dad told me to invite his dad
and of course his dad thought it’ll be a **great** idea to—"

“Anna, I’m fine,” Mike reiterates, managing a halfhearted smile. “Don’t worry about it.”

“You always say that when you're not fine. Guess some things haven't changed, huh.” She disengaging herself from him, revealing a wide grin to Chester. “By the way, you were **amazing.** You really went off the rails and I’m so proud of you.”

Mike averts her gaze, pinning it on his shoes. "Um...thanks.”

Anna doesn't seem to notice his discomfort though since she doesn't pause. "You should’ve seen Kyle’s dad. It was glorious. He practically dragged him out by the ear.” She waves the phone she has in her grip. “I even videotaped it.”

This time, her husband is the one to speak. “**You what?**”

She throws him a shrug. “What? You know he deserves it.”

Her husband shifts his head from side to side, as if mulling it over. “Yeah, fine,” he decides thoughtfully. “I guess he does.”

Anna waves her free hand in dismissal. “At any rate,” she starts, turning back to Mike. There's genuine guilt written over her face. "I’m really sorry about that. But I’m really glad you decided to come, despite Kyle.”

As if prompted, Chester’s “fake boyfriend” switch flips on. He’s not even sure what triggered his mouth. Maybe it’s the couple’s presence. Or maybe the panicked look Mike has on now.

Whichever the case, Mike needs him.

Now.

So much for keeping his mouth shut.

“Like Mikey here said, it’s no problem. As long as the guy got his dues.” He points a finger at Anna’s phone. “You don’t mind if you sent me the vid? I have a great plan that involves YouTube and—”

“Ches!” Mike hisses, whipping his head towards him.

“What?” Chester exclaims. “He deserves that for that shit he pulled. Hell, if I could get my hands on his neck—”

Mike rolls his eyes. “Please ignore him,” he says apologetically, addressing the newlyweds. “He’s a total drama queen.”

Anna’s husband laughs, giving Chester a once-over. Chester almost scowls at him, but notices the study isn't tinged with judgment.

Damn did Douchebag get him bad. Now Chester's going to be a paranoid motherfucker like Mike is.

*Thanks Kyle, you fucking piece of shit!*

“So this is the boyfriend I’ve been hearing about?”

Mike jerks back, caught off-guard. “Wait, you know?”
“Anna wouldn’t shut up about it. She was— Ow!” He rubs his ribs, apparently sore from his wife’s jab. “But it’s true!”

“Ignore him,” she says, shaking her head out of fondness. She holds out her free hand towards Chester. “I’m Anna. It’s great to finally meet you.”

The smile she plasters on is so entrancing that Chester couldn’t help but gingerly take her hand in his. He plants a lingering kiss on the back of it. “It’s a pleasure to meet you,” he murmurs, his lips barely ghosting it. His nostrils are hit by a mix of roses and jasmine. “You look radiant tonight.”

Thankfully, her husband doesn’t glare at him. In fact, he has an amused expression on. Mike is the one with the scowl though, which puzzles Chester for a brief moment.

A giggle escapes Anna's lips, her cheeks flushing as well. “Wow, Mike. You sure got yourself a charmer.”

“And a looker, might I add,” Chester says proudly, dropping her hand.

Mike scoffs. “With a big ass ego.”

“You love my ass,” Chester says, nudging his fake boyfriend's side. Mike's cheeks turn a ridiculous shade of pink.

Anna’s husband releases a deep cough. “Too much info, man. Didn’t need to know that.” Shaking his head in amusement, he extends a hand towards Chester. “Rob, the husband. Mike’s old friend. I’m sure he’s mentioned me before.”

The gears shifting in Chester’s brain screeches to a halt.

Old friend? Mentioned? Mike has never mentioned you before. Hell, I only knew your name today. What in the world are you talking about?

Out of the corner of his eyes, Mike shuffles his shoes out of probable discomfort.

“A pleasure,” Chester says outwardly, hoping his skepticism doesn’t seep through. “But about the too much info thing? That hardly scratches the surface. You see—”

“Ches,” Mike orders, reprimanding him with another look. “No.”

“Babe,” Chester begins. Just like before, he doesn’t freak out at the endearment. “You—”

“As much as I’d like to add to his lover’s spat here,” Anna interrupts, a playful smirk on her lips as her eyes flicker from Mike to Chester before settling on Rob. She hooks her arm around her husband’s. “We should head back inside. Rude to leave our guests hanging.”

“Right.” Rob smiles in turn. “We should all get going.”

This is it. That’s their cue to leave. Their golden ticket out of here.

At his words, Chester bumps Mike’s ribs with his elbow, prompting him to speak. Mike blinks, as if woken from a dream.

“Um, yeah,” he starts. "About that…”

“Don’t worry,” Anna assures. “I doubt that Kyle would be back. You know how Kyle’s dad could be.”
Mike raises an eyebrow in disbelief. “Seriously? Kyle’s in his forties. His dad’s like close to eighty. There’s no way he’s still doing that.”

This time, Rob pipes up. “Don’t underestimate the power of dads, I guess. But seriously, come back in. There’s still dessert. And alcohol.”

“What? Champagne?”

“Whiskey. Maybe vodka.”

Mike looks torn, glancing between the couple and Chester. His gaze lingers on Chester, as if asking for his permission.

Chester almost facepalms. He can't figure out why Mike's so adamant in going down the rabbit hole, to expose himself to such people. He doesn't care if Anna and Rob are good people. The rest of the people might not be. And that outweighs things.

But then again, it's his choice. Chester can't control him. He can only watch over him and be the tourist in Mike's strange past.

“Well,” Chester says, turning his grin on the married couple. "one drink wouldn’t hurt.”

Thankfully, the attention is back on the newlyweds when they return to the ballroom. Several voices yell for the couple to start their first dance.

“That’s us,” Anna beams. She casts a look at Mike and Chester in turn. "Hope to see you guys on the dance floor later." She pins a mock glare on her ex. "Especially you Mike."

"You know I hate dancing."

"Well," Anna throws a sly grin at Chester. "I hope you're a better persuader than I am."

Before either one of them could answer to that, she’s whisked away by her husband. The opening notes of John Legend’s “All of Me” begins playing through the overhead speakers. Most of the guests have risen from their seats and rushes towards the dance floor, hoping to catch a glimpse of the couple. Mike and Chester aren’t among them, opting to stay by the doorway.

Hmm, Chester muses. *Dancing would be fun. Been a while since I've done it in front of people. And with a partner.*

Frankly, Mike wouldn't be his ideal partner but hey, beggars can't be choosy. And who knows, he might be a competent dancer underneath that hard exterior.
And if it'll help Mike takes his mind off what happened earlier, Chester will do it in a heartbeat. “So,” he begins out loud, raising his volume to compete with the music. “You hate dancing?”

Mike shrugs his shoulders.

“C’mon, man. It’ll be fun!” Chester cajoles. “I promise I’ll do all the heavy lifting.”

For a brief period, Mike seems to consider this idea but ends up shaking his head. “I’m good.”

It's a disappointing but unsurprising answer. Chester respects it all the same.

Since watching people dance is much more boring than dancing itself, they return to their designated table. Fortunately, it's void of people. There’s strawberry panna cotta laid out at their spots. The serving is tiny, despite being served on a large saucer.

Chester never could comprehend the point of gourmet food.

But it’s not heavy and the sauce isn’t overpoweringly sweet. It's adequate enough for Chester to savour it in small scoops.

Nobody bothers approaching them, all avoiding them like the plague. The only person that does is a pudgy, white-haired man who claims to be Douchebag’s father, to apologize for his son’s fuckup.

But it’s a poor-ass apology, that consists of shitty excuses like “you know how he is” and “I’m sorry you took it that way” in such a condescending tone that Chester has to mask his snort with a loud cough.

“Like father, like son, huh,” Chester whispers as soon as the old man ambles away.

Mike shrugs a shoulder. “He’s always been like that. He apologized to my dad that way after Kyle called me racial stuff back in sophomore year.”

“Bet your dad yelled at him.”

Mike snickers. “He punched him.”

Chester whistles lowly. “Go dad,” he says, earning another chuckle out of his friend.

It’s uneventful after that. It doesn’t stay that way though because by the time the fourth song is finishing up, Anna urges the both of them to dance from across the room.

“Well,” Chester says, leaning towards his fake boyfriend as his gaze casually inspects the stares they’ve earned. “We drew a crowd. And we don’t wanna disappoint them, do we?”

Mike sighs as he fingers the table cloth. “Yes, we can.”

Chester almost groans out loud. Despite wanting to appease Mike, he’s tempted to enjoy the night too. The food hasn’t done it for him just yet. Maybe the dancing would. Chester likes dancing.

So with all that in mind, Chester plasters his best puppy look. “C’mon babe, just one dance. Please?” He bats his eyelashes for good measure, clasping his hands together. “For meehee?”

Mike’s facade cracks, his lips breaking into an amused smile. “Stop that,” he halfheartedly orders, turning away.
Chester reaches for Mike’s arm and starts shaking it to grab his attention. “Babe!” he whines, cranking his cheesiness to a hundred. He doesn’t care if people are watching them. Whatever he says to Mike isn’t any of their business. “Please?”

Finally, Mike heaves a sigh, relenting. “Fine. Just one.” He rises to his feet, not making eye-contact with anybody. “Let’s just get this over with.”

Chester grins, intertwining their hands together as he tugs them towards the dance floor. There’s a swell of pride that courses through him as he feels the gazes of others on them. There’s something empowering of being able to hold your boyfriend’s hand in a sea of bigots. Even if they’re not dating for real.

“It’ll be my pleasure.”

By the time they’ve reached the area, the opening notes of a song begins to play. It seems to be a slow song.

That means a waltz. Or some form of it anyway.

The couple on the dance floor seems to have the right idea, the men scooping their lovers in their arms. Chester steers the both of them to a spot with lots of room, making sure they don’t take up others’ space. The last thing they need is to trip over some wealthy businessman and get themselves sued for giving him a bruise.

_Feeling my hands start shaking_
_Hearing your voice I'm overjoyed_
_I'm sorry but I have no choice_
_You're only getting better_

As soon as Chester places his other hand on his partner’s waist, Mike stiffens up. Neither of them pull away.

“Let me guess,” Chester murmurs, loud enough for only the both of them to hear. “You don’t know how to dance?”

Mike shrugs before planting his own hand on Chester’s shoulder. The mere touch sends warmth all the way down to his toes. “It’s...been a while.”

A smile creeps up Chester’s lips. “Just follow my lead.”

He steps forward and Mike steps backwards and before he knows it, they’re skating around their little bubble.

_Maybe you have your reasons_
_Maybe you're scared you'll be let down_
_Are you crying when there's no one around_
_Then maybe_

“Hey,” Chester says as they dance. “You’re not so bad, Shinoda.”

Mike rolls his eyes. “We just started. Wait ‘til I step on you.”

As if on cue, Chester’s poor foot ends up being trampled over.

“Ow!”
“Sorry!” Mike exclaims, panicking. He almost skids to a stop. “See what I mean?”

“Dude, it’s cool.” Their eyes meet for a moment before Chester turns away, finding the eye contact unsettling. Instead, he finds Anna’s gaze from across the room. She flashes him a broad grin as Rob twirls her around. Chester has to admit, they make a nice looking couple.

“You think they suspect a thing?”

Chester returns his attention back to Mike. His eyes are on the newlyweds too with a furrowed brow. “I don’t think so. They don’t look like it.” Chester smirks. “That means either we’re great actors or they’re dense as fuck.”

Mike chuckles. “Maybe you but not me. She could always tell when I’m lying. I don’t know how the hell she hasn’t suspected a thing.”

Chester slips out a good-natured laugh of his own. “Must be your lucky night. Or they’re in their honeymoon mood already.”

“Probably the latter.”

That smile on your face, like summer
The way that your hand keeps touching mine
Let me be the one to make it right
And maybe

“Chester?”

“Yeah?”

Mike’s lips are formed in an “O” shape, as if he’s ready to speak his mind. But then, he bows his head. “Nothing.”

“What?” Chester asks, his curiosity piqued. If there's anything he hates is that people won't say what they're dying to say. “C’mon man. You can’t tease me like this.”

“Yes, I can.”

“No, you can’t.”

“Please,” Mike brushes off. “You’re always teasing me.”

“With good reason,” Chester says defensively.

Mike cocks an eyebrow in incredulity. “Really?”

“Uh huh.”

“Like what?”

“For fun.”

Mike snorts. “What a valid reason.”

And if you want we’ll share this life
Anytime you need a friend
I'm gonna be by your side
When nobody understands you
Well, I do

“Mike?” Chester begins, a marvelous idea forming in his head. Marvelous in his book, anyway. Mike would definitely despise it. But it might pull him out of whatever funk he has going on right now.

His partner frowns, suspiciously peering at him. “Why do I feel like I'm not gonna like what you're gonna do?”

“You won't.” Chester grins. “’Cause I'm gonna dip you.”

“Wait, what—? AH!”

Mike's sentence is cut short by Chester spinning him on the spot. After a short turn, he lowers Mike backwards for a brief second before pulling him back up into his arms again. As much as Chester would like to credit himself, it’s surprisingly smooth how they transition back to dancing.

Mike wheezes, trying to catch his breath again. "What the hell?!" he gasps, grasping Chester’s shoulder a little too tightly. His hair is a bigger mess now, a second away from being a bird’s nest. But his lips have broken into a grin. It’s the widest and most sincere one he's had on since they got here. And that's what matters. Mike could kill him later. As long as he's having a good time, he wouldn't mind being flayed alive.

But then the smile disappears, as if he remembers he's supposed to be annoyed. His eyebrows are knitted in a scowl instead but his lips threaten to curl up again. Chester couldn't help but laugh at his reaction. It's adorable. He's like a puppy trying to make itself look fierce. "Hey, you had fun."

"You're," Mike shakes his head, his locks whipping around. "you're one crazy motherfucker, you know that?"

“Dude.”

"I'm not wrong, am I?"

Chester snickers. "Got me there."

So maybe let me hold you, baby
Let me come over
I will tell you secrets God only knows
I cannot overstate it
I will be overjoyed

"Mike?"

"Hmm?" Mike continues to evade his questioning look, busying himself by peering over Chester's head. That troubled look from before has made its comeback.

Chester raises an eyebrow, pinning him with an expression of expectancy.

At that, Mike finally concedes. “Okay, fine. I didn’t get to say how great you look tonight.” Straight away, his eyes train themselves back onto his dress shoes. “So there.”

All of a sudden, Chester’s chest feels funny. He can’t figure out why. Is it flattery? Appreciation? Happiness?
But it's been there before. Talinda used to ignite such feelings in him when they were dating.

He doesn’t know what to make of it. So instead, he bends down to survey his clothes.

That’s when he notices it. It's definitely not what Mike's pointing out because Chester always knows he's a stunner. It's that Chester’s in scarlet and Mike’s in royal blue. They're similar dark shades. In a strange way, they match and complement each other.

Just like a couple.

*Baby*

*Let me come over*

*I will tell you secrets nobody knows*

*I cannot overstate it*

*I will be overjoyed*

Heat washes over his face. It's not something he'd get embarrassed over. Hell, he's not even sure he's embarrassed at all.

But it’s a sweet coincidence. And Mike's sweet for saying that. He's sweet.

“What can I say?” Chester winks as he sidesteps to avoid an oblivious dancing couple. Mike follows suit. “I’m a fashionista.”

“Please,” his roommate says, rolling his eyes. “Your jogging clothes are neon purple and yellow. Which are disgusting to pair together, by the way.”

Chester throws him a look of disbelief. “Well excuse me, Mr Stuck Up Artist,” he sniffs. “*Some* of us are at least bold enough to get out of their comfort zone.”

“*Excuse* me, Mr Clueless Egomaniac,” Mike shoots back. “Mixing purple and yellow is the worst thing anybody could do. They're on opposite ends of the colour wheel for a reason. And they're neon too! That makes it worse.”

“Yes, I know it’s ghastly.” Chester makes a face, wiggling his eyebrows. "But what can I say? I’m a ghastly guy.”

Mike throws his head back and laughs. Just like that he looks twenty years younger. Not that he doesn’t already look young in the first place. But there’s something about that little act that brings the youth out of his weary body.

*It's his smile,* his brain concludes for him.

That's the moment that strikes him — the doubt of his emotions. Well sort of.

Chester's definitely unsure of his feelings for Mike, whether they're in a romantic nature or otherwise. But if there's one thing he's certain of, he's in love with his smile.

And he wants him to smile. For the rest of his days, he wants him to smile every day. He deserves that.

“That, you are,” Mike says, remnants of happiness still on his lips.

And there it is again, that gravitational pull towards his lips. It takes all of Chester's willpower to resist.
He could kiss him if he wants to. If Mike demands an explanation, he could always say that it's for show, for Anna and Rob to feast their eyes on their lie.

But he won't. As much as he wants to, he won't.

Because one touch could change everything. And Chester's uncertain if he's ready for that.

“Mike?”

Mike snaps his gaze back on him. “What?”

Yeah, I will be overjoyed

“Did I tell you how much of a dork you are?” Chester says, grinning. “An endearing dork.”

“Think this is the 349th time you did.”

“Really?”

“Mm hmm,” Mike hums. “I was keeping score.”

Chester scoffs but his smile doesn't fade. “Yeah, I’m sure you were.”

Oh, I will be overjoyed

Chapter End Notes

Lyrics featured in this chapter are from "Overjoyed" by Matchbox Twenty.
As the last notes of the song fades away, Chester feels a tap on his shoulder. Immediately, Mike’s grip on his shoulder falls away.

Behind Chester is a jacketless Rob. He has an apologetic smile on, his gaze flickering between the two of them. "Really sorry to cut in. But you mind if I could borrow Mike for a bit?" He flashes said person with a cordial smile. But Chester notices under all that friendliness and warmth, there's some form of uncertainty and...caution?

Chester glances over at Mike, in the very case he protests this arrangement. His expression is void of emotion, a blank slate.

Which is not an expression anybody would display to an old friend. It’s strangely unsettling.

“Catching up, huh,” Chester remarks, raising an eyebrow at the groom as he searches for any signs of guilt or fear.

It doesn’t take long for him to notice the straying hand rubbing itself on the back of his neck. It's a sign of distress.

He’s guilty. Of something. The frustrating thing is that he doesn’t know what. And Chester hates not being in the know.

“Yeah,” Rob replies, sounding hesitant. His lips curl into a tense smile. “Been a while, after all.”

"Yeah," Mike echoes, casting Rob with a wary look. “Been a while.”

It’s then the music blasts in full force, a-ha’s “Take On Me” shaking the dance floor to the core. There’s a chorus of cheers from the guests as they make their way over. Chester resists an eye-roll. Of course they’d play this. It’s perfect for this kind of crowd. Rich, white assholes. Remind me why we’re not home throwing popcorn at the TV again?

“We should get out of here,” Rob declares as he takes several steps away from them. “I’d rather not
get trampled over these people.”

Mike doesn’t make a move, turning over to Chester. There’s a fracture in his mask, a mix of reluctance and determination.

He should go with him. Chester should go with Mike. He doesn’t give a shit whether Rob wants him around or not. Because he should check on Mike in case anything happens. After all, he still doesn’t trust these people with his friend.

Not that he expects them to drug Mike or something of the like. Rob doesn’t seem to be the type and if Mike is right, Anna would definitely sock him in the face, husband or not.

Then again, he doesn’t know Anna well either. For all he knows, her concern for her ex is all a facade.

“Do you want me to come with?” Chester asks, raising his voice to rival the bombastic tune. He doesn’t know why he even bothered asking. He knows the answer to his question because Mike is more predictable than he lets on sometimes.

As expected, Mike declines with a slight shake of the head, flickering a hesitant glance back at Rob. “I’ll be back soon.”

Chester nods, heart heavy. As much as he wants to insist, he should respect Mike’s wishes. His eyes trail down from Mike’s face down his arm, towards their joint hands.

They’re still holding hands after all this.

Before he could stop himself, he pulls Mike over towards him and plants a tender kiss on his lips. It’s over before Chester could fully comprehend what he has just done.

Which is that he just kissed Mike.

He just kissed Mike on the lips.

He just kissed Mike on the lips in front of these random people.

Okay, maybe he’d exclude those people since they’re too busy swaying around like a swarm of jellyfish. It’s probably for the best.

Rob could be considered people though. His eyebrows are arched so high that Chester swears that the tips are brushing his hairline. He definitely didn’t expect that at all. It would make sense considering Mike isn’t seem to be the type to give into PDA.

Well, he’s not the only one who’s surprised. Chester shares his sentiments.

Because he just kissed Mike.

What the fuck?

Okay, maybe kind of. Sort of.

Even if it’s just a light brush, it’s still something.

But it shouldn’t be. It shouldn’t mean anything. They’re not together. They’re not lovers or boyfriends or fuck buddies or whatever they are not.
They’re roommates. They’re friends. They’re fake boyfriends.

And fake boyfriends don’t have to kiss. At all.

Chester's pulse shouldn't be pounding and his body shouldn't be stiff. And yet here he is.

Mike’s staring at him like a deer caught in the headlights. He wrenches free from Chester’s grip, shoving his hand into his trousers' pocket as his gaze darts away. Chester tries to ignore the crushed feeling in his chest.

Another feeling he shouldn't have.

Thankfully, his sense of emotional control doesn't abandon him. He manages a soft smile because he doesn’t need Rob to know that this is their first kiss and not their hundredth.

“Call me if you need me,” Chester tells Mike before turning to address Rob. There’s confusion written on his face but it vanishes when Chester’s eyes come in contact with his, replaced with a gentle smile. “Have fun, you two.” Chester flashes him a wink. “But not too much fun.”

Rob chuckles. “Don’t worry,” he says easily, seemingly recovered from the initial shock. “He’ll be back before you know it.”

So with one last grin to the both of them, Chester reluctantly slips through the crowd.

In the midst of their conversation, the herd of snooty people has increased in size, flailing around to the chorus. Chester wades through the ocean of guests, sidestepping most of the way. He almost takes a swinging fist to his nose, ducking barely in time.

“Crazy asses,” he mumbles to himself as he bends backwards to avoid getting whacked by a rushing server’s tray.

Is it him or has the room gotten smaller or the number of people have doubled since the last song?

It's suffocating. He needs out.

As much as he likes mingling and striking up conversations with people, Chester figures he won’t be making any new friends tonight because, rich people. Instead, he slips out the nearest side door.

Besides the main entrance, all the other doors on each side of the ballroom are thrown wide open, revealing a balcony each. Fortunately for him, there's an empty one.

The warm summer air prickles his skin as he exits the reception behind him. The night sky is clear, providing Chester with a good view of Los Angeles from where he stands. It’s a dazzling sight, the lit buildings illuminating the darkness, accompanied by the distant rush of vehicles as they streak down the road below.

It would’ve been a calming atmosphere had the music behind him isn’t cranked to a hundred. But hey, it's better than nothing.

Closing his eyes, he exhales deeply. Chester doesn’t want to think about what has happened in past several hours. He’s well-aware that the night is still young and surely there’s more to come. Right now in this moment, he'll take whatever breather he can get.

But then...the kiss.

There’s a part of him that wishes that he could actually remember what it was like — the feel of him,
the taste of him.

The kiss he planted on Mike was light and feathery, like a calm breeze on a spring morning. As fleeting as one too.

And that’s all Chester could remember.

Which sucks because now the curiosity he suppressed, all the thoughts he made dormant since the man he drenched in coffee ran off, they’re awakened.

He wants to kiss Mike Shinoda. He wants to know what it’ll be like to kiss Mike Shinoda proper. No brief peck on the lips. A genuine mouth-to-mouth touch.

His lips would be soft of course. Supple and enticing. Mike likes to bite the bottom of his lip sometimes. And it never fails to draw Chester’s attention to it, as if beckoning him to sweep Mike into his arms and mold their lips together.

Thinking what Mike would taste is a different story. It’d be hard to pinpoint that. Maybe he’d taste of bitter coffee he likes to down each morning? Maybe he’d taste of cool mint like his toothpaste? Heck, maybe even of the saccharine frosting of the cupcakes he eats quite often?

They’re all huge possibilities and Chester doesn’t mind savouring any of those flavours with his—

A quiet groan escapes his lips as he buries his face in his hands.

What am I doing with my life? I’m thinking of kissing Mike. I’m thinking of kissing Mike fucking Shinoda. This is so bad. Why is this happening right now? He exhales through his nostrils, nodding to the landscape before him. I need a cigarette. My brain’s being stupid ‘cause I haven’t smoked since the afternoon. Yup, yeah.

He’s about to light his first cigarette of the night when a familiar voice pierces his ears. It comes from behind him.

“Got another?”

It’s a glowing Anna, gliding over to his side. This time, she has a jacket over her sleeveless arms, most likely Rob’s. If she isn’t wearing the garment and if Chester doesn’t know any better, he’d think her an angel. She’s that beautiful, especially with that smile she’s wearing right now.

Well, he could have if he’s high. Anything’s possible with a little weed.

Though that’s besides the point. The million dollar question that has popped up is, what is she doing here?

Is she here to start interrogating him like all boyfriends' friends do? Is she here to gather dirt on Mike and hold it against him as blackmail? Is she here to propose some love affair just to get back at Mike?

Okay, the last one sounds as fucking stupid as it must look on paper. But it is a possibility.

"Shouldn’t you be inside?” Chester can’t help but ask, lighting his own cigarette before rummaging through his pants' pocket for his pack reluctantly.

Is giving a cigarette to a bride okay? Will her husband chuck him over the balcony if word reached him?

And not to mention Anna is some rich author with some kind of reputation. Maybe this is how he’ll
go out — splashed on the front of some stupid tabloid about how he’s Anna’s secret boy-toy or drug dealer or some shit.

Mike would definitely throttle him.

"Chasing me out already?" she teases as she settles her crossed arms on the balcony railing. She’s beaming at him, pearly whites and all. It doesn’t put Chester at ease as much as he’d like it to.

He likes company. Unlike Mike who’d rather have a minimum twenty yards distance from the nearest stranger, Chester would love to have people around him.

But the thing is, this is Anna. She’s Mike’s ex. This could either spell trouble for him or…

Okay, maybe that’s the only future he sees in his crystal ball. But could anybody blame him?

"Not at all," Chester replies. "Just wondering why the woman of the hour would be out here hanging out with a peasant like me."

A faint snort escapes Anna, her lips thinning to a softer smile. “I can see why Mike likes you.” She turns away, missing the surprised look Chester’s certain he has on right now. “Nah, everybody’s too busy trying to outdrink each other. They won’t miss me for a while. Anyway, I felt like escaping it all for a bit."

Chester nods, pulling another fresh stick from his pack. “I know what you mean. I like being around people. But sometimes it gets hectic. A little quiet's nice every now and then.”

Anna inclines her head in agreement, plucking the cigarette from his fingers and wedging it between her teeth. “Exactly my sentiments.”

The familiar whiff of roses and jasmine hit his senses when she leans over to let him light her cigarette. It’s light and doesn’t make him want to gag, which is a major plus. However, he has the urge to distance himself from her, but only at the absurdity of the position he’s all.

Because here he is, smoking with his fake boyfriend’s ex-girlfriend at her wedding.

Seriously, what kind of shit did he get himself into?

Might as well make the best out of it, he supposes. And if I play my cards right, I won’t be roadkill by the end of the night.

“You smoke,” Chester notes aloud after they let out a wordless puff. There's a sense of relief that follows the smog out of his lungs. He's thankful, to say the least, for cigarettes. Maybe one day he'd quit them. Hopefully there'll be a day when he wouldn't need them to ease his worries.

That day is not today though.

“Yeah,” she answers, peering at the dark sky above them. “Used to drive Mike crazy. Not that I blame him.”

Based on her tone, there seems to be a story hidden behind her last sentences. She doesn't give him time to ask, immediately following up with a question. "Is he still iffy about it?"

Chester exhales another bout of smoke. “Oh fuck yeah. He had an issue with it when we met. Nothing big or anything.” He waves his cigarette between his fingers, making sure the ash doesn’t hit Anna. The last thing he needs is go to court. “I mean, it’s hard when you share a place together. Like
sure, I smoke when I’m outside. But I know he’s a little annoyed when I come home smelling like cigarettes.”

Anna laughs, a quiet trill. “That sounds like Mike.” She slips her cigarette between her lips again and takes a long puff. “He mentioned you guys were roommates before you started dating. Think for like a couple of months?”

Chester nods, trying his best to mask his surprise. He’d figure Mike would mention a year or at the very least half a year. Mike doesn’t strike him as the kind of guy to start dating his roommate of...three months? Two-and-a-half?

Jesus, he really needs to a proper grasp of timing.

"Yeah. Things have been pretty good." Chester couldn't help but smile at the thought of the progress they’ve made over the past months. From being total strangers to estranged roommates to friends who're willing to fake date each other. "He's a great guy."

"Yeah," Anna echoes wistfully. Even from his angle, he catches a glimpse of somberness reflected in her irises. Her lips mirror it, flattening into a line. "he is. I’m glad he’s finally let himself go."

Chester starts at that.

This is it. This is it.

He could ask her. He could finally figure out the puzzles to their relationship. About what makes Mike tick and why he’s the way he is.

If Anna has a hand in all of this. Chester doubts it's all on her. One person can't just fuck a person up like that.

Then again, Sam fucked him up pretty badly.

“What'd you mean?”

Anna shrugs her shoulders. “He’s always had walls up. Always distancing himself from people. Distrusting them. It takes him a while to warm up to people.” Her eyebrows knit into a frown. “Scratch that. A long while.” She tilts her head upwards, meeting Chester’s perplexed gaze. The smile she flashes him is laced in sadness. “So it’s nice to know that he’s found somebody he’s willing to be himself around.” Another laugh breaks out of her, her shoulders shaking. “But I could be wrong. Maybe he’s been happier after all these years without me around. Maybe he’s been like that since you guys met.”

Chester raises an eyebrow, ignoring his reeling brain. “You guys could’ve stayed in contact, you know?” Flickering his his head to the front, he pushes the cigarette between his lips to smoke again. He watches as the puffy clouds of smog float upwards into the night. “I mean, unless you guys had a shitty breakup or something. Then I’d totally understand.” He pauses, letting the words he spoke sink in. “Wait, I didn’t mean to—”

“It’s fine,” Anna interrupts him, broadening her smile. Chester wonders if her muscles ever tire of being constantly stretched like that. “I get where you’re coming from. But I still think the space was good for the both of us. We were in bad places at the time, him more than I. Not his fault, of course.” Anna shrugs her shoulders. “I just… I want him to be happy. After what I did to him...he deserves to be happy.”

Chester freezes, his cigarette almost slipping out of his fingers. Invisible sirens ring in his head as he
tries to comprehend her words.

*What she did to him? What did—? What?*

“Hap—?” An abrupt fit of coughs pop up, halting his speech for the moment.

He definitely needs to quit smoking one of these days. Or it could be some higher being telling him to shut the fuck up before he embarrasses himself or gets a fist to the jaw.

Anna delivers a couple of steady blows onto his back. “You okay?”

Chester nods vigorously as he lets out another couple of wheezes. “Yeah, thanks. I swear I’m gonna die coughing if I don’t stop smoking.”

She snorts. “That makes two of us.” Giving him one last pat, she pulls her arm away to rest itself back on the railing. “You were saying something?”

“Uh, yeah. I was.” His free hand wounds itself around the nape of his neck and rubs it. Should he ask? Would that be weird? Is this some form of invasion of privacy?

*Could be. But if it might help me understand Mike in the long run, then well...*

“I was just...” His voice catches in his throat. He harrumphs to clear it. “I don’t get what you mean when you said you did something to him? Like you made him unhappy or something?”

It’s Anna’s turn to be baffled. She breathes out another stint of smoke. “Wait, he never told you?”

Chester narrows his eyes. “No... He never told me what?”

“What did you do to him?”

He shakes his head in response.

Sighing heavily, she bends down to watch the ongoing bustle below their feet. Her shoulders slump. “I messed things up. Hurt him.”

Chester barely catches her words, straining his ears to comprehend them. If his chest could burst in anticipation, it would've done so at this moment. “What did you do?”

*Hit him? Degrade him? Play mind games with him?*

“I betrayed his trust,” Anna says instead. Her grip tightens around the railing as she sighs again. “I was stupid. I shouldn’t have...” Her cheerful demeanor morphs into one of sorrow. For a brief moment, Chester feels sorry for her. Her remorse seems genuine. “It doesn’t matter now. I wanted things I thought he wasn’t giving me. I was blind to the fact that he was, in his own way. And I wish I realized sooner. Or maybe realized that we were best off going our separate ways. Probably would've soften the blow.”

Her words swim in his head as Chester tries to grasp her words.

*Betrayed his trust? Did she...? His eyes sweep over her, scrutinizing. No, she couldn't had. Mike respects her too much to... Unless that’s why he can’t trust people. But...*

But really though, what kind of soap opera set did he stumble onto?

As much as Chester’s dying to demand for answers, it’s a delicate topic to even bring up. What if she
didn’t do what he’s assuming she did? If he opens his big fat mouth, it might just come back and bite him in the ass.

But if he’s not, that’s great. He’s right. That's really great.

Thing is, she’s the bride. He’s a random guest at her wedding. Angering or upsetting the bride on her special night would spell disaster. Hell, he’s already causing her distress. He should pull out while he can and swear to never speak of it again.

But Chester's a trooper. A stubborn trooper at that. So he continues.

Piecing his words carefully in his head (which is something Chester hardly does), he phrases his question slowly. “What’d you mean it doesn’t matter?”

“Because I don’t know if Mike wants you to ever know. No offense.”

He purses his lips at that. "You make it sound ominous."

"Well if it calms you, he's not the bad guy in the scenario. Just a private and jaded guy."

“Well, he is a pretty private guy.”

“Yeah.” Anna pauses to take in another puff. “But he should talk about it though. Keeping it all bottled up is bad. You’d burst eventually.” She shakes her head. “I used to tell him that all the time. Think it never went through his thick skull. That stupid idiot.”

Chester nods in agreement. “I know what you mean. It’s like a huge weight off your shoulders after you let yourself go.”

“Yeah. But I mean from his history, I get his caution." Anna snorts. "But I swear, he’s too cautious for his own good.”

Silence looms over them. They take the time to catch up on their smoking. Chester takes advantage of this window to comprehend what has been said.

Definitely Mike and Anna has unfinished business that they to wrap up, or at the very least be at peace with. While he's still in the dark of the context, at the very least he knows they need to talk about it.

Another thing he's gotten out of being in her company for the past minutes, is that she's Sam's polar opposite. For one, she’s amicable and ready to admit to her faults. And between the two exes, there’s still that mutual respect and care for each other.

Which is great and all. But god, did this night reopen some wounds on both of their ends.

Maybe Chester should've shut his mouth.

“Can I ask you something?” Anna motions him to continue with her cigarette. “Why did you invite him?”

“Invite him?”

“Mike,” Chester clarifies. “I mean, not to say you can’t invite your ex to your wedding and all. I mean I know you want to reconnect with him. Make up. Whatever.” He gestures to his surroundings. “It’s just a shit place to do that, is all.”
Anna laughs, her despair erased for the moment. “Yup, I can see why he really likes you. But you’re right. This is a shit place to do that. Hell, I’m not even doing that with him now. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“I mean,” Chester offers. “the night’s still young. And he’s with Rob now. You could go talk to him now.”

“Yeah, I know. Rob told me he wanted to talk to him.” Anna jabs her thumb behind her at the bustle behind her. In the distance, Chester’s ears pick up on another tune — Toto’s “Africa”. Another basic song that’ll be a staple among folks like these. “But I don’t want to interrupt them. Maybe later.” She rolls her eyes. “Not to mention that I’d be swarmed with congratulations and stuff. It’s nice and all but I’d rather hang with my ex’s current boyfriend than my dad’s business partners. Least he's fun.”

“Glad you think so highly of me.” Chester chuckles before sucking on his cigarette. “If only Mike thinks of me that way.”

“I’m sure he does,” she answers earnestly, as if adamant of holding on to that belief. Pulling away from the railing, Anna twists her body to face Chester, crossed arms and all. “Honestly, tell me. Is he happy?” She frowns. “Wait. Don’t answer that. That’s a stupid question.”

Chester arches an eyebrow. A part of him is not liking where this is going. “How so?”

A gentle smile graces her lips. “I saw the way you both stood up for each other. The way you interacted in the hallway. You both oozed of chemistry. I don’t think I’ve seen him this comfortable in somebody’s company for a very long time. Like when you guys were dancing? I've never seem him smile and laugh the way you made him.” Her voice drops lower, as if sharing a secret. “And I saw the way he looked at you.”

She’s peering at him with a knowing look, a half-smile. Chester knows the meaning behind it. But he doesn’t want to acknowledge it. If he does, it might end horribly for him.

Because the floodgates have been opened the moment his lips touched Mike’s. And if Anna actually saw that besides all that shit they have been doing since the night began, if she could sense real chemistry behind all that acting they’ve been doing...

But to make sure anyway, he asks anyway.

“Looked at me?”

“He looked at you…” The smile Anna flashes him is a broken one. “like he’s in love.”

When they’re past all the awkward and emotional talk, their conversations take a livelier shift. It turns out Anna’s delightful company.
For one, she’s an amazing storyteller, capable of spinning stories and tossing random curveballs. Not to mention, her storytelling is enchanting. Never did he think something as meaningless as gravel could be as beautifully described to him.

Until now that is.

Also, she has quips and jokes up her sleeve. Chester’s a sucker for them. And she’s pretty cool with discussing random stuff — from their shared love for Jane Austen and chocolate to their shared hatred for LA traffic and watered down tea.

It’s all fun and interesting. Somehow, she's managed to distract him from the possibility that Mike Shinoda may be in love with him. Or at least romantically attracted to him. Or whatever bullshit that is.

But all in all, he could see why Mike fell in love with her. He really could.

She's in the midst of regaling him a story involving Mike, geese, and a red mullet when loud footsteps approach them. Chester’s greeted with the sight of a puckered out Rob, dragging what seems to be a stumbling Mike in tow.

“There you are! I’ve been looking all over for you,” the groom pants as he addresses Chester. He sneaks a quick glance at his old friend. “We, uh...got a tiny problem.”

Mike sways on the spot, despite having his body supported by his old friend. “Hey guys!” he exclaims, flapping his arms around like a pudgy duckling. Even in the moonlight, his cheeks are obviously pink. Like he’s been downing one too many…

Shots.

Oh no.

As if she read his mind, Anna mirrors his horror. “He’s drunk? Rob! You know how he gets when he drinks. Why did you let him drink so much?”

How he gets? Chester wonders. What?

After all these months of living together, Chester couldn’t tell anybody about Mike’s tolerance of alcohol. Until now, he always figured his roommate as a teetotaler since he’s never seen him drink. Or maybe even a social drinker, if the bottle of whiskey in the kitchen is anything to go by.

So to see him intoxicated is jarring. Hell, watching Mike flounder around blissfully happy is already making his head spin. If Mike isn't Mike, he wouldn't be freaking out about it.

But Mike is Mike and if he's dead drunk right now, something must've upset him.

I should've been there. I should've have left him alone. Fuck!

“I swear I was keeping an eye on him,” Rob replies defensively. “We were talking and then I got distracted for a short minute.” He juts his chin out at the now giggling Mike. “Next minute, he's...like this.”

Mike’s laughter increased in volume. Jerking himself free of Rob’s grip, he launches himself at Chester, arms latching themselves around him.

Immediately, Chester’s overwhelmed by the stench of aged whiskey and Mike’s own distinct scent.
“You smell really nice,” Mike breathes into his ear, coaxing a shiver out of him. His roommate’s grip tightens around his waist. “Makes you really, really fuckable.”

Chester’s mental sirens go off again. Heat courses throughout his body, even down towards his groin.

Which is a place he does not need to feel any kind of heat at right now. The last thing he needs is to be turned on by his drunk roommate in public.

But god, wouldn’t he like to grab him and—

Okay Chester, he tells himself mentally. Calm your ass down before you do something you’ll regret. Plus, Mike’s drunk. You don’t want to take advantage of a drunk person.

In the midst of wading through his fogged senses, he could distantly make out Rob’s voice. Chester can’t properly decipher his words but if he’s not mistaken, a mix of “forgotten”, “miss”, and “Mike” are thrown together.

Gathering all of his mental strength to keep himself together, Chester pats Mike gently on the back as he pries his friend off him. “C’mon, babe. Gotta take you home.”

“But I don’t wanna go!” Mike whines, his lips an inch away from Chester’s ear. He winces.

It’s a good thing Mike's hardly drunk. Otherwise, Chester's precious hearing would've been done by the end of the first month.

I’m never gonna complain about stick-in-the-mud Mike ever again. Never ever.

They really should've left while they could've. Now Mike's drunk and possibly depressed.

Bottom line, Chester is a shitty friend. He should've done something earlier.

But no...

“I’m so sorry for bailing early guys,” he finds himself saying out loud. “But we probably should get going. I’ll get a Uber and—”

Rob’s brow creases. “But Mike told me you guys drove here.”

Chester almost face-palms.

Oh right. Fuck.

They’re definitely screwed now. There’s no way that either of them are capable enough of driving the both of them back. And now they have to leave Mike's poor car behind for the car.

Why did you have to get drunk, Mike?

“We did,” Chester confirms. “Well, Mike did. I can’t drive.”

“Oh.” Anna gestures between herself and her husband. “We could get you guys a room. You could stay the night.”

Chester’s eyelids flutter. Stay the night? Here? At this swanky ass hotel?

That's such a strange suggestion. Is she feeling that guilty that she’s willing to put her ex and his
“boyfriend” up here?

There’s a part of Chester who’s eager to take advantage of the offer and bask in the luxury a five star hotel has to offer. But he's a nice guy and nice guys don’t take advantage of their fake boyfriend’s ex and her husband’s charity.

Uber is fine. They could do Uber. Then they could come back when Mike’s sober enough and retrieve his ride.

“No, there’s no need for that. Don’t worry about us— Hey! No! Come back!”

Long story short, Chester is staying at a five star hotel tonight for the very first time in his life.

And it’s all thanks to Rob. Or maybe no thanks, considering Chester's the one insisting he doesn't spend his money on Mike and him.

In spite of his demure nature, Rob's a stubborn man. Not only did he secure them a room, he insisted on paying for the bill upfront and ignoring Chester’s protests.

Chester wonders if most introverts are like that — reserved but unyielding. Judging by Mike’s and Rob’s personae, it’s proven to be true at all.

The only time Rob gives into Chester’s insistence is when Chester stresses for the newlyweds return to their wedding. He could haul Mike’s ass upstairs on his own.

Anna had been more conflicted on it, darting her gaze from one man to another. “I’ll text Mike in the morning to check on you guys,” she finally said, conceding. “We’ll be staying at Room 1410 so if you need anything, just knock on our door, okay?”

Chester had nodded in confirmation, only to get her out of his hair. The whole predicament is too weird for him.

But whatever. It is what it is. He won’t lie that he’s sort of glad he won’t be forking out thousands for a nightly stay. And he doesn’t need to be in the awkward company of Anna and her husband. As much fun as he had before, he’s still not comfortable of having Mike in the same room as her.

He starts regretting his decision as he pulls Mike into the elevator. Unfortunately for him, Mike’s heavy as hell and their room is at the end of the hallway on the 10th fucking floor.

“Jesus, how much do you weigh?” Chester exclaims as he hauls his friend’s ass out of the elevator. Mike doesn’t bother to do much of the walking, making Chester drag his body along instead. Thank god the corridors are deserted. It would be awkward to explain what he’s doing. Or they're doing. It's a good thing Mike hasn't tried stripping because god.
Mike cackles. “More than your mum!” he slurs before breaking into a fit of hiccups. “Wow, I taste like whiskey!” he declares before letting out another hitch.

Chester rolls his eyes as Mike dissolves into another round of snickers, hiccuping every now and then. Who knew that Mr Serious and Stoic is a childish, touchy mess when drunk?

*Note to self, never give Mike more than a shot. Or a glass. Or a can. Just one dose of any kind of alcohol.*

After another minute of drunken shenanigans on Mike’s end and puffing on Chester’s, they find themselves in front of their room for the night. Their room for the night.

Chester almost falls to his knees and kisses the floor. Hell, he'd launch into a bout of "Kumbaya" too. Mike's a bitch to drag around, fuck.

He would've done all of that if the thought of germs on the carpeting crosses his mind. He doubts that prestige includes in cleanliness around here.

“Okay Mike,” Chester starts after leaning his friend against the opposite wall. He turns away, fumbling for the card key in his pocket. “Time to—”

He never gets to finish his sentence. Because Mike has him against the door, swallowing Chester’s words with his lips.
Happy Post Traumatic release day! I'm on my second listen right now and oh my god, it's a ride.

But anyway, sorry for this late update! Been really busy with university. I honestly don't know when I can post the next chapter but it'll be when I have the time.

Anyway if you guys noticed, the rating changed so...LOL. This is new territory for me so excuse my bad writing.

Anyway, happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Every single neuron in Chester’s brain freezes. His mind is blank and all his senses are suspended for the moment.

Because Mike Shinoda is kissing him.

Mike Shinoda is *fucking* kissing him.

Or maybe trying to eat his face, considering Mike has shoved his tongue down Chester’s throat. It’s probably a good thing Chester’s lips parted in surprise. It’d be pretty awkward if Mike just stuck his tongue on Chester’s lips.

And that their foreheads and teeth clacked together, which is a little uncomfortable.

But those are measly problems. Because Mike Shinoda has him against the door with his mouth on Chester’s and Mike has a tight grip on his ass and his brain is dead and they’re in public and he should put a stop to whatever the hell this is because....because…

Fuck if he knows why.

Instinctively, his idle hands find themselves moving forward as he responds to the kiss as intensely as he can. One seizes Mike by the waist, the other wound itself around the neck. His fingers drift softly, drawing invisible lines around the nape of Mike’s neck. The light tremor radiating off Mike makes Chester’s head spin faster.

Amidst it all, he feels his teeth sink into flesh. Mike pulls away slightly, growling quietly as their eyes
They’re darkened, fueled by lust and fire. His tongue peeks out, swirling around his puffy lips.

Oddly enough, that’s when the stench of alcohol hits him. It’s dumb of him to not notice it before. Anybody within five feet of Mike’s radius could’ve smelt that shit off him. It shocks him back to reality.

Because they’re not boyfriends or lovers or in any kind of romantic or sexual relationship. They’re roommates, they’re friends.

They’re fucking fake dating.

And Mike is drunk as fuck. That’s the biggest factor of it all.

The thought rings loudly in Chester’s brain. Immediately, he gently pushes Mike away. “Mike, I gotta—”

“Gotta what?” Mike slurs, grinning. He licks his lips again. Chester almost jumps him right there and then, his morality thinning by the second. “What’s more important than kissing me? You’re nice to kiss, by the way. You taste nice. I wanna kiss you again.” He stumbles forward. He probably would’ve lost his balance hadn’t Chester manage to catch him in time.

Yup, he’s definitely drunk.

“Open the door,” Chester grounds out as he plants Mike against the opposing wall again. Even to himself, his voice sounds strained and distant. His poking arousal doesn’t help matters. “Hold on.”

With a shaking hand, he yanks the card out of his pocket and slides it through the keyhole.


Chester’s knees almost buckle.

Mike shouldn’t sound like that. Hell, nobody should sound as sinful. He’s practically the embodiment of lust right now, with his messed up hair, swollen lips, wrinkled clothes and—

Apparently Mike isn’t a patient person when he’s drunk. Chester has barely enough time to swing the door open and turn the lights on before Mike shoves him through the threshold.

His back slams against the nearest wall, making Chester wince in pain. But the ache disappears when Mike claims his lips again, pressing their bodies together.

Chester’s eyelids flutter shut, his legs wrapping themselves around Mike’s waist this time. Their arousals brush against each other, coaxing a throaty groan from Chester.

This time, Chester doesn’t sober up. Again, Chester forgets Mike reeks of whiskey and they’re fake dating and they’re in a hotel room and they’re Chester Bennington and Mike Shinoda.

In this very moment, they’re just two human beings succumbing to carnal desire.

“Mike,” he murmurs, pulling away and settling his feet back on solid ground. He doesn’t dare open his eyes. There’s something spellbinding about Mike’s eyes. He doesn’t need to see it, the desire reflected in his gaze. Because god, he’s already messed up as it is. I—"
“Please,” Mike whispers against his lips before diving back in.

Mike tastes of many things, flavours that Chester could not pinpoint if anybody were to ask him now. But it’s definitely addicting to the point that he hasn’t register how much time has passed as they kiss. It must’ve been a while because they’re both panting when they break off the kiss.

Mike’s eyes are filled with greed, drinking in Chester’s presence as if parched. The shallow breaths escaping his redden lips sucks Chester’s own gasps. Never in Chester’s life has he ever seen somebody this erotic and arousing as Mike Shinoda in this moment.

And he’s dying to consume him too.

A hand tugs at his wrist. Mike drags him along, leading him towards the bed at the centre of the tiny hotel room. Its sheets are white and pristine. The bed is big enough to comfort the two of them.

So of course, it’s the only one in the room.

Suddenly, everything hits Chester like a freight train.

Mike isn’t one of his one-night stands. He’s his drunk and dorky roommate and current fake date to a wedding.

And he’s fucking drunk.

Before Chester could pull the carpet under Mike’s feet, he’s knocked off his own. His back hits the soft sheets. It’s more welcoming compared to the wall but nevertheless, it knocks the wind out of him. His ears catches things hitting the floor and before Chester could comprehend it all, Mike’s face comes into view without a jacket.

He towers over Chester, oozing of dominance and hunger. A wicked grin graces Mike’s lips as he clamps Chester’s wrists above his head, settling himself over Chester. He plants his thigh between each side of Chester's. His sock-covered feet brush against Chester's clothed knees.

A touch like that shouldn't frustrate him. None of this should. How can anybody this drunk could be this seductive?

And just like that, all logical thoughts abandon him again.

“Mike,” he utters hoarsely. His pulse thumps wildly against his skin, waiting in anticipation.

And then, Mike jerks his hips.

A hoarse moan escapes Chester’s lips as he struggles against the hold on him, aching for relief. He hardens further each time their clothed arousals come in contact. The temptation to rip their clothes off and let himself be taken right there and then is great and terrible. Chester would’ve started blabbering in need hadn’t Mike swooped down and swallowed his words.

The kiss is rough and messy. Somehow, Chester manages to wrench his arms free, his fingers fumbling over one of Mike’s shirt buttons.

His senses are overwhelmed, to the point that he can't discern anything saved for taste. In this very moment, he can comprehend them better.

Mike tastes of many things. He tastes of sugary panna cotta, a hint of minty toothpaste, and something that’s distinctively Mike.
But he also tastes of whiskey, of alcohol.

*Alcohol.*

It takes all of Chester’s might to pull away and restrain himself from submission. Because Mike’s drunk and he’s not thinking straight. Sober Mike wouldn’t be kissing him. Sober Mike wouldn’t be even trying to get him off.

Sober Mike wouldn’t want to fuck Chester.

“Mike, I—” he says, breathless. His heart continues to thump wildly against his chest. He takes in a gulp of oxygen and tries again. “We can’t… We can’t—”

His poor excuse of a sentence goes ignored. “You look so good,” Mike whispers, dripping with want. He leans away, resting his lips against Chester’s ear. “All for me. Only for me. I can’t wait to watch you come.”

A quiet groan escapes Chester.

He feels Mike’s nose brush against his earlobe before being followed by an inhale. “You smell good too.”

Chester almost screams in frustration.

Because as much as Chester wants this, they can’t do it. Because Mike is drunk and he’s not in his right mind. And Chester doesn’t want Mike to wake up in the morning nursing a hangover and the biggest regret of his life.

Somehow, he manages to turn the tables, pressing Mike onto his back instead. It’s a miracle that only sheer willpower could pull of.

“So, you wanna fuck me instead?” Mike slurs. “That’s cool too. I haven’t been fucked in—”

“Mike,” Chester interrupts. “We’re not fucking.”

His answer must’ve been harsh for the lightheartedness surrounding Mike vanishes. A deep frown settles over his eyebrows before fear washes over his face. “What? Why not?” Chester opens his mouth to reply but Mike doesn’t let him. “It’s me, isn’t it? I fucked up, didn’t I?”

Chester frowns. “What—? I don’t—?”


“Mike,” Chester says, switching his voice to a more soothing tone. A million questions are running through his mind but he quiets them down for the moment. “That’s not true. I do care about you.”

His roommate vehemently shakes his head. “No, no, no! You don’t. You don’t—”

Something tells Chester that this is going to be a conversation they’re definitely going to have tomorrow. He’s definitely going to be the instigator but that doesn’t matter. While he'll prefer they discuss this right now, it's a horrible idea. One, Mike's drunk. Two, they’re both horny. Three, Chester’s not in the mood to have a heart-to-heart now. Way too much shit has gone down over the past several hours for him to try throwing advice around.
“Mike, I do,” he says firmly, his chest feeling funny. “But that’s not the point. The point is, you’re drunk and I—”

“No I’m not!” Mike exclaims. “I’m not as think as you drunk I am. Perfectly sober!” He pauses. “And horny. Doesn’t matter.”

“No, you’re not. You’re not thinking this through. We can’t have sex if you’re drunk.”

“Yes we can!” Mike protests as he struggled against Chester’s grip. “I’m totally consenting right now. Mark always...uh... Mark fucked me when I get drunk anyway! Which I’m totally not right now, so why the flying freaking fuck does it matter?”

Chester’s limbs freeze in disbelief.

*Did this fucking Mark...? Did he...?*

What the fuck is going on?

Another million questions are at the tip of his tongue, desperate to be answered. But since Mike is no used to him at the moment, he’ll have to swallow them down.

Whatever it is, he can’t deny that it's a disturbing turn of events. If Mike is implying what Chester’s thinking, Chester would love to get his hands on this Mark and pummel him to the ground. Hell, maybe that wouldn’t satisfy his anger.

Regardless whoever this bastard is, he played a role in Mike's mysterious past and not in a good way. And Chester doesn’t like that at all.

He heaves a heavy sigh as he gathers himself. “Mike, listen to me. We can…”

Fatigue suddenly courses through him and he finds himself releasing Mike as he topples over. His back hits the mattress with a soft thud, a welcoming change from all the drunk roughhousing he received.

“We can do it tomorrow.”

Mike’s voice brightens as his gaze flickers over to him. Chester’s heart aches further. “Really?”

Chester doesn’t meet his eyes, fixing his gaze on the ceiling. There’s not a single crack or blemish. At least to his naked eyes anyway. “Yeah,” he replies, eager for Mike to shut up. He's definitely fucked in the morning, if Mike remembers it anyway. “Just get some sleep now. It’s late.”

“Is that a promise?”

Chester whips his head. Mike’s back to grinning and Chester’s brain is dying from processing the sudden change in mood. He’s never letting Mike get drunk ever again. “What?”

“That we’d have sex tomorrow.”

A nervous laugh finds its way out of Chester. He silently utters a prayer to every higher being that he won’t be burned alive for his answer. But it's not like he means it. All he wants Mike to do is to shut up and sleep. And if lying about sex would, he'll take it. “Yeah, sure. Whatever you like.”

Mike laughs. “Cool,” he says passionately, ending the conversation but not the moment between them.
Because he's scooting over and he's flinging an arm around Chester, pulling him closer. Tucking his chin under Chester's shoulder, his drunk friend mumbles a “goodnight”.

His eyelids flutter close, leaving Chester wide awake with a raging hard-on and an overloaded brain.

When he’s definitely certain that Mike is in deep sleep, Chester disengages himself from him. He keeps a watchful eye on Mike, praying that he's careful enough to not wake him.

Unfortunately for him, he finds himself bumping into the side table. Thankfully, Mike continues snoring away.

In spite of it all, Chester couldn’t help but let out a loud sigh.

Because he’s still aroused. Even after all that drunk shit and Mike’s breakdown, he’s still aroused. There’s so many things he could be thinking about but of all things, his need for pleasure still runs through his mind. He can’t tell if that’s a good or bad thing.

The obvious thing to do is jerk off because *duh*. It’s amazing how the revelation that Mike wants him and was ready to take him right then and there gave him the worst erection he has ever had. That he could remember having anyway.

But is that weird? Would it be weird to relieve himself when the person who aroused him is passed out drunk? And after such a breakdown?

Seriously, he must be fucked in the head to still be turned on after all that shit.

*Well there’s always the bathroom*, he muses mentally. *I could just do it in there.*

But should he? Is there any weird moral implications to that?

Funny enough, it’s not the first time Mike has crossed his mind when he’s in the mood. Several times before Mike invaded his headspace as Chester brought himself to ecstasy. It’s not wholly uncharted territory. He’s done it before.

Then why is he hesitating now? Because Mike’s right here?

It could be. All the other times he’s masturbated, Mike wasn’t home. Ever since he found out how thin the walls were (no thanks to Joe’s constant reminders), Chester made sure that Mike was out before indulging.

Because the last thing he needs is scaring his friend for life by his moans. Or accidentally walking in on him. That would definitely not end well for Chester.
But…

But if Chester was quiet enough, he could pull it off with Mike being none the wiser. After all, he’s practically knocked out now. He wouldn’t hear a single thing.

But… But…

Ah, fuck it. What do kids say these days? “You only live once”? He reaches over to latch his fingers over the side drawer. If he finds out, hey, the worst thing he could do is bury me alive.

With a careful pull, Chester’s greeted by the sight of two bottles of lube and several packets of condoms. He snorts inwardly.

Of course. Five star hotels think of everything, don’t they?

He snatches one of the bottles before sliding the drawer shut. Chester swipes one last glance at his roommate as he makes his way over to the bathroom. Mike's chest rises steadily.

I’m definitely going to hell for this, he thinks as he locks the door in place. He shucks off his trousers and boxers, revealing his erection to the summer air. He cringes at the sight of it.

Chester’s not embarrassed of it or anything. In fact, he’s very proud of his dick.

It’s just that he’s going to jerk himself off. In the bathroom of a hotel. With his roommate fast asleep on the other side of the door. Who put him in this spot in the first place.

What kind of shit have I gotten into?

Chester climbs into the bathtub, settling himself on the warm surface. It’s the best place he could think off. Standing would be tiring after a while and sitting or lying on the floor would be uncomfortable. He could put the toilet cover down and sit on it but...nah.

And if gets come all over the place, he could hose it down.

God, that sounds really fucked up.

Silencing his brain for a moment, he covers his left hand in copious amounts of lube before wrapping his hand around his erection. A hiss escapes his lips as a pleasurable tingle courses through his body.

Immediately, he draws his hand back.

This is wrong. He shouldn’t be doing this. He should've opted for a cold shower instead of whatever the fuck he’s about to do.

Jerking off. I’m gonna jerk off to Mike. What the hell is wrong with me?

Heaving one last sigh, Chester curls his fingers around his erection again. This time, it's firmer. Both his arousal and his throat constrict at that.

And then, he moves.

The first several strokes are slow and careful. Chester bites the corner of his lip, not trusting himself to be silent. If Chester is aware of one thing, he’s definitely not a quiet lover.

With a rush, images pierce his thoughts. They’re a merge of real life situations and fantasies, all he's seen before.
There’s the aftermath of their first fight — the solid form of the wall against Chester’s chest as Mike slams himself into him from behind.

There’s also that time on the couch — the burn of the seat on Chester’s back as Mike’s digits press inside him, filling him with his skilled fingers.

But then there’s the new one — the soft sheets of the hotel room enveloping Chester as Mike’s tongue swirls around his erection, enticing him to come.

For some reason, that very scenario sticks with him. Everything he felt not long ago comes gushing in like a flood. The blaze mirrored in Mike’s eyes, the grip around Chester’s wrists as he pinned him down, the feel of his erection against his own. The taste of his lips.

Goddamn, the taste.

“Fuck,” Chester hisses, quickening his pace as the sound of skin becomes louder. His tongue unconsciously swipes over his lips and he lets out another breathy moan.

The taste of Mike on Chester’s lips. Despite the circumstances, he can’t deny that the experience was so overwhelmingly amazing. He’d love to experience it again when Mike's sober. And maybe takes things further.

He’d drink it all — all the moans and whines, all the “fuck”s and “please”s. And Chester won’t stop there. He’d flip them over and slink backwards. He’d get on his knees and pull Mike’s trousers and boxers off him.

And then he’d take him in. He’d take all of him in.

Several curses leave Chester’s mouth. His pleasure mounts, eager to reach the top.

“You look so good,” Mike had whispered in his ear. Chester could remember it as clear as day. He’d say it again after Chester releases. “All for me. Only for me. I can’t wait to watch you come.”

That sets him off.

With one last pump, a guttural moan tears out of Chester’s lips. He lets himself go, heightened pleasure shocking him to his toes he paints his palm with ropes of white. His heart races and his breathing is erratic as he comes down from his high. All lusty thoughts of Mike wither away, replaced with a big question mark.

What the fuck just happened?

After taking the time to collect and clean after himself, Chester decides that a phone call is in order.
He needs somebody to talk to, somebody that could make sense of what kind of night this has been.

Because he just had the best orgasm of his life courtesy of Mike Shinoda. And he didn’t even touch him.

And Chester doesn’t know what to make of it.

Obviously that’s not all of it. But Chester would rather have the answer to that first.

“Come on,” he mumbles as he drops himself onto the edge of the closed toilet seat. As much as he is ready to run back outside and away from the reminders of guilt, he can’t in case he rouses Mike.

“Pick up, pick the fuck up.”

Talinda picks up at the fifth ring.

“Jesus, Bennington,” she mumbles into the phone groggily. “It’s one in the fucking morning. You better—”

“Mike kissed me.”

Silence fills his ears, only broken by the rustling of sheets and Talinda’s shriek piercing his ear. “He what?!”

Chester winces, tearing his phone away from him and cupping it as if it’ll muffle her voice. As soon the yelling dies off, he returns it back to his ear. “Shut up, T!” he hisses. “He’s asl—”

“Babe? What’s wrong?” a feminine voice interrupts him on the other end of the line. It’s soft and drowsy but commanding enough to shut him up for a short moment. Only when she finishes her question does Chester’s brain return to overdrive.

“Is there somebody with you? Holy fuck, T! Did you fuck the n—?”

“Ches,” Talinda interrupts, voice dangerously threatening. “Shut the—”

“Wait,” the other woman cuts in, sounding perkier. “Is that Chester?”

A grin makes an appearance on his lips. “You told her about me? Tell her I said—”

“Okay!” Talinda declares, annoyed. “I’m gonna hang up now.”

Dread claws into his heart. “Wait, no. I need—”

“Don’t worry. I’m calling you back. Hold on.”

Before Chester could make another protest, the line goes dead. He pulls the device away from his ear, feeling a little betrayed.

Well, at least one of us is getting some.

His phone starts ringing again after several seconds. He swipes right immediately.

“Okay,” Talinda starts, her voice booming in the silence surrounding Chester’s ears. “I’m in the clear. So say whatever you wanna say.”

While he’s dying to dive into one of the craziest nights of his life, the nosy part of him couldn’t help but ask, “Wait, is that the—?”
“The nurse? Yeah,” Talinda replies shortly. “But we’re not here to talk about me, are we?” She pauses, the gushing of the water faucet filling in. “Anyway, you guys kissed. You guys actually kissed.”

The lack of a question doesn't escape Chester's attention. He laughs uneasily, running his fingers through his cropped hair. “Yeah, believe it or not.”

“You don’t sound happy.” There’s rustling and the sound of a switch being flipped on her end as she continues. “You kissed in front of everybody? Can’t imagine Shinoda wanting to do something like that. Even if it’s fake. All the more reason not to do it.”

Chester shakes his head before realising she can’t see him. “Nope,” he answers, lowering his voice for some reason. “I mean, it wasn’t...one time.”

“Twice?!”

“Uh...well...I mean…” He mumbles out the last sentence. “More than that.”

“Seriously?!”

“I mean, uh I...kinda just pecked him in front of everybody but I doubt anybody was paying attention. Except...Rob? I think that’s his name?”

She hums in response. “I’m assuming Rob’s the groom?”

“Yeah. They’re like high school friends and shit. Mike didn’t elaborate.” Feeling a little restless, he begins jiggling his right leg to shake it off. “But yeah, it was some quick peck. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“Uh huh, right,” Talinda says, sounding unconvinced. “What about the other time? Or times since you’re being pretty vague right now.”

Heat crawls up him neck as images of Mike and his makeout fills his brain. “Uh, well…? He’s drunk.”

“What the—? Why’s he drunk? I— He’s never drunk.”

His eyebrows narrow in confusion. “Wait, you’ve never...?”

“Never,” Talinda echoes firmly. “I didn’t even know he could get drunk.”

“Apparently he’s a lightweight. Pretty needy too so never get him drunk.”

Talinda laughs. “Noted. Thanks for the heads-up.” The humour in her voice shifts into a more serious tone. “But why did you let him get drunk if you knew that?”

“I didn't! I didn’t know he’s a lightweight and I didn’t know he was getting himself drunk,” Chester says defensively. “I was hanging out with Anna and he was, uh, hanging out with Rob. And one moment I was having a conversation with Anna and the next moment, he’s slurring and shit.”

“Jeez,” Talinda says. “Something must’ve upsetted him to make him drink. Like he hardly drinks during gatherings. He’d take a couple of sips and that’s the end of it.”

Chester shuts his eyes, squeezing them tightly. “Tal, he wanted to fuck me. He wanted to fuck me.”

Unsurprisingly, Talinda’s smugness reverberates through the line. "Called it.”
He scowls. “T.”

“Quiero decir,” Talinda says proudly, shutting the door. “que te advertí.”

Chester rolls his eyes. “Right. Well, good for you. I hope you and Dave aren’t betting over this.”


“I’ve known you for decades, T. I know everything about your shitty habits.”

She snickers. “I mean, you’re not wrong. But Dave? Really?”

“Okay fine,” Chester amends. “I forget he’s an innocent cinnamon roll or whatever millenials say these days.

“Millenials say a lot of things these days but they’re not all full of shit,” Talinda points out. “Did you—?” The whistling of the kettle cuts her off. “Wait, hold on.”

It takes half a minute for Talinda to whip up her chamomile tea and seat herself on her couch. Chester doesn’t mind. He has a lot of time in the world.

Well, until his body decides to shut down for the night, that is.

“Well, did you—?”

The implied tone jolts Chester. “Of course I didn’t. Jesus, I’m not crazy.” The bombardment of his recent jerk off suddenly pierces his brain. “But I might’ve, uh, jerked off after that.”

“What?” Talinda exclaims, horrified. “Not with him—?”

“No! In the bathroom. What the hell, T?”

She exhales loudly. “Well, sorry! It’s in the middle of the night, morning-ish and I half-dead right now.”

Immediately, guilt settles in him. Calling her wasn’t a good idea. She probably would rather spend her time spooning with her new girlfriend over listening to her best friend’s whining about his weird ass night.

“Sorry, I shouldn’t have—”

“No, don’t hang up,” she says softly. “I’m cool here. Just...not thinking right. Sorry. Didn’t mean to freak out. But seriously, why the hell did you jerk off? Did—?”

“We didn’t just kiss, okay?” Chester says hotly. “He had me against the door in the hallway and he shoved his tongue and—”

Talinda lets out a disgusted noise. “Can it. I don’t need to know that.”

“Hey, you’re the one who’s adamant of us to get together.”

Talinda snorts. “Yeah but I didn’t ask for specifics.”

A playful smirk flits at his lips. “Well if you wanna know, his tongue is—”
“Say one more word about it and I’ll chop your head off.”

“As if you can do that now.”

“When I see you then.” She sighs heavily again. Chester’s a hundred percent sure she’s massaging her temples. “You know you guys gotta talk this out later right?”

Chester’s idle fingers begin drumming on his shaking thigh. For a split second, he wishes that the phone has a cord. Twirling it around might help curb his restlessness. “Yeah. Question is whether Mike would. Want to talk about it.”

“He wouldn’t, knowing him,” Talinda replies. “But I don’t think you guys should skirt around it. I mean, he wanted to fuck you, Chester.”

“It’s probably the alcohol,” Chester guesses. “Alcohol always makes you say and do stupid shit.”

“Sometimes they’re the truth,” his best friend points out. “Remember what Freud used to say?”

He groans, wiping his face with his free hand. “You know how much I hate that fucking asshole. Stupid incestuous dumbfuck.”

“So do I, Talinda agrees. “But I mean, if you’re looking at it from his point-of-view. Like the unconscious and shit.”

He heaves a dramatic sigh, not liking where the conversation is turning one bit. “Tomorrow’s gonna be so embarrassing.”

“Mm hmm. No shit Sherlock.”

“What if he doesn’t want to acknowledge it?”

“I guess it’ll be hard to press something like that out of him,” she huffs. “That man’s too stubborn for his own good.”

Chester nods. “No shit.”

“Mm, I’m always right.” She pauses, the sound of slurping filling in for her. “What’s Anna like? Did she figure out the whole act?”

His eyebrows knit together as he tries reconstruct her profile. It’s been a long night after all. “Anna’s nice. She seems to care a lot about Mike. Surprisingly. I thought she’d be like Sam.”

“Nobody could be as crazy as that she-devil.”

“Yeah, true.” Chester’s eyes flickers over to the ceiling. Like the one outside, it’s as spotless. He’s really not used to being in a place like this. “But she said something weird. That she betrayed his trust or some shit.”

Chester could hear the gears shift in her mind. “Betrayed him?”

“I don’t know. If I have to guess, I’d say she cheated on Mike with Rob. ‘Cause Mike was a little stiff around him too.” He exhales. “I don’t know. I don’t wanna speculate too much. Everything is just fucking weird. A lot of weird shit went down tonight. Lots of yelling and revelations and shit.”

Talinda laughs. “What a great telenovela tonight could make. “La vida y los tiempos de Chester Bennington: Parte uno.” It’ll be funny and the episodes would be out of order because why the fuck
not?” He could hear her stifle a yawn.

“That’ll be a horrible idea,” Chester chuckles. “Like it’ll be rated NC-17 for all the sex and jerk-offs and—”

“Jesus, Bennington. Pipe your dick down, god. Ya duérmete.”

“I’m an adult, Bentley. You can’t tell me what to do.” As if on cue, a long yawn escapes him.

Her tone is amused and teasing. It almost sisterly. “Right.”

He waves a hand in dismissal. “Argh, fine. Whatever. I’m gonna try to catch some shut eye. Will tell you everything later. Depending on when I get home.”

“Home?” Talinda questions, surprised. “Wait, you’re not—?”

“I’m still at the hotel. Staying over for the night. Mike drove us here and well...” Chester clears his throat. “he’s drunk and I obviously can’t drive.”

Talinda sighs. “You should’ve told me earlier. I could’ve gotten you, you know. I still can.”

“It’s fine. Don’t worry. Go get some sleep.”

“You sure? I can go now and get you two. It’s not a problem.”

“It’s fine. Go back to fucking your girlfriend or something.” He pauses, another thought crossing his mind. “Although I wouldn’t be opposed to you picking the both of us up tomorrow. You could come in a Uber and drive us back in Mike’s ride.”

“Sure. Always wanted to sit in his car anyway. Heard he has a treasure trove of music in there. I wanna see if he has any Justin Bieber.” She yawns again. “And Chester?”

“Yeah?”

“Whatever happens tomorrow...” She trails away, before letting out another sigh. “Whatever happens tomorrow happens, okay?”

“Yeah,” he replies, trying to sound convinced as he can be. “Sure.”

“Mm. Buenas noches.”

“Buenas noches,” he says before pressing the red button, terminating the call between them.

And then he’s left alone again.

For a long moment, he just sits there, staring down at his phone’s screen blankly. While he didn't get the assurance or comprehension he wanted, he still feels like a small weight was lifted off him. It’s better than nothing. Talinda always could make him feel better.

So now, he can finally get some sleep. His brain is crying for rest.

A part of him is ready to climb back into the bathtub and sleep the whole night off. But it's wet and the last thing he needs is a reminder of his masturbation.

Rising to his feet, he unlocks the door.
Thankfully, Mike’s still fast asleep. He has his back towards him, but his body heaves at a steady pace. He’s not sure whether Mike would like the idea of waking up with his friend next to him.

Chester’s first thought is to sleep on the nearby armchair in the corner of the room but he ends up squashing that idea. Chester never could sleep upright. He’ll just wake up with the most painful sore back.

There’s the floor. But the wooden surface doesn’t look as comfortable as it looks to be.

_Then again, floors are never comfortable to sleep on. They're hard and irritating and what the fuck am I on about?_ He pinches his nose. _Yup, I really need sleep._

Tiptoeing as quietly as he can, he crosses over to the bed. The thought of sneaking a peek at Mike’s face crosses his head but he shoves it out before he could act on it. It'll just make things worse.

The urge to pull off his drying contacts and strip down to his boxers is terribly tempting. But obviously, he doesn't have contact solution or his glasses and Mike would freak if he found out he was sharing a bed with a half-naked Chester.

So instead to spare them both the pain, Chester pulls his jacket off as he watches Mike curl into a ball.

_Cold. He's cold._

Prying the covers carefully off under the unoccupied pillow, he lays the quilt over Mike's body.

Chester's going to be shivering through the night. But that doesn't matter. He's not gonna feel it as he sleeps. Making sure to not startle him awake, Chester cautiously lies at the edge of the bed, their backs against each other.

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The first thing Chester notices when he wakes is that there’s limbs around him.

His eyelids flutter as they try their best to adjust to the sudden flood of light. Judging by the harshness, it’s probably mid-morning, a weird time for Chester to be up at. He’s always been an early riser.

Shifting his head to the side, he tilts his head, only to meet a pair of dark eyes.

They’re understandably droopy, given his drinking binge. Chester wonders if he even got enough sleep at all. Mike looks awfully drained and his eyes are bloodshot and…and…

Maybe it’s the moment they’re in, that they're tangled in each other and sheets.
Or maybe it’s the sunlight filtering through the drapes, bathing part of Mike’s face like he’s heaven sent.

Heck, maybe it’s the disorientation from waking up because he swears Mike’s lips are moving and god, he’s sure he’s leaning forward too.

Their mouths ghost each other, on the brink of touching when he feels the loss of a presence. His brain hardly registers the bathroom door shutting with a loud slam, followed by the booming sounds of hurling that only a hangover could elicit.

Instead of checking on Mike like a friend should, Chester grabs the nearest pillow and buries his face in it to muffle his groan.

Unfortunately for him, it's Mike's. So obviously his nostrils are filled by his scent.

Which doesn't help matters. Because in that moment, he knows something has shifted. Their whole world has shifted. And Chester is proven wrong by Talinda once again.

He has feelings for Mike. He has fucking feelings for Mike Shinoda.

But why should he be surprised? She’s always right after all.

He hates it when she's right.

“Fuck me,” Chester says into the pillow.

Chapter End Notes

Spanish translations:
Quiero decir que te advertí: I mean I warned you
Increíble: Unbelievable
La vida y los tiempos de Chester Bennington: Parte uno: The Life and Times of Chester Bennington: Part One
Ya duérmete: Go to sleep now
Buenas noches: Goodnight
“Seriously though, you guys should’ve brought me along.”

They’re stuck in the hundredth traffic jam of the day. Chester is ready to wind the window down so he could scream. Hell, maybe jump outside because god, it’s driving him crazy. He’s one step away from moving back to Arizona, because goddamn there’s traffic jams on a fucking Sunday?

Thankfully, they’re at the last traffic light before they reach the end because goddamn.

But hey, Chester has a treasure-trove of gossip for Talinda to sink her teeth in the meanwhile. And one of the million things the both of them have in common is that love for gossip.

He snorts as he twists the Rubik’s cube in his hand. It’s frustrating when he could only solve one side. He’s definitely checking out online tutorials when he gets home.

“Please, you would’ve socked his face as soon as he opened his mouth.”

“As he deserves,” Talinda says, pinning him with a cocked eyebrow. “I mean, look me in the eye and tell me you wouldn’t.”

He doesn’t have to. She's right. She's always right. “Fine. I wish I brought you along so you can pummel Douchebag into the ground.”

She makes a satisfied noise. “It’s not an apology but I’ll take what I can get.”

The traffic light turns green. Traffic itself begins inching forward.
“So…”

Chester glances up. He’s a couple tiles shy from completing the blue side. “So what?”

Talinda turns them into a junction. Finally, some familiarity. “Did you talk about it?”

Chester sighs, chancing a glance backwards. Mike is still fast asleep, his body draped across the backseat. “Not yet. He hasn’t said much since he woke up.”

“Mike never says much in the morning.”

“True,” Chester agrees. “But he is hungover too.”

Talinda hums. “Makes sense. But really—”

“I know.” His gaze shifts to the window. Flashes of nameless passers-by and compressed stores fly by. “I’m just worried about his reaction or whatever he’s feeling. He couldn’t look me in the eye this morning.” He sighs. “Do you think he hates me?”


Again, she's right. Except that moment when they almost fucked. But well, that night itself is weird on its own.

“I don’t know. For not stopping him earlier? For not dragging his ass out of the wedding earlier? Making sure he doesn’t drink?”

“I don’t think he’ll be mad about that.” She stops the car at the entrance to the basement of the apartment, surveying the vehicle’s interior. “Where’s the card?”

Chester nudges his head forward. “Think it’s tucked in your visor.”

Talinda plucks it out and presses it against the card reader. The traffic gate lifts. “If I know Mike,” she continues as she accelerates forward. “he’d be blaming himself.”

He couldn’t help but nod. As much as Chester would like to pin the blame solely on himself, he knows that's not what Mike would agree with. “I wish he wouldn’t.”

Talinda nods as she pulls up into the designated parking lot. "Yo también,” she sighs.

Chester twists his body back. A part of him is reluctant to rouse his roommate. Despite being hungover, Mike seems to be at peace. Based on his soften facial features anyway.

A loud harumph makes him jump. There’s a wide smirk painted on Talinda.

“Ches? Anytime this century.”

Rolling his eyes and ignoring his heated cheeks, Chester leans forward to shake Mike awake. His roommate makes an incoherent noise.

“Hey Mikey? We’re here.”

“Mm.”

“You can sleep inside,” Chester coaxes lightly.
Mike mumbles something that sounds like “fuck off”.

He musters a heavy sigh. “Mike.”

With a final groan, Mike sits himself up slowly while clutching his head. Chester feels a pang of sympathy. Hangovers always suck.

“Hey, thanks for the help,” Chester says, addressing Talinda. “I’m really sorry for troubling you. Dragging you away from your girlfriend and all.”

“She’s not my girlfriend. And you never trouble me.”

“That’s a lie and you know it.”

She snorts. “Perhaps. Anyway, Heidi’s filling in for a coworker today. It’s not like I could hang out with her anyway.”

Chester brightens, a grin forming on his lips. “Wait, her name is Heidi? Heidi what?”

With one last eye-roll, Talinda flings the driver’s door wide open. “Adiós, Ches,” she bades him before stepping out.

“Hey!”

She doesn’t bother looking back, flipping him off as she makes her way out of the parking lot. Chester couldn’t help but roll his eyes.

“Well isn’t she a bucketful of sunshine?” says the voice behind him.

Mike is slumped against the seat, face buried in his hands. Chester sighs.

“C’mon, Grumpypants. We’ll get you some painkillers.”

For the rest of the day, he doesn’t hear a peep from him.

The rational part of Chester (which is not a big chunk of his brain) chalks up his silence to Mike’s devastating hangover. Which makes sense. Since Chester’s been to one too many stupid parties back in the day, he’s seen one too many horrible and disgusting aftermaths at the bar. It’s sad he can’t relate much. He could hold his liquor pretty well.

So throughout the day, all he could do is watch Mike scarf down his chocolate chip pancakes, down some painkillers, and haul his ass to bed.

And he hasn’t seen him since.
Even when Chester woke up from his afternoon nap and readied himself for work, there is no trace of Mike, no indication that he's even in the building.

Except for some quiet murmuring coming for Mike's room. It could be some song Mike’s playing or he’s muttering himself. Chester wished he actually checked on him instead of zipping out without a word. He didn’t even leave a note for him, like he always does.

Because god, Chester doesn’t need to act like he’s avoiding him too.

If Mike actually is. Though he wouldn’t put it past him.

Mike has every right to avoid him though. Sure, he managed to pull the brakes before things escalated further. But they still made out. They almost fucked.

And then he jerked off.

Which could be the problem. What if he did hear Chester jerk off?

That’s way worse. Like...so much worse.

Because that time was such a mess and god, he could barely recall what he was doing or saying—Saying.

What if he accidentally called Mike’s name?

Chester almost rams his head into the nearest wall. Because… Because…

As much as he’s confident he has feelings for Mike (maybe, could be), he doesn’t want Mike to know. It’s not that Chester’s afraid of any dynamics changing or Mike’s rejection. He’s been there, done that.

It’s just that…

“What if I lose him?” he mumbles out loud. “What if he freaks and doesn’t want to see me again?”

He doesn’t want things to change. He loves Mike enough to know that.

Not as a lover or whatever. As a friend. He only has feelings for him that have nothing to do with love. They're romantic but...not love.

And that’s all that is.

“Oh my god,” Chester mutters under his breath. “I am freaking out over dynamics and shit. I am so fucked.”

Which is not a lie. Because Dave had sent him home early again (“Jesus, Bennington. I don’t know what the hell happened last night but you really to sleep. You look like a half-dead zombie.”) and odds are Mike’s still awake. And most likely recovered from his shitty hangover.

“Well,” Chester says as he turns the doorknob with his key. “only one way to find out.”

True enough, Mike’s sprawled over the couch. His chest heaves in a steady rhythm, his face buried under an open-faced book.

It’s an adorable sight, something he’d love to capture on his camera. Chester would’ve whipped his
phone out had Mike not suddenly pulled the book over his face.

“Hi,” he croaks, lifting his head up. “You’re early.”

“Hey,” Chester replies, closing the shoe cabinet. “And yeah. Dave decided to let me off early tonight. Feel better?”

“Uh...yeah. Much better.” Swinging his legs off the sofa, Mike moves himself to sit up. He runs a hand across his face, most likely wiping the sleep off himself. “Um...I need to tell you something.”

Chester’s body stiffens.

This is it. This is when Mike tells him that they crossed a line that they shouldn’t have, that Chester has to pack his bags and leave, that Mike never wants to see Chester’s face again.

This is when things fall apart.

All because of one goddamned night.

“Ooh, sound ominous,” Chester couldn’t help but joke as he plops himself next to Mike. Out of the corner of his eye, he notices Mike plant a couple of inches between them. He pretends it doesn’t bother him in the slightest. “It couldn’t wait ‘til tomorrow?”

Mike laughs uneasily. “Well, it could. Now that I think about it…”

“I’m just joking, man,” Chester says, hoping he sounds as casually as he could. They might as well get it over and done with. After such a sentence, Chester doubts he could sleep well tonight. “You could tell me. I’m all ears.”

His roommate runs his fingers through his hair. “Um, well… This is gonna sound weird. I—”

“As this about what happened in the hotel room?”

As soon as the words leave Chester’s lips, he wishes he could take it all back. Because...yikes.

Fortunately and unfortunately for him, they don’t seem to be on the same page.

“Hotel room? What?”

Chester’s heart skips a beat. “You know...when you were drunk...?”

Mike shakes his head, his features contorted in confusion. He averts his gaze, flickering them up to the ceiling. “I don’t...remember what happened.”

Chester studies him for a moment. He’s not looking him in the eye — a sign of lying. And his voice doesn’t sound like he wants to talk about it. It’s steady but too dismissive and confident for Chester’s taste.

But the big thing that gives Mike away is always his ears. And they’re not reddening at all.

*Never mind. We can talk about that later. Let’s just hear what he has to say.*

“Oh okay,” Chester says. “Never mind then. So what’s on your mind?”

Mike’s bottom lip juts out, worrying it with his tooth. It’s a gesture that shouldn’t transfix Chester as easily as it should. “Well, so...Anna called.”
Chester cocks an eyebrow. He’s not entirely surprised. After all, they quietly checked out and headed home without letting the newlyweds know. She must’ve been worried sick about Mike.

“And?”

“Well,” Mike says slowly. “We talked.” He pauses again.

“And?”

“And…she invited us to dinner. You and me. Her and Rob. Together. Tomorrow night.”

Chester frowns. “Wait, what? Dinner? Aren’t they supposed to be on a flight to Antarctica or wherever the hell they’re having their honeymoon at?”

“They will. Wednesday morning. And they’re going to Italy.”

Chester snorts. “You know what I mean.”

“Yeah.”

A short pause settles in.

“So, what did you tell her?”

Mike shrugs his shoulders, sinking into the couch. “Told her I’d gotta tell you. Will let her know tomorrow morning.”

“Huh. Do you wanna go?”

“I don’t know. Do you?”

Chester shakes his head. “If I find out they booked some stuffy fancy ass restaurant, I’m zipping back to Arizona. On foot.”

A sliver of a smile graces Mike’s lips. “Damn, you’ll abandon me just like that? Ouch.”

“I mean,” Chester leans backwards, hands behind his head. “I’m down if you’re down. I mean, if you want to.”

He hears Mike blow out air loudly. “I don’t… I don’t know, man.”

“You don’t have to if you don’t want to.”

“I don’t. Well, I also do. I just…”

He doesn’t finish his sentence. Chester doesn’t prod him. Mike looks worried enough as it is.

Another bout of silence stretches between them. It’s not as awkward as Chester thought it’d be.

But it is a little weird. Because a lot of things are looming over their heads. Namely last night’s shit, Anna’s invitation, Chester sort of/kind of/maybe/definitely harbouring feelings for his emotionally-compromised roommate.

Which, god. He’s itching to blurt all that shit out to Mike. Especially the last part. He’s not sure whether he should even keep whatever that happened between them a secret. He’d end up doing that though because as much as Chester likes to think he’s all that, he’s a coward.
We kissed. Well, you kissed me. And we sorta made out. And we sorta almost fucked and I had to stop it because you’re drunk and I want you to be in a right state of mind when we ever do fuck. That is, if you want to. Which I kinda promised you to shut up and sleep ‘cause you kept wanting to fuck. And yeah, I jerked off to you when you were sleeping ‘cause I’m sort of/kind of/maybe/definitely not in love with you. But I have feelings for you. And maybe you feel the same way ‘cause you wanted to fuck me last night.

Also you were blabbering about a guy named Mark who I wanna punch in the face.

But he doesn’t say any of that.

Because Mike beats him to the punch.

“Can you tell me about your marriage? With that ex of yours? If you don’t mind me asking.”

To say he’s taken aback is an understatement. He’s really shocked.

Chester sits up straighter, his hands falling into his lap. “Wait, what does that have to do with anything?”

Immediately, Mike shrinks. Chester’s heart aches. This past couple of days have been a ride, watching Mike transform from a frozen cube to a puddle of water. As much as Chester would like to have his walls torn down, he doesn’t want it to be a painful ordeal.

“I mean, I… I’ve thought of doing it but, you know. I didn’t think you’d be cool about it.”

“It’s just that… It’s sudden, that’s all.”

Mike nods vigorously. “Yeah, it is. Sorry I didn’t mean to—”

“No, no. I’m cool with talking about it.” He inhales deeply, racking his brain for all the memories he’s locked up at the back of his mind. “Well, Sam and I used to go to high school together. High school sweethearts kind of bullshit. And you must be thinking, “Oh god, that’s so sweet”.”

“I’m guessing it’s not.”

Chester shakes his head. “She was fucking toxic. I don’t know how to explain it but…she’d pick on everything. The way I talk. The way I walk. The way I look. Like when I’m having a good time, she’ll always find some way to upset me for the rest of the day.” He laughs. “One day we were watching TV. And I was laughing at some joke on and she suddenly turned to me and was like, “Why do you look like that? Why’d you look so fucking ugly?”"

A hundred percent of him is waiting for Mike’s expression to shift into a doubtful one. Much to his surprise, he doesn’t. In fact, he seems to look…like he understands?

“What? Seriously?”

It’s a first. Even when he was telling Talinda about Sam for the first time, she didn’t believe him.

“But yeah, despite it all I still cared for her. Loved her even.” A chuckle escapes his lips. “Worst mistake of my life. I shouldn’t have forgave her or come up with shitty excuses for her fucked up behaviour. I’d always say that’s how she is, that she’s right to say that I’m the fuckup.” He sighs heavily. “Then I got myself married to that bitch. Right after we graduated. I thought things would get better. Maybe without school beating itself over our heads, things would change. Fuck, it got worse.”
“Worse?”

“I mean, it wasn’t entirely her fault either. I said shitty things too in defense of myself. I’ll admit I fucked up at times. We were both at fault with that.” Several thoughts swim by. Chester cringes at them. “Difference is I didn’t hit her. And I never called her a low life or anything extreme. I never insulted her family. I never insulted her sexuality.”

Mike’s cheeks drain of colour. Chester doesn’t question him about it, trudging through his story instead.

“Then I got into college, met T.” He snorts, a quiet warmth burning at the pits of his stomach. “Sam always thought we were fucking behind her back. She’d pick on Tal for no reason, calling her horrible names and shaming her in public. Like even when she isn’t around, she’d say shitty things about us. Like she’d yell them out loud for no fucking reason besides to embarrass me.”

It’s amazing how one memory, one instance, one person could fire Chester up. And not in a good way at all.

Sam was a unique individual.

“And you know, it was fine when she was doing it to me. But it wasn’t cool when she brought other people into it.”

Mike’s question is uttered, barely a whisper. “What made you...you know?”

“Think it was a lot of things.” Another set of thoughts flicker in his head. “There’s one that sticks out. Once, I was driving us home and we were going under this highway. And this rock, like, fell onto the windscreen and left a crack on the windshield.”

The more that he keeps that very thought in mind, the more overwhelmed he feels. His anger must be obvious, for Mike has scooted closer. Their thighs brush against each other. Chester shuts his eyes, gripping the edge of the couch.

“I mean, we freaked out. Like, who wouldn’t? It wasn’t a big ass rock. But you know, whatever. So I pulled to the side to check on her.” His eyelids snap open, meeting Mike’s startled ones. “And you know what she said?”

Mike shakes his head wordlessly.

“She didn’t say, “Are you okay?” or “I’m fine” or whatever a normal person would say. She just gave me this hard stare and raises her fucking voice. Like she said something like, “You see? You're bad luck. This wouldn’t have happened if you weren’t driving. Now we gotta pay for the car. And it’s all thanks to you, you dipshit.”” He pauses, giving it a thought. Not that he could think coherently, considering his anger agitating him. “Or something like that. Can’t really remember. Happened a long time ago. And I don’t know why. She said way worse things to me. I don’t think the rock would’ve killed us. But I don’t know. Sitting there next to her and hearing that she only gave a shit about the car instead of her own husband...just…”

“It hurts,” Mike finishes for him.

Chester nods, his features softening. “Funny thing is she wouldn’t let me go if I asked. She’d manipulate me to stay. Or threaten me anyway. So the next day after class, I talked about it with T and she looked at me with this serious expression and was like, “She thinks we’re fucking right? Why not let’s make it real?””
Mike makes a choking noise. “The…? What the fuck? You guys had sex?”

“Course not,” Chester replies breezily. “T gave me her underwear for Sam to find.”

In spite of the heaviness of the subject, Mike lets out a loud chortle. Chester couldn’t help but laugh along. Despite only been about twenty-four hours, he sorely misses hearing Mike’s laugh.

“It was really hilarious. I mean, shit got violent. But it was pretty hilarious. Well, the way she turned red anyway.” Chester snickers. “Stormed out and filed for divorce the next day.”

“I don’t think the violence was hilarious,” Mike says. “But it does sound...weird. Did people find out?”

“Sam didn’t go to college and I wasn’t a popular guy in my major or in any of my classes. And the people I knew knew about the idea anyway so all is good.” Chester exhales deeply. “Last I heard, she’s holed up in Alabama married to some racist redneck. Didn’t verify if that’s true but at this point, I don’t give a fuck anymore.”

Mike’s eyebrows knit together. “So…that’s it?”

“Well, I guess?” Chester crosses his legs. “I mean…what else is there?”

“I don’t know!” Mike exclaims, startling Chester. It’s disorienting, considering how soft-spoken Mike has been the whole time. “I mean, like… How the hell did you forgive her?”

Chester scrunches his own eyebrows. “Forgive?”

“Yeah! I…” He trails away, slapping his hand on his thigh lamely. His eyes dart away, back down to the ground.

It’s troubling, how down Mike is this whole time. Ever since Anna entered the picture, Mike’s been out of sorts.

And Chester’s determined to know why. Not to satisfy his curiosity (well, kind of), but to make things right. Maybe, he could help Mike make sense of things. Maybe things would be better if he tried.

*Guess that psychology minor isn’t gonna go to waste after all.*

“I’m sensing a story here.”

Mike doesn’t say a word. He lifts himself off the couch and glides over to the sliding door that leads out to the balcony. Outside, the night sky is dark, with the lights radiating off buildings illuminating the surroundings. Mike wounds a finger around the translucent fabric.

“Mike?”

No reply. Chester’s heart sink further down into darkness.

This is what he’s afraid of — losing him. Losing his trust. Losing Mike to whatever demons he’s fighting off. Losing everything they’ve built.

Losing his own heart.

Neither of them speaks for a long minute. Chester’s about to get up and comfort him when Mike’s voice interrupts him.
“Why do you care?”

Chester whips his head up, caught off-guard. “Care?”

Mike nods, too transfixed on the curtains. This time, he curls the cloth around his fist. “Why’d you care so much?”

His eyebrows knit together. “Because you’re my— my friend. I…” Another exhale escapes him. He’s trying so hard not to spit out his newfound feelings for Mike. Because that’s not what he needs right now. He doesn’t need another complication in his life. He’s already aching as it is. “You mean a lot to me, you know? And you deserve the world.”

“No, I don’t,” Mike says fiercely. The sudden sprout of furious emotion unsettles Chester. “I’m a fuckup who doesn’t deserve—”


His roommate shakes his head. “Not me. I don’t.”

“Mike—”

Mike stomps back over, pinning Chester with a glare. His eyes narrow to crinkled slits. For a short moment, he almost sinks to the floor, scared out of his wits. It’s only when he reminds himself that he’s speaking to Mike does he collect himself.

“Look, if you knew who I— what I did, or who I am. Or whatever the fuck it is,” Mike starts, both of his hands balled into fists. “you won’t think that way.”

“Then tell me,” Chester murmurs. He almost reaches out to smooth Mike’s fists. “Tell me.”

Again, the fire in his eyes diminishes. Hesitation replaces his features, as if his brain has just caught up with what Chester’s mouth has uttered. “I… What? Seriously?”

“I am,” Chester says. “I have all the time in the world. I have all the time in the world for you.”

The last part is meant to be reassuring. Unfortunately for Chester, Mike doesn’t find it that way.

“You won’t like this,” Mike continues to fret as he collapses onto the couch. “You’ll look me in the eye and—”

Chester wants to tell him that he’s so fucking wrong. He’s desperate to show him that he’s everything, that he should be given the world. That Mike’s heart deserves to be repaired. That Mike deserves to love himself and be loved.

Instead, he silences him with a finger to his lips. Mike falters at the touch.

“Hey, don’t judge. Some people like doing those stuff, you know.”
A snort escapes Mike. “Right.”

Another bout of silence befalls them. From the corner of Chester’s eyes, he notices Mike playing with his fingers in his lap. A pang of guilt hits him.

Then again, the last thing he needs is to force Mike to do something he doesn’t want to do. As much as he wants to make things better right now, he shouldn’t have poked at him like that. Then he’ll be no better than fucking Mark.

God, just thinking of him gives him the creeps.

“You know, Mike,” Chester begins. “If you’re not comfortable talking about it—”

“No,” Mike cuts in. His frown is still plastered on his face. Chester has the urge to wipe it off his face. “I… You know, maybe you should hear it. It might— It might help. ‘Cause you know…whatever. Maybe it’ll make me feel better.”

“You don’t have to—”

Mike snorts. “Seriously? First, you wanna hear what I have to say. And now, you don’t? What happened to “I’ll still be hear to listen”?“

Chester swirls his tongue around his drying lips. “I am. I always will. It’s just that I don’t want you to feel like you’re forced to do it. Like you’re cornered or feel like you don’t have a choice. Or—”

“Yeah, I get the memo.” Mike musters a sigh. “I know what you mean. But I don’t know. I’ve been thinking about it the whole day and I… I don’t know. Maybe a different perspective would be nice.”

His eyes drift up to Chester’s.

Brown on brown. Uncertainty and certainty.

God, Mike’s eyes are something. Underneath all that cool and calm, Chester could make out the fear and pain. It’s astounding.

In that very moment, Chester couldn’t help but think how privileged he is to witness Mike Shinoda’s vulnerability, his shame, his window. He doubts many have that privilege.

“You want me to turn the lights off?” Chester finds himself saying.

“It’s fine.” Mike clears his throat, ducking his head. “Um so growing up, I’ve never been good with emotions and shit. My parents weren’t the most emotional sort. I mean, I know they care about my brother and I. And each other. But they never, like, expressed them much. Like through words or hugs or whatever. So I guess that’s why I’m,” he gestures to himself awkwardly. “a little stunted when it comes to emotions and feelings and shit.” A choked laugh escapes him. “Which is kinda stupid considering I could learn to share my feelings or whatever. But…”

“But?”

Another sigh escapes his lips. “There was this guy. Mark. I think the others mentioned him last night.”

Boy, not just the others.

“This was like, during my junior year. We hardly shared any classes except a couple,” Mike continues. “Art, for sure. English and…History too if I’m not mistaken. Whatever, it doesn’t matter.
Like we didn’t know each other well. We were just classmates. He seemed nice. From the people I talked to and from what I’ve seen anyway."

His lips twist into a grimace. “So one day in Art, he came up to me and asked me to hang out with him. I didn’t think much of it. Maybe he wanted to be friends. I don’t know.” Mike squeezes his eyes shut. “He went down on me. In his house. In his room.”

Chester’s breath catches in his throat.

God if Chester was angry before, he’s seething now. He’s almost ready to jump up and hunt this Mark down.

“It was consensual,” Mike repents quickly. “Don’t worry. I liked it. He’s been with guys before. They were all from other high schools. And secretly anyway.” Mike finally lifts his head up but only to face the ceiling. “At the time, I didn’t know that I liked guys too. I guess it was kinda like my sexual awakening for guys or something. It was so confusing. And then he became everything. My first kiss, first love, first...everything. And I hate that.”

Chester mentally braces himself, silently praying that he’s not going to hear his worst fears, his horrifying assumptions.

“He used to…” Mike’s eyelids flutter shut, squeezing it tightly as if to ward off the images from entering his sight. “He’d get violent sometimes. When we get into disagreements or when I don’t want to have sex with him. Sometimes, he threw things at me. Sometimes, he’d blow cigarette smoke in my face. Just to see how I’d react.”

Cigarette smoke.

That’s why he hates cigarette smoke. Jesus fucking Christ.

“Sometimes, it’s this verbal thing, emotional manipulative bullshit he’d pull on me. Sometimes, he gets rough with me during sex. Like I don’t mind the rough stuff but I mean, he doesn’t listen to “no” or “it hurts” or whatever. He never forced himself on me though. Thank god. Because...I don’t know what I’ll do with myself.”

Chester hates that his first reaction is to exhale in relief. It disgusts him that he’s thankful that Mike has gone through a similar ordeal to Chester’s instead. That the worst didn’t happen.

He shouldn’t. He really fucking shouldn’t. It’s something he’d never wish anybody would go through themselves.

And yet here he is.

They really aren’t that different from each other.

A swirl of thoughts and emotions swim around his head. He can’t identify all of them. From the ones he could, most of them is fury towards Mark and fear and empathy for Mike.

“Jesus.”

At that, he almost facepalms. That’s all he could come up with?

Mike lets out a strangled laugh. “Yes siree.” He crosses his arms in front of his chest. “It’s kinda funny that he’d want to fuck me but in reality, he hated me. He never said it but I know he did. Does,
maybe. Who knows? He hated how attracted he was to me. He hated that I’m a guy. It was the internalized homophobia I guess. Most of the time, he’d insult me. He’d said that I was a confused bitch who couldn't decide between “dick and pussy”.

Usually, Chester’s pretty good at keeping his mouth shut when people are dumping emotional stuff onto him. So he blames it on instincts and shock when he blurs out, “What kind of fucking bullshit is that? Like— Like, what the fuck? Hasn’t he heard of fucking bisexuality or pansexuality, that fucking prick?”

For the first time today, Mike cracks a genuine smile. A genuine smile that isn’t elicited because of humour. Chester would’ve let himself feel accomplished had it not been for the situation they’re in right now.

“His words, not mine. And that I used him, turned him gay when he was straight.” Mike huffs. “Which is a fucking lie because he came up to me and started it all. He didn't understand that you could like more than one gender. Said it’s all because I couldn’t pick a side.” Instantly, Mike’s expression falls. “And I believed that. I believed there was something wrong with me.”

At this point, Chester is vehemently shaking his head, willing his boiling rage to simmer and his aching heart to still. At least until Mike’s finished.

But the way he said that word, the emphasis on “wrong”... If Chester would let it destroy his soul, he would.

“Somebody found us messing around in an empty class one day. Just kissing. Nobody knew that we were...messing around.” Mike inhales deeply. “He was just some random freshman. A random freshman that couldn’t shut his mouth. I mean, most people didn’t take him seriously. Just some nobody freshman, you know? But there were still rumours after that. People looking at me funny and saying shitty things.” Another bout of sadness finds itself on Mike’s face as he uncrosses his arms, returning them back onto his lap. “Another added problem that came along with being a half-Asian in a school full of shithheads.”

That’s it.

Chester inches closer, reaching over for Mike’s hand. It takes all of him to not let himself get distracted by Mike’s wary and surprised expression. He seals his palm over his. A flicker of recognition and uncertainty passes over his face.

I’m here, Chester wants him to know. I’m here for you.

Mike cocks his head from side to side, gaze returning to the ceiling. He detracts his hand, rather run it through his hair. “After that, Mark didn’t want anything to do with me. Avoided me like a plague. Which was for the best. At the time, it didn’t seem that way. It destroyed me. He was somebody I cared about, you know? Even if he was a shithag. But you know, I mean, people forgot about it by the end of the week.” He snorts. “Well, most of them did. Kyle and his lackeys like to remind me of that shit every now and then. I mean, I had Brad and Rob. They’ve stuck by me, which was great. They didn’t care that I liked guys too. They love me the same and that’s all I could ask for.” He inhales sharply. “And then one day, Mark left.”

Chester arches an eyebrow. “Left? As in left the school?”

“Yeah. His parents moved to London or some shit. Which was for the best. But I don’t know.” Mike’s brow creases. Chester wonders how many muscles are straining from all the frowning he’s been doing for the past half an hour. “Before he left, he said so many things. So many fucking things
to me and it made me feel worthless as shit. I didn’t know what to do with myself. I was so fucking lost. Like I know now I never deserved the shit he gave me. But…” He throws his hands up, allowing them to fall against his thighs carefully. “I don’t know. There’s a part of me that…that…”

*Thinks he’s right,* the silence finishes for him.

Chester almost jumps him, ready to go on a rampage about how Mark is a dickbag and Mike is wrong but then again, Mike doesn’t give him space to.

“It was such a dark time. I mean, I should’ve been happy. Like really happy. But I wasn’t. I think I was confused by the whole thing, whether what he said about me is true. And sure, Brad and Rob were there to help but you know, there’s so much you can do, right? They didn’t know what to say or make me feel better. I kept saying that they’re only being nice to me because we’re friends. I didn’t believe they were being genuine.”

“I’m sure they were,” Chester says automatically. He’s raring to add, *Mark is a fucking clueless douchebag. He didn’t and never will deserve you.* He doesn’t. “They love you.”

“Yeah,” Mike says, sounding half-convinced. “And yeah. Then Anna moved in and she…” A corner of his lips tug to the side. “She brightened things up. She doesn’t give a shit about who you are. As long as you’re not a shitty person, you’re good.” The smile widens as he tilts his head to a side, his eyes trained towards the front. “And I don’t know. There’s something about her that made me told her about my...my dilemma. She looked at me and asked me why I had to pick a side.”

“She’s not wrong.”

“Well, yeah. I mean, it wasn’t like an absolute solution to my problem. But it was nice to know that somebody I hardly knew said that. Believed that with all their heart. And I’m glad she told me that. It helped that somebody understood. She helped me understand myself better. And I’ll always be thankful for that.” Mike shrugs his shoulders. “Then we got closer and then...we wound up dating.”

He pauses for a moment, to gulp down the glass of water on the coffee table. Chester couldn’t help but let his gaze drift down Mike’s neck, of his bobbing Adam’s apple, of the blemishes that mars Mike’s tanned skin. It’s practically begging to be caressed. Namely by Chester’s lips.

He almost slaps himself in response. God does he have it bad.

He’s stuck deep inside his stupid head that he barely recognizes that Mike has continued his storytelling.

“It was kinda hard at first. I thought I was unconsciously using her, you know? To help me figure out whether I was gay or straight. But being with her reassured me I didn’t need to choose a side. She wouldn’t let me forget it sometimes.” Mike waves a hand around. “It got a little annoying but you know. She cared. She said it’s normal. And when somebody that cares about you says that, it means a lot, you know?”

Mike pauses again, looking hesitant. “I... I’ve never been good with emotions, you know? Everything was such a mess when I was with Mark, worse when he left. It probably wasn’t a good idea for Anna and I to date but...” He sighs again, the deepest Chester has heard him let out tonight. “I mean she was patient with me. But I knew there was a part of her that craved for the intimacy that I couldn’t give her. The walls she couldn’t scale or break through. Even as friends, I still had that barrier and I... And you know, things got worse after high school ended. She got a scholarship at NYU, I stayed put here. We didn’t get to see each other often and it was killing us. And then…I...”

His hands fly to his face, cupping it. “Fuck, I’m sorry. I’ve been rambling like a fucking idiot and
you really— you really don’t—”

“Mike, Mike.” Chester soothes. “Take your time. It’s okay.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. Don’t ever be sorry.”

A wary smile surfaces on Mike’s lips. “That’s what she used to tell me too.”

Chester doesn’t know how to reply to that. So for the next minute, they sit in silence.

“She cheated on me, you know? She was cheating on me. With Rob.”

Chester’s blood turns cold.

“Funny enough, that hurt me more than Mark ever could. I-I know Mark is a fucking douchebag who deserves to rot in whatever hole he is in right now. But Anna and Rob fucking behind my back hurt more because she was somebody I did love and he was somebody I used to call one of my best friends. They were fucking behind my back and I never knew.” The laugh he lets out is laced in ice. “I was so confused, you know? I was sad and angry and desperate. I was begging her to not leave me. She saw this as her ticket way out. And I hate that. I hate that the people that stood by me betrayed me at the end.” He snorts. “I guess that’s where my trust issues came from.”

The way he said it, so nonchalant at first. And then, the emotions just increased into this exploding crescendo…

“Mike—”

“But you know what?” his roommate exclaims bitterly. He meets Chester’s gaze, his coffee eyes glazed in a variety of emotions. “I don't blame her. It's my fault. I couldn't give her what she needed. I couldn't give her the affection she wanted. I ignored her during our long-distance relationship. Maybe she does deserve Rob. Rob's a more emotional guy anyway. And things were cemented last night. She did help me through some shit and I thought...I guess I thought I owed her and I thought going there could get me the closure I’ve always wanted. But I couldn’t fucking get it. They were all reminders of my fuckups. And everything that happened… I drank because I couldn’t handle it. I drank to remind myself how much of a fuckup I am. And it’s so fucking true. I fuck things up with people. And always will.”

For the longest moment, nobody moves a muscle or utters a syllable. It’s a miracle that they haven’t lost any eye-contact. Mike has a horrible habit of not being able to maintain eye-contact.

But here he is doing that…

He means it. He fucking means it. His shame… The fact that he’s… Jesus fuck.

He’s going to say it. This is it. Chester’s going to say what he wants Mike to know and he’s going to listen. He needs to know. Chester needs Mike to know it all.

“You’re not a fuckup.”

Mike’s reply is instantaneous. “No, I—”

“Mike,” Chester interrupts firmly. “can I say something first?”

Despite the uncertainty that has surfaced, courtesy of Mike’s vulnerable speech, Mike nods his head.
“She did you wrong. Sure, you can’t deny the impact she had in your life. That she helped you understand yourself better. And that’s enough for you to up and head to her wedding, no matter what she did to you. But Jesus Christ, Mike—”

“I wanna put it behind me,” Mike says morosely. “I thought I did. I thought I forgave. But sometimes it’ll play in my head and…”

“Listen to me, Mike.” Chester scoots closer. To Mike’s credit, he doesn’t pull away. “I don’t know about other people. But based on personal experience anyway, you don’t forgive other people to move on. That’s not how things work.”

His roommate’s eyes narrow. “What’d you mean?”

Chester shifts in his seat leaning forward. “I mean, lots of people say otherwise. Maybe it works for them better, I don’t know. But speaking from experience, it’s bullshit. It’s hard to forgive people for messing and wrecking and wasting your time and ruining your life. And with people that are abusive and people who do really, really despicable things… You can’t just simply forgive them. It’s not like they broke your favourite vase or stole your sandwich. This is detrimental. It leaves you scarred. And for me, forgiving isn’t how you move on. You accept the things that happened to you. You accept what you’ve done and what they’ve done. You accept that it’s fucked up and we all have to live with it now. That’s one way forward. It’s definitely not easy. But it’s best in the long run.”

“What about closure?” Mike murmurs. “So you just...accept? That’s the closure?”

“Closure doesn’t come with forgiveness. It comes with acceptance.” At this point, Chester knows he’s getting too emotional, putting himself in Mike’s shoes. But like he decided before, they’re not very different. “Like the people who said I’m supposed to forgive “for my own sake”? Fuck them. I worked to realize what I need, what I deserve. And I did not deserve any of that shit. Why should I forgive when I never asked for the shit I went through in the first place?”

A hundred percent of Chester is waiting for Mike to deny that, to insist that forgiveness is the way forward. He wouldn’t be surprised. It’s something that society likes to drum in people’s heads. Which is bullshit. This is about him realizing his worth.

“Is that okay?” Mike asks quietly. His eyes have flickered back down, hanging his head as if in shame.

“It’s not my call, you know,” Chester says, calmer now. “It’s all up to you. But for me, it helped me move on. I don’t have to be okay with what she did to me. And that’s okay.”

“That’s okay,” Mike echoes. In a louder voice, he adds, “I wish I could be like you. Even after all the shit you’ve been through, you’re so...optimistic. So...damn strong.”

“You are strong,” Chester reminds him. “You stood up for yourself last night. In a room full of strangers and bigots. And that’s brave.”

“I didn't feel brave.”

“You are brave,” Chester says softly. “You’re...a good person, Mike. No matter how much you don’t believe it, or no matter how many people tell you differently, you are to me. Don’t let anybody else tell you otherwise.”

A sharp intake of breath from Mike. His expression morphs into a one of confusion, disbelief, and other emotions that Chester can’t comprehend. “Why would you say that?”
“Because it’s the truth,” Chester replies easily. “I don’t know how much do I have to let you know how wonderful you are. But I will. Because you are amazing and wonderful. And I’m gonna be by your side and walk you through that until you learn to be kind to yourself.”

His words flow out of his mouth like a gushing dam, finally freed to declare his thoughts to Mike. Because god, he deserves to know this. That he’s deserving of love.

“Ches—”

“I can’t make you love yourself. That’s not how things work. I can’t force you to do anything. This is all you. Everything starts with you. But I’m here. I’ll be here for you.”

“I—”

And before he could stop himself, Chester’s leaning in, planting a soft peck on Mike’s forehead. He has to will himself from capturing his lips instead.

But this is not the time for that. There will be time for that later, a time when he can actually say how much he cares for him. That the care for him extends to more than friendship.

Hopefully.

“Think about it, okay?” Chester murmurs against his skin before pulling away. “You don’t have to see Anna and Rob just for closure. You can get it on your own too.”

Mike’s eyelids are fluttered shut, his lips parted. “What if I never get closure?” he whispers. “Like even if I meet them, and if I don’t... What if...? What if things don’t get better?”

“They do. Change doesn’t happen immediately. Closure doesn’t happen immediately. It takes time. And I know you can get it. You gotta allow time to work its magic.”

Mike nods. “Okay.”

Chester’s lips quirk to the side before he leans in again, this time to wrap his arms around Mike in an embrace.

It’s something he’s been wanting to do for so long. He’s not left disappointed. Mike radiates of warmth and his body fits Chester like a jigsaw puzzle.

This feels right. Everything feels right.

Arms snake themselves around Chester’s waist, pulling him closer. His heart skips a beat.

“Think about it,” Chester murmurs into his friend’s ear. He could feel a tremor coursing through Mike. “Okay?”

Mike tightens his grip, burying his face into the crook of Chester’s neck. He swears he feels that spot dampen.

“Yeah.”
Actually, I'm kinda curious. Do you guys think Mike should meet with Anna and Rob? I'd love to hear your thoughts on it! :D

Spanish translations:
Yo también: Me too
Adiós: Goodbye
Hey, everybody! Hope you all are doing well, especially during this time of the year. Chester, we miss you so much.

So this is the last chapter of the second act. Hope you guys enjoyed reading this!

Also, special thanks to all of you who left your thoughts in the last chapter. I really appreciate them! To those that hoped this chapter would end, differently, sorry about that. I just felt like this was a better resolution.

Anyway, enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chester’s tuning his guitar when he hears rapping on his door.

His first assumption of who’s behind the door is Mike because, well, who else could it be? Unless there’s some weird ass ghost that’s haunting the apartment that Chester doesn’t know of. He’ll definitely have a strong word with Mike then.

But whatever, it better be Mike. He hasn’t seen or heard a peep from him today. It’s already around noon and Mike should be up and about now. Or he might’ve already been. Chester has barricaded himself in his room for the past couple of hours so Mike could’ve been awake since.

He’ll let Mike’s night owl tendencies go this time. Mike had went to bed the night before drained and hopefully enlightened. Heart-to-hearts are always draining. Draining but necessary. Mike needed to know all that. And Chester wasn’t lying when he said he’ll be there for him.

People seriously need to talk their feelings out more. About eighty percent of life problems could be solved that way.

So he sets his guitar down next to him before rolling across the other side of the bed and jumping up to his feet.

As he suspected, Mike’s face is what greets him behind the door. There are slight bags underneath his eyelids like he hasn’t gotten proper sleep in years. But then he’s flashing him that shy smile of his and Chester falls back into hell all over again.
“Hey,” he starts.

“Hi,” Mike says. He jabs a thumb behind him. “Wanna jam?”

The jamming session ends up dissolving into a fitful of giggles, shitty jokes, and one too many banging on the keyboard and riffing on the guitar.

Chester’s sure their tenants above and below them would file complaints against them but that’s the last thing on his mind right now. He’d include Joe but knowing Joe, he’d be eavesdropping on the both of them. That busybody son-of-a-bitch.

But besides all that, he doesn’t care. God could be outside, ready to throw him down to hell and Chester still wouldn’t give a shit. Because Mike is smiling, the corner of his eyes are crinkling, and he’s laughing like he means it. All is good in the world for the moment.

After Chester belts out the last note of the Pokémon theme song, he lays his guitar on the ground before diving unceremoniously onto Mike’s bed. Which is not a good idea because Mike’s sheets smell uncannily like him. And the last thing Chester needs is to get an erection.

Bad idea. Time to get up.

His dick twitches.

Yup, time to get up.

But before he could get to his feet, Mike swivels in his chair to face him. So all he could do is to roll onto his stomach and pray to every single god in this world to save his soul.

Not the brightest idea but hey, you gotta do what you gotta do.

“You should’ve been a singer,” Mike comments. “I’d listen to you and buy your records. Your voice is...”

“Like an angel?” Chester offers.

“I was going to say like butter,” Mike answers drily. “Smooth like butter.”

Chester quirks his lips to the side. “I’ll take it.” Ignoring Mike’s eye-roll, he continues, “I used to. When I was a kid, I wanted to be a singer.”

His roommate frowns, his curiosity piqued. “What stopped you?”

He shrugs his shoulders. “Reality. Life.”
“Reality and life shouldn’t stop you from following your dreams.”

A short whistle leaves Chester’s lips before they spread into a playful grin. “Wow, look at you Mr Pessimist,” he says in a sing-song voice.

“Well, I expected better from you, Mr Optimist.”

“Hey, I have my moments.”

At this point, his dick has soften, the blood flowing away. This gives him the opportunity to flop onto his back without being asked unwanted questions. “I assume being a teacher is not what you always wanted to do too.”

“Of course not,” Mike answers. “I wanted to be an artist.”

“Like have your paintings in galleries and stuff?” Chester asks, recalling what the assholes said on Saturday night.

“Yeah.”

“Why didn’t you do it then?”

Mike tilts his head. “Reality.”

“Touché,” Chester says with a grin. "But I thought you like teaching?"

“I do.” Mike turns away to turn his keyboard off. "But I guess sometimes you kinda wonder, right? Like what they said...”

From the way Mike speaks, Chester knows who he's talking about. “No,” he says fiercely. “They’re wrong. There’s nothing wrong with choosing the path you’ve taken.”

Unsurprisingly, all Mike does is blink and say, “Okay, another question for you.” It makes Chester wonder if he'll ever be comfortable in being vulnerable.

“Damn, you and your questions.”

“It’s only been like, what?” Mike protests. "The second one?”

Chester makes a shooing gesture. “Schematics. Anyway, shoot.”

“You busy the whole day?”

“I mean, I got work at night later,” Chester replies as he sits up cross-legged on the bed. "Why?”

Mike shrugs. “Wanna grab lunch? I’ll buy.”

“Lunch?” Chester repeats. “It’s….” He slips his hand into his pant pocket but before he could fish out his phone, Mike answers for him.

“3.03pm?”

“Yeah,” Chester says, frowning. Did that much time pass since they started messing around?

Time does fly when you’re having fun butchering every single song known to man, apparently.

Mike shrugs. “Schematics. If you’re that uncomfortable with it, then we’ll get as the British would
say — tea time.”

Chester smirks. “Seriously?”

"What? I'm not wrong!"

“Didn't say you were. But you don’t have to pay, man. I can do that.”

It's the least he could do after Saturday.

Mike shakes his head. “Nah, it’s cool. I’m in the mood to be charitable.”

Chester snickers. “You have moods when it comes to charity?”

“You know, I’m starting to regret asking you out.”

*Asking you out.* Just those three words send his mind buzzing.

It’s not a date. Not a date at all. Because Mike doesn’t remember anything about their night at their hotel and maybe it should stay that way.

Or when he’s sure Mike does actually see him more as a roommate or a friend. Which then yeah, he’s definitely up for it.

At any rate, Mike just wants to hang with him. Like they usually do sometimes. All he wants to do is spend some time with him. And that's the end of it.

“Where do you have in mind?” Chester asks as he swings his feet off the bed.

“I was thinking of the coffee shop with the amazing cupcakes.”

He cocks an eyebrow. “I thought you hate that place.”

Mike looks rightfully offended. “Did you forget the part when I said “amazing cupcakes”?”

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Chester has to admit, naming your coffee shop “A Thousand Suns” is a bit much. Too hipster for his tastes. Hell, even the decor screams hipster, with the hanging lamps, the inspirational quotes written in chalk behind the counter, and the tall bar stools propped against the front windows.

Then again, he’s not really a hipster anyway so who’s he to say how hippy a place should be?

Since it’s a Monday afternoon, there aren’t a lot of people around, save for a couple middle aged men decked in full suits, several college-aged students chatting noisily at the largest table in the room, and an elderly woman who’s currently ordering. Which is nice. Chester doesn’t like crowded coffee
“One of these days I’m gonna learn how to make cupcakes,” Chester proclaims as he glances away from the menu above their heads.

“But can you make them as good as the ones here?” Mike asks, with a raised eyebrow.

“Hey, I’m Chester Bennington. I can do anything. Like make you the best cupcakes you’ve ever tasted in your life.” He swipes an arm around him. “Then you wouldn’t need to come here. Since you hate the food here with a strange and burning passion.”

“If I just wanted cupcakes,” Mike says. “I could buy them on the go and not eat their other stuff. Then, you wouldn’t need to go through all that trouble.”

“Then why don’t you just do that now?”

A light blush blossoms across his cheeks. “Uh…I don’t know. I just thought… You know…”

“No, I don’t know.”

Mike lets out a huff. “Don’t be a dick.”

“I’m not being a dick,” Chester says, though his grin is a dead giveaway. He can’t help it sometimes. Mike can be pretty fun to mess with. He’d get all flustered and a little frustrated, which is pretty cute. A dick move but oh well. “I’m serious.”

Mike’s about to open his mouth to reply when the elderly woman takes her leave with a takeaway cup. The barista manning the counter turns towards them with a bright smile.

“Hey there!” she greets them, pushing her drooping glasses back onto the bridge of her nose. “What would you guys be having today?”

“Uh…” Mike’s gaze flickers from the woman to Chester. “You ready?”

“Yeah.” Chester cranes his neck back up towards the menu. “Uh…I’ll have the turkey ham sandwich and a chai latte.”

“Don’t get the sandwich,” Mike cuts in. “Or any of the sandwiches. It’s bad. Like, they salt it like crazy. All you taste is salt.” Something flashes over his face, as if he realized who’s he standing in front of. “No offense! Like I was… Uh… Well…”

The barista lets out a short laugh. She glances around her before leaning over, as if sharing a secret. “Just between us, your boyfriend’s right. The food here is pretty awful. Well most of it anyway.”

As soon as the word “boyfriend” leaves her lips, Mike and Chester’s gazes meet before turning away at the same time. A warm feeling spreads throughout Chester's cheeks.

He shouldn’t be blushing because well, they’re not dating. Mike and him? They’re just friends. He should be laughing it off, or clearing the air.

But for some strange reason, he can’t do either of those.

From the corner of his eyes, he watches Mike shuffle his shoes as he glues his gaze towards the ground. It’s a reaction he’d expect out of him.

The woman doesn’t notice since she continues rambling on. “Though I never told the chef. He’d
skin me alive if I did. So here we are, with badly made food. But we’re more popular for our coffee anyway so I guess it doesn’t matter. Plus, there are some weird people that like the food. For some odd reason.”

“So,” Chester says smoothly. Even in awkward situations, he never fails to give into the weirdness of it all. One of his countless traits. “what’d you recommend?”

The barista nudges towards the display of baked goods next to her. “Honestly, get the baked stuff that’s like already available. Our baker’s different from our chef so all the stuff that comes out are actually okay for human consumption.”

Chester snorts. “I can imagine.”

“Let me guess.” She jabs her thumb in Mike’s direction, who looks both offended and guilty at the same time. “His words?”

“Mm hmm.”

Mike nudges him in the ribs. “You make me sound like an asshole,” he says without any malice.

Chester flashes him a sly wink before turning back to the barista. “Well, I’ll get the chocolate chip muffin.” He ignores Mike’s scoff. Typical cupcake elitist. “And a chai latte.”

“Alright,” she says as she keys in the items. “And your boyfriend?”

Chester starts at that word again.

It’s not that he finds it offensive. In fact, he’s flattered that such a term would be what a stranger would describe him and Mike. But the thing is, all they did was exchange a couple of jabs. What made them look like boyfriends at all? It strikes him as strange.

Both Talinda and Anna has mentioned that they seem to exchange some looks. God knows what they are. And then there’s this stranger who doesn’t seem to mind coining them with the term.

Maybe women were better at spotting signs or vibes or whatever people call it. Men are always the obtuse ones after all. Anyway, Talinda is right about Chester. But that could be because they’ve been friends for so long.

This time, Mike doesn’t seem to be as affected by it. He’s nonchalant when he’s ordering.

“Three cupcakes?” Chester exclaims a little too loudly. The men in the suits shoot him dirty looks from where they’re sitting. He doesn’t retaliate. Regardless, he’s not going to view men in suits and slick-back hairstyles in a positive light in a long time. Last Saturday solidified that.

Mike casts him with another eye-roll. “One for you, alright?”

“Fine.” Chester pauses for dramatic effect. “Two cupcakes?”

“So?” Mike asks. “I got the Americano, okay? And you know I drink my coffee black.”

To punctuate the ridiculity of it all, Chester makes a show of rubbing his temples. One of these days, he’s going to need to sit him down and give him a long lecture on the hazards of overeating sweets. Chester’s no health nut but at least he knows when you draw the line on “too much sugar”.

“Mikey, your sugar levels.” He turns back to the barista, who seems to be more amused that she should be. She definitely should be a shoo-in for gaining the “Employee of the Month” award just by
putting up with their shit. It also a good thing that there isn’t anybody lining up behind them. “Once, I bought him a box of Cookies & Creme Pop-Tarts and he demolished the whole thing. In a day.”

The barista bursts into a fit of giggles.

“In my defense,” Mike says, his cheeks now are bright shade of crimson. It’s adorable. “I haven’t eaten the whole day.”

“Well, who was the one who insisted to not take my sandwich to work?”

Mike returns to his usual fumbling, which gives the barista time to ring up their total. Even at the bill, both Mike and Chester end up bickering over who should pay for it all. “You know I have to say,” she says after they ended up splitting the bill. “You guys are probably the most entertaining and compatible couple I’ve ever met. I don’t think my girlfriend and I get into as many arguments as you guys.”

Chester chuckles. “I recommend getting into them. Well, not like serious ones. Just cute and endearing ones like the both of us get into.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” she says. “I’ll go get your stuff ready.”

As she trots away, Chester could hear Mike clear his throat next to him. He’s playing with the collar of his plaid shirt. Which really looks good on him. One thing Chester knows is that plaid shirts and denim jackets on Mike? An absolute match made in heaven.

“God, that was weird.”

“What’s weird?”

“You know.” Mike leans forward, lowering his voice as he whispers into Chester’s ear. His warm breath tickles him and sends a shiver down his spine. “the boyfriend thing.”

Chester’s too distracted by the proximity of the both of them to give his reply in ease. “I-Is that a bad thing to...assume?”

“I mean we’re not dating,” Mike says as he pulls away, oblivious to the effect he has on his roommate. Chester tries not to mourn the loss. They’re in public after all. If it was the two of them alone...well.

“Well, yeah. But what’s the harm in assuming?”

“There’s no harm,” Mike quickly amends. He tilts his head to the side as he casts his gaze at the ceiling. “I just…”

“Does it make you uncomfortable?”

“No,” he asserts. “Just...never mind.”

Chester cocks an eyebrow.

“I’m serious!” Mike says, sounding not as convincing as he probably would like. “I just…” He heaves a heavy sigh as their eyes meet again. “Do we look like a couple?”

And there it is, the million dollar question that Chester would love the answer to.

But it doesn’t matter, should it? Because this is some random barista that’ll forget about them in a
couple of days and who made a wrong assumption that should’ve been cleared up a moment ago. But it wasn’t. And it shouldn’t matter at all.

To Chester anyway. Mike has always been more self-conscious of himself.

Chester shrugs his shoulders. “Honestly? I have no freaking clue. But I mean, lots of friends get mistaken for couples. And siblings too. So I wouldn’t worry about it.”

Mike doesn’t seem as comfortable with that idea but he lets it go anyway. “That’s true.”

They settle in a comfortable silence. Or for Chester, it is. Because Mike seems to be tapping his fingers on the counter and jiggling his foot as he sweeps the coffee shop with his gaze. He looks as nervous as an anxiety-riddled boyfriend about to propose to his long-time lover.

“Fuck,” Mike groans suddenly, his eyes widening before being covered by his palm. “I just remembered something. I can’t believe I forgot to tell you.”

“What?” Chester teases. “That you’ve been planning to seduce me? Because frankly, asking me to serenade you with the Pokémon theme song and then taking me out to some random coffee shop isn’t sexy. Or romantic.”

“Very funny, Bennington.” Eyelids fluttering close, he sucks in a breath before exhaling loudly. “So remember that art show I had a couple months back?”

“Yeah?”

Mike clears his throat again. Chester swears he’s in need of a lozenge or a glass of water at this rate. “Anyway, my principal was thinking if, well, you know… If you want to...you know…?”

“What? Date him? ‘Cause I—”

“No, Ches! No.”

“Why?” Chester asks cheekily. He’s sure he has his signature Cheshire grin on and he’s sure Mike is going to be a puddle at his feet at the rate he’s going. “Jealous?”

Turning again a good tomato red, Mike tries spluttering out a defense. Unfortunately for his sanity, the barista returns to set their drinks down on their respective trays. Immediately Chester’s hit with the waft of coffee roast and spicy masala. Hopefully the drinks are as good as the cupcakes.

Seriously, those things are overrated. Chester definitely could do better.

“Is he okay?” she asks as she grabs their sweets from the display.

“Yeah, he’s cool,” Chester answers breezily. “He’s not used to me being lewd and all.”

Mike makes another incoherent noise.

The barista laughs. “I see. Well, don’t make him burst. Because I think he’s going to.”

Chester turns towards his supposed boyfriend, who has ducked his head like an ashamed child. “But he’s adorable, isn’t he?”

She laughs again, pushing the trays over. “Have a great day, you two.”

“You’re destroying me, Bennington,” Mike chokes out once they settle at the furthest corner. Chester
would say it’s the quietest spot there had it not been for the speaker blaring indie folk above their heads.

“I mean, that’s what I’m here for, right?” They both snort at that. “But seriously, what’s up?”

“Okay.” Mike inhales. “So… I don’t know if Talinda mentioned this to you. Or maybe she did. I don’t know. Shawn’s been egging me for a while because he thinks you’d fit perfectly at our school. And like I forgot to ask you and he called me this morning to remind me for like the millionth time and I swear I’m like the most forgetful person in the goddamn universe and—”

“Mike,” Chester notes. “You’re going off-tangent again.”

Now he feels awful for messing with him earlier. All Mike wanted is to relay a message and here he is denying him that privilege.

“Oh, right. Sorry.” Mike picks his coffee mug gingerly and raises it to his lips. “I guess what I’m trying to say is that if you wanna teach. Again. At the school. I mean, if you want to! I mean, I don’t know if you want to get back to teaching at all.”

He’s not wrong about that. Chester has only quit months back. It hasn’t been a year. Which should be a good thing then since that means some of his knowledge is still retained.

But the thing is, should he take it? Is it too soon?

It’s not that Chester hated teaching. He left Arizona because he found his life mundane there. Seeing the same old people and doing the same old things. It was all predictable. A boring routine. But even if things are predictable, it shouldn’t matter when you’re home. And Arizona should be home. He’s grown up all his life there.

But for some unexplainable reason, it isn’t.

Not that being here in Los Angeles made a difference. He was still going out to work and coming back and going through all the motions a person should be.

The only difference is Mike Shinoda. And being around Mike Shinoda has been quite a ride itself.

Back in Arizona, there wasn’t any reason to stick around company-wise. Sure there’s his family and maybe a friend or two, but Mike wasn’t there. And he’s grown to be somebody Chester has...well…

And to say meeting those kids all those months ago was fun would be an understatement.

“I’ll think about it,” Chester says as he peels the paper cup off his muffin. It’s warm and smells like chocolate heaven. He’s sure these would trump Mike’s cupcakes any day of the week. “Sounds fun to get back into things though. I mean, I did say I was burnt out by it all but…” He tilts his head from side to side. “I guess I needed a change in environment.”

Mike nods as he traces the rim of his mug. “I don’t know if you traded for a better one though,” he remarks quietly, as if he’s meaning to be speaking to himself.

Instantly, Chester’s “Protect-Mike-At-All-Costs” mentality kicks in. “Hey, don’t say that,” he chides. “You’re the best thing that’s happened to me.”

“I doubt it,” Mike say dismissively.

“I mean, Mike. I don’t think I’ve been this happy and at peace in a long time.” Chester sets his
muffin down because chocolaty goodness comes second to Mike. “Like don’t get me wrong, I love Tal and Dave and all but being with you and talking with you, it’s different.”

Mike’s voice is so quiet that Chester almost thought he imagined it. “What’s different?”

Chester’s jaw doesn’t make any motion.

Okay, now he’s dug a hole that he can’t jump out. Because if he doesn’t say anything, Mike would be crushed.

But if he says the truth, that the difference is I might be in love with you, it won’t go over well, especially in the state Mike’s in right now.

So how can he articulate the difference of being around somebody he’s only known for several months versus people he’s known for decades?

Sifting through potential sentiments, his focus somehow keeps returning to a particular sentence. Which might make things worse.

But fuck it, he’s Chester Bennington. And Chester Bennington is a fearless beast.

“You make me feel,” Chester says, making sure he’s looking at Mike squarely in the eye. “Like I’m finally home.”

Mike stiffens, as he averts his gaze. Chester tries not to feel as disappointed as he should.

If this is how Mike’s going to react to a friendly sentiment, what if Chester confessed his affections for him?

They dig into their meals in silence. It feels like an eternity, as if they’ve been sucked into a vacuum, even though he can still hear the clinking of cutlery and the quiet murmur around them. Despite the gooey chocolate and the delicious mix of milk and spice of his chai, Chester’s spirits could not be lifted.

I could still fix this, he thinks. All I need to do is apologize. Or something like that. My mouth would figure things out. It always does.

“Mike?” Chester starts hesitantly. “I was just—”

“Hey,” Mike cuts in, not looking up from his cupcake. There’s frosting at the corner of his lip. Chester wants to point it out but the weight of everything hampers him from doing so. “There’s this little bookstore around the block. I think you’d love it. They have a lot of books on poetry.”

Chester’s eyebrows knit together at the sudden change in subject. “Uh...yeah. Okay”

Mike nods, his eyes finally meeting his. “Okay.”

A large weight is lifted from his shoulders. Chester flashes a soft smile. Mike returns a shy one.
They spend the rest of the evening walking around aimlessly and peeping into random stores, from Mike’s said poetry store to a toy store selling vintage dolls. They grab an early dinner at a random diner with the best hashbrowns Chester has ever tasted. It’s the most fun he’s had in a while. Definitely more fun than the shitshow that was Saturday night.

The both of them don’t acknowledge what has been said at the coffee shop. As much as Chester would like to clear the air, he refrains himself from doing so. Mike’s smiling again. He doesn’t want to ruin the moment again.

Another thing to hide from Mike. Besides their make out session.

On the way back, Chester ends up getting a message from Dave, who reminds him that he’s needed soon.

As much as he feels bad for taking his friend for granted and not showing up to work, Chester doesn’t want his time with Mike to end. Not now, when they’re having so much fun. He never thought getting stuck in traffic could be fun, though it’s possibly because of Mike’s wide array of CDs.

Sorry man, Chester types back. Feeling a little shitty. Think I’m down with the flu. Just deduct my pay for the night. Promise I’ll come in tmr.

Dave’s reply is instantaneous.

I know you’re not sick. You never tell me when you’re sick. You’re with Mike, right? It’s cool, man. Don’t have too much fun! ;)

Chester resists a groan. He really needs to stop speaking to Dave and Talinda one of these days. Or they need to stop speaking to each other and assuming behind his back.

In reply to that, he shoots off the middle finger emoji before pocketing his phone.

“So,” Chester begins as Mike comes to a stop behind the silver pickup truck in front of them for the thousandth time. “Can I choose the music now? Because honestly, this is boring me.”

Mike raises an eyebrow. “Boring you? James Blake bores you?”

“Well, I like some power in my music.”

“Hey,” Mike says defensively. “James Blake has power in him too.”

“In like, what? Two songs?” Chester swerves to the side to avoid Mike’s playful slap. “Hey!”

“Well, Mr Likes-Power-In-His-Music,” Mike starts, miserably failing to keep his offended mask on. “how about you choose something then?”

“It’ll be my pleasure, Mr Likes-Boring-And-Dull-Music.”

He goes through several before settling on one. His fingers skim across the console.
“Why did you skip the first s—?”

_Come out of my cage_  
_And I’ve been doing just fine_

Mike jerks back in surprise before glancing at Chester with an arched eyebrow. “Seriously?”

“Hey,” Chester says defensively. “you’re the one who bought it.”

“True. But still.”

“C’mon. Mr. Brightside is a classic.”

“Yeah, but nobody should ever skip tracks on an album.” Mike lifts his hands off the steering wheel, gesturing wildly around him. “It’s— It’s like listening to an album on shuffle.”

Chester curls his lips in disgust. “Why the fuck would anybody listen to an album on shuffle.”

“Exactly my point!” Mike exclaims, his voice rising. “It’s inhumane and—”

“Mike,” Chester interrupts.

“What?”

He plasters on a smirk. “It’s coming.”

Mike glances from the front to Chester and back to the road. His eyebrows are dipped in a skeptical frown. “What’s coming?”

Oh, the poor man. He doesn’t know what’s coming.

One major note everybody must make: Never play Mr. Brightside around Chester Bennington. Ever.

Chester sucks in a deep breath, grin never leaving his lips.

“JEALOUSY!” he screams at the top of his lungs as he flails around the car.

Mike jerks away in surprise. “CHESTER!” he yells, surprisingly at the same volume as his. Chester never thought he’d be capable of such a range.

“SING IT WITH ME!”

“STOP FUCKING YELLING.”

“SWIMMING THROUGH SICK LULLABIES!”

“CHESTER! SHUT THE FUCK UP!”

“C’MON MAN!” Chester yells over the chorus. He rotates the dial to the right, the music blaring from the speakers increasing. His ears are definitely going to be ringing by the end of the night. And he’s sure other people could hear them from their own vehicles.

But who gives a shit when Mr. Brightside is playing?

“SING IT WITH ME, MIKEY!” he continues to shout. “DESTINY IS CALLING ME!”
Mike sighs heavily. From the corner of Chester’s eye, he swears Mike shakes his head, a sliver of a smile across his lips.

“‘CAUSE I’M MR BRIGHTSIDE!”

As soon as the words leave Mike, Chester bursts into laughter. Mike finally breaks into a smile, his sparkling eyes meet his.

They spend the rest of the song half-yelling, half-loudly harmonizing as they sit through the evening traffic. Chester lets himself loose for the first time, letting the music fills his ears, Mike’s presence enveloping him.

It’s moments like these that Chester lives for.

“I swear, Bennington,” Mike pants as they come down from their high. The first couple of notes of the next song begins playing. “If you butcher “Smile Like You Mean It” with your unnecessary screaming, I’ll castrate you myself.”


Mike clears his throat in response. Chester is definitely going to invest in lozenges one of these days. Maybe he could convince him to stop by at a drug store on the way back.

“Too much?” Chester suggests.

Mike nods slowly. “Yup. You’re a pervert, you know that right?”

“It’s in my blood. Can’t change a goddamn thing.” Chester inhales deeply, readying himself. “IT’S IN MY BLOODDDDDD!”

“Chester!”

“What? It’s a good song!” He pauses. “I mean it’s the wrong lyrics. But still!”

Mike rolls his eyes fondly (well, Chester hopes it is) before twisting his neck to the front. If Chester hasn’t had his eyes on him, he wouldn’t have noticed the smile slipping off his lips.

They only managed to go through a couple more of songs and moved several inches forward when Mike breaks the silence.

“You know, I turned her down.”

“Turned who down?”

Mike reaches over to turn the speaker volume down. For a split second, Chester feels like he’s been taken back to that tense moment in the coffee shop. “Anna. The dinner tomorrow? I turned her down.”

Chester almost freezes on the spot, his good mood thrown out of the window.

Of course. He forgot all about Anna and whatever the fuck tomorrow is supposed to be.

After what Mike has said about Anna, he lost a lot of respect for her. Sure, she seems repentful and eager to make amends but fuck, she scarred Mike. And only now she only realized her mistakes?

Better late than never, sure, but fuck. She betrayed his trust. She was both Mike’s saviour and
downfall. He’s grateful for her helping Mike through his dark times. But not dragging him back into it.

“Oh. What did she say?”

“She was cool about it. We talked about a lot of things. Got some things off my chest. She did too. A lot of things.” Mike sighs. “I thought about it for a while, you know. About my thoughts and feelings about it. About what you said. Which were pretty insightful, by the way.”

Mike doesn’t speak for the next several seconds, as if waiting for Chester to make a comment. Which he honestly has no idea on what to say. So all he could spit out is a, “Thanks.”

“Yeah. And as I was thinking about it all, I realized some stuff.” Mike's fingers drum the steering wheel as he glances out the side window. “Like one of it is probably finding acceptance and closure in people. I realized that’s all I’ve been doing, hoping that somebody would say the things I hope they’d tell me. What I want them to tell me, to tell me that I can move on, to tell me that I was worthy of...whatever... And like I was lying in bed in the middle of the night and it hit me that, that maybe I’m wrong.”

“Mike…”

“Like I’ve been getting it all wrong. I shouldn’t think that just because these people had a positive impact in my life, doesn’t mean I owe it to them. To forgive them. To make me look like...like I did something wrong. I’ve done wrong too. But so did they. And I shouldn't take all the blame that others were a part of too.” He leans back, sinking into his seat. Brandon Flowers continues to croon in the background. “And... And my past shouldn’t define my present, my future. Anna and Rob… They don’t have to belong in my present, my future. Not everybody has to. I can decide who I want to take along with me or not. And I've decided that belong in that past that I should’ve put behind me a long time ago. Without all the shitty stigma of forgiveness.” He sighs heavily. “I just… I guess I couldn’t accept…"

He trails away. Mike juts out his bottom lip, worrying it with his teeth for a split second. “You know, I’ve never told anybody how...bad things were. It was always the summary of it all. I never had...told people about the abuse and stuff.” He turns back to meet Chester’s gaze. “I’ve never told anybody what I've told you. I mean, some people could guess certain things. Like why I’m not a big fan of smoking.”

“Do you want me to quit?” Chester asks softly. “I could, you know. Or leave if you're not—"

“No! Don’t leave… I would never ask you to do that.” He shakes his head. “My smoking problem wasn’t just because Mark. It’s also a health thing. You’re not... You’re not the problem.” He exhales again. “I need to work through all this. I need to find what’s best for myself.” His eyelids squeeze shut, as if willing himself to speak what’s on his mind. “And I— I’d like...you to be there with me. Through it all. As support.” He opens them again. “You’re...a good person too.”

For a moment, Chester’s stunned. He knows Mike’s never been one for emotions or expressing his appreciation for people like this. Usually, it’s just a couple of brisk sentences and that would be the end of it.

It’s amazing how much Mike has blossomed over the past months he’s known him. Heck, even the past several days.

Chester smiles gently. “I’ll be honoured to be there with you. It’s a big step, Mike. You have awareness and you’re ready to make yourself a better person, to work towards progress. And I just
wanna say how proud I am of you. Like super, duper proud. I can’t even articulate how proud I am of you.”

“Uh…” Mike glances between Chester and the road, visibly distressed. He reaches over to turn the volume knob. “I...uh…”

“You’re uncomfortable,” Chester remarks.

“Yup.”

“I’m not surprised. You’re not comfortable airing out your feelings. You fidget a lot. And don’t make eye contact much.” Chester inches towards him sideways, as far as his seat-belt would allow him. “But I am proud of you. You’ve made so much progress. And I’m honoured to know that side of you.”

“I’m honoured to know that side of you too,” Mike murmurs. “Of what you’ve been through with Sam. I’m sorry you had to go through that.”

“I’m sorry you had to go through all that shit too.”

“Yeah.”

They don’t speak for a moment, letting the music fill the void instead.

Yeah, you know you got to help me out
Yeah, oh, don't you put me on the back burner
You know you got to help me out, yeah
You're gonna bring yourself down
Yeah, you're gonna bring yourself down
Yeah, you're gonna bring yourself down

“Mike?” he speaks after what feels like centuries.

“Yeah?”

“You okay?”

Mike looks thoughtful for a long moment. “No,” he finally says. “But I will be. Eventually.”

Chester smiles and reaches for his hand. That’s all any of them could hope for.

Mike reciprocates. Chester’s heart skips a beat.

Chapter End Notes
Lyrics are from Mr. Brightside and All These Things That I've Done by The Killers.
Hello, all! Hope you guys are doing well. So this is the third and final installment of this story. I don't know how everybody's gonna feel about Act Three but we'll see how things go, haha. Anyway, I really appreciate all of you, especially the ones who leave kudos and comments! It makes me happy to read them! Don't be shy to leave them, I'd love to hear your thoughts on the story so far. :D

This part of the story takes place a week after Act Two. And to those who love Mike's POV, it's back! :D

Anyway, happy reading!

“You’re late, Shinoda,” are the first words that leave Brad’s lips. He’s leaning against the wall, arms crossed over his suit-clad chest and a pair of sunglasses propped on the bridge of his nose. In his head, Mike makes a note to march his friend over to the barber’s. His bird nest of a hair is growing wildly again. Right now, Brad looks like he’s Bob Ross trying to pass as a CIA agent.

“Blame it on this guy,” Mike says, jabbing a thumb at their mutual friend behind them.

Brad heaves a heavy sigh as he pockets his sunglasses. “Let me guess, he lost his house key again.”

“Hey!” comes a protest behind them. "It was one time!"

“More than sixty-three,” Mike corrects, twisting behind. Brad hums in agreement.

Joe narrows his eyes, gaze darting between the two. “You guys actually keep track? Pft! You psychopaths.”

Mike rolls his eyes. “Said the psychopath who tries to trick their friends into being the subject of a self-portrait while they dig for dirt. Never try the same trick again. It doesn’t work twice. I thought you’d know that.”

“You can’t blame me. I’m getting old,” Joe justifies. He bends forward, stabbing a finger at his ponytail. “Can’t you see the white hair growing?”

“Stop being melodramatic, Hahn,” Brad says as he heads over to the front door. “I’m hungry. And my stomach doesn’t have time for your bull.”
“Hmph, some friend you are.”

“As your friend, I’m here to keep you in check and to stop you from sulking over trivial stuff. Which you’re doing now, by the way,” Brad turns his attention towards Mike. “So how’re things?”

Mike shrugs his shoulders. "Same old summer holidays bull. Planning for classes, going to boring meetings. The same old."

"Figured as much," Brad replies as they enter the coffee shop. Immediately, Mike’s swarmed by the waft of coffee beans. The scent of roasted coffee has always been one of his favourites. "So, how's Chester doing?"

Chester. Fucking Chester.

The thing is if Chester hadn’t turned him down today, they would’ve been grabbing lunch together at this very moment. It's a huge contrast compared to their nonexistent relationship months ago. God, they've come so far.

Back then, Mike's always came up with excuses to not spend time with his roommate. Now Mike’s on the receiving end of rejection. It's weird considering Chester has never turned him down before. In fact, he's always eager to spend time with Mike.

But whatever, it doesn't matter. He has his life to lead, after all. So does Mike. Chester’s life shouldn’t constantly revolve around his. It'll be unhealthy.

Which is why Mike didn't try asking Chester a second time and sought Brad and Joe out instead. Hopefully being around other people would curb whatever this attachment he has for Chester, or at the very least weaken it to a more healthy kind.

“He’s fine,” Mike answers as the three of them stood in line. “He’s actually out with a friend now.”

A friend whose identity he doesn’t know of. Chester didn’t throw out a name when he was excusing himself, only that a friend’s in town for a week and he'd like to meet them.

Which is a nice thing for Chester to do. He's a really nice guy and hanging out with other people would be good for him.

But the problem is, the whole thing doesn’t sit well with Mike. It's not that he doesn't want Chester to make friends or meet past ones. In fact, he encourages it.

But the way Chester said “friend” makes Mike uncomfortable. Chester uttered the word with so much feeling that Mike's...just...

God, he doesn't know. But if this so-called friend ends up being a secret lover Chester managed to get without Mike's knowledge, then well... Good for him?

Regardless of whoever this friend is, it's none of Mike's business. There’s no point in worrying about it. Besides, Chester has the right to hang out with whoever he wants. Mike never objects to Chester hanging out with Talinda, Dave or some random patron at the bar that he managed to befriend. So why did Mike's gut suddenly turn a 180?

Thankfully for him, the conversation doesn't dwell on that. It steers to other topics, from Brad’s piling workload to Joe’s own little projects and both of their bickering.

Mike misses this. He really does.
As much as he loves hanging around Chester, there’s something about around friends he’s known for most of his life. He’d even go to say that it’s refreshing. The three of them hadn’t met up in a while since Mike’s initial meltdown with Chester (which he’d like to put behind for the rest of his life).

It’s nice. Things all fine and dandy. Everything is all good and—

“Hey, I remember you!”

He’s face-to-face with a stranger behind the counter, the faceless barista of the day. He can’t recall a petite blonde college-aged kid working here at all. Not that he’s been here often. Only with Brad when they’re free or when he’s in the mood for cupcakes.

Or last week with Chester. Which now that he thinks about it, she does look a little familiar...

“You do?”

“Yeah!” the barista continues brightly, adjusting the cap propped on her head. “you and your boyfriend came in here last week.”

Out of the corner of his eyes, he notices Brad and Joe’s heads snap in his direction, with arched eyebrows and wide grins.

Oh fuck.

How could he forget? How could he forget at all?

That weird, fucking awkward moment. Oh, god.

“Oh right!” Mike begins nodding his head like a bobblehead on cocaine. He must look like an idiot right now. “Sorry, I… Uh…”

The barista waves a hand in dismissal. “S’all good. I don’t expect you to remember me after one little encounter. I’m just a barista after all.” She leans forward, arms crossed on the counter. “How’s he? Your boyfriend, I mean?”

God, why is this girl being such a busybody? Even if Chester’s his boyfriend, this is none of her business. She could be being polite or making conversation or whatever but Jesus, what is she doing?

Why of all the baristas here, did the same girl that assumed Chester and him were dating would be also serving him and his friends today? Just...why?

What sheer luck he has.

“He’s, uh…” Mike rubs his neck, hoping she’ll get a clue and shut her mouth. “He’s great. Doing great.”

“That’s good.” She clasps her hands together, looking at all three of them in turn. At this point, Mike wouldn’t be surprised if she’s the one on cocaine, being all-too preppy for his tastes. Just like a certain somebody. “So what can I get you guys today?”

Thankfully, she doesn't bring up the boyfriend thing as she keys in their orders. Unfortunately, his two other friends do. When the barista disappears to get their orders ready, his two friends decide to harass him in her stead.
“You got a lot of explaining to do,” Brad murmurs into his ear.

“Yeah, Mikey,” Joe chimes, casting him a look of mock betrayal. “Boyfriend? Is there something you’re not telling us?”

Mike wipes his face. He doesn't get paid enough to put up with this shit, which he doesn't at all. He deserve a pay and a raise. “It’s not what it sounds like.”

“Then what is it, hmm? Are you sure you’re not having a secret love affair behind our—?”

Before Joe could finish his sentence, Mike cups his palm over his lips. “Shh!” he hisses, glancing around him. Fortunately, nobody seem to have noticed the Three Stooges at the counter, busy with their gossiping, electronics or books. “Can we, like, discuss it later?”

Strangely enough, his two idiotic friends obey him, which is out of the ordinary for them. Those two hooligans never listen to him.

But whatever. Guess this day isn’t as fucked up as he thought it’ll be.

“It’s all a misunderstanding,” Mike explains as they take up residence at one of the many empty tables. “I’m not dating Chester. She just thought we were boyfriends. For some reason.” He glances between his two friends who both have doubtful expressions on. “I’m serious!”

Joe takes a bite out of his bagel, looking thoughtful. “Must be the way you guys were looking at each other. You always look at each other like there’s nobody else that exists, like you're each other's world.” He swallows and continues before Mike could make a comment. “And then there’s your weird ass banter. I swear when you guys started becoming chummy, this weird thing started building. And it never stopped.” He taps his jaw. “I don’t know how to…” He nudges Brad in the ribs with his other arm. “What’s the word?”

“What do I look like to you?” Brad asks incredulously, looking up from his slice of red velvet cake. “A walking dictionary?”

A snicker escapes Joe. "You could have a dictionary buried inside your bush of a hair— Hey!"

Mike shakes his head, face-palming. These two immature dummies will be the death of him.

Joe sniffs, rubbing his sore side. “I mean, you’re the only one out of us with a Master’s degree.”

“In law, might I add.” Brad lifts his mug of tea. “But yeah, she misunderstood it. That’s fine. But you went with it though.”

Mike groans, mentally trying to push the incoming memories from his head. He doesn't need a reminder of last week at all. “Chester was just milking it up, messing with me. He always does that.”

“But you let him mess with you. And you didn’t try to stop him or clear the air.” Brad takes a long sip from his tea. "So..."

Waggling his eyebrows, Joe elbows Brad again. “C’mon, of course you know why he didn’t say anything. He’s into the dude, duh.”

It’s a good thing Mike hasn’t bit into his cupcake. Because he’d spew it all out. And that's an unholy thing to do.

So instead, Mike chokes on his saliva. “I don’t— I’m not into Chester.”
Joe pins him with a look. “Mikey boy, no need denying it. We’ve been through this before. You want to bang him. He wants to bang you. End of story.”

Brad contorts his facial features in disgust. “You make it sound like they’re hormonal teenagers.”

“Dude if you’ve been in the same room as them, you’d know what I’m talking about.”

For a split second, Mike and Brad exchange glances. Hopefully Joe doesn’t pick up on it.

Besides Chester, Brad’s the only one who fully knows what went down on Saturday night. Like every single detail.

Including Mike’s drunken mistake.

It’s not that Mike doesn’t trust Joe. He’d love to share with Joe. Joe’s pretty good with listening and handing out advice.

It’s just… Well…

Chester and Brad has only met a couple of times — at Dave’s bar and Mike and Chester’s place when he came over for dinner. Joe, however, frequents Dave’s bar and is friends with Chester himself.

Which makes him the worst person to tell. Joe likes getting drunk sometimes. Drunk Joe can never keep his mouth shut.

Not that he knows whether Joe gets drunk at Dave’s. Never know, right?

“—like they’re one second away from tearing each other’s clothes off,” Brad is saying. "Which goes back to that hormonal teenager thingy I said."

“Well, they were,” Joe confirms.

“No, we weren’t,” Mike retorts.

“You’re in denial.”

“Sure. Think whatever you like,” Mike mumbles into his coffee cup. The smoky liquid burns the back of his throat. He sets it down, all while keeping his head ducked down. It’s like he’s being interrogated right now. He hates being interrogated.

Picking up the dessert fork, he pokes at his cupcake. It’s unlike of Mike to do that. He never plays with his cupcakes. He’d take his time to savour them, sure, but not to make holes all over the frosting.

Even though he has his focus on destroying the love of his life, he could feel the stares his friends are giving him. It’s just making things more awkward.

“I think he likes me.”

Nobody says anything for the first second. Brad’s the first one to pick up on that. “What?”

“Chester,” Mike clarifies louder, lifting his head. “I think he likes me. I don't know. I—”

Joe jumps to his feet so quickly that his chair clatters to the ground. The sound draws the attention of everybody around them. Mike ducks his head again, cheeks warming. The urge to pull Joe back
down is tempting. He hopes Brad does it for him.

This is why he doesn’t go out with Joe often. He can’t bear to handle the second-hand embarrassment that comes with his friend’s craziness.

“Sorry!” he hears Joe call out. “Had too much sugar today!”

Brad snickers. “More like since you were born.”

Mike grudgingly peers upwards. Joe seems to have chosen to ignore Brad, proceeding to take a long slurp out of his coffee instead. It’s no wonder Chester and Joe get along well. They’re not subtle people. He makes a mental note to prevent Brad and Chester from becoming friends by any means necessary. He doesn’t need to handle three psychopaths in his life.

“Enough about me, Delson. We have more important matters at the moment.” He waves his hand in Mike’s direction. “Which is that Mikey finally realized the obvious.”

It’s not that he’s only realized it. He’s had that feeling since Chester straddled and tickled the shit out of him. It could be the glow of the television bathing them in the dark room. Or the attention Chester was giving to his lips or even the light skimming his fingers was giving to Mike’s sides. Whichever the case, it was a feeling that has stuck to him since.

Mike was in disbelief at first. It’s what he does — being skeptical. After all, why would Chester be attracted to his ugly ass anyway?

But then, Chester agreed to be his fake boyfriend. He defended him from assholes, even if he accidentally outed him in the process. They danced.

And after that, Mike got himself drunk. Things became messier since.

The feel of Chester’s lips and groans fill his head. He tries to ignore them the best he can. The last thing he needs is to get an erection in some hipster coffee shop. He’d like to get off in the comforts of his room, thank you very much.

"What makes you say that?" Joe asks. "Did he try to fuck you or...?"

"It's just a feeling, Hahn," Mike replies quickly, taking another sip from his coffee. "What makes you say that it's the obvious?"

Joe fixes him with a look of disbelief. “Dude, he’s always giving you heart-eyes. Or whatever people call them. He just looks at you differently. His eyes light up every time he talks about you. Haven't you notice it? It's so freaking obvious.”

“As much as I’d hate to agree with Hahn here,” Brad interjects. “But it’s true. I mean, we’ve only met a couple of times. And the first thing he said was what an amazing guy you are.”

Mike scoffs inwardly. Him? Amazing? Seriously?

“You don’t know each other well,” Mike reasons as he lifts his mug again to his lips. “Isn’t it the best way to have small talk is talk about the thing you’d have in common?”

Brad tilts his head, as if considering his side. “Well… Yeah. But the thing is, he wouldn’t shut up about you. Like he talked about you for almost half an hour. If I hadn’t changed the subject, we’d still be talking about your macaroni and cheese.” He tosses him a look. “Which are overrated, by the way.”
“You’re only calling them overrated because I refuse to give you the recipe.”

His friend disregards that. “And also, he said that you’re the best thing that’s ever happened to him.”

Mike almost spits his drink out because what the fuck? Which are the words he says out loud because really, what the fuck, Chester?

Now, that’s just fucking bullshit. No fucking way that’s true.

Even Joe seems skeptical at that. “Wait, what? He actually said that?”

Brad nods, stabbing his fork into his cake. “Yeah. Weird, right? The way he said was pretty earnest too. Like he was being sincere. I’d know.” He jabs a thumb at his chest. "Apparently, being a lawyer is useful outside of court too."

While it does sound strange to Mike’s ears, he wouldn’t write it off as out of the ordinary. Chester’s an affectionate person, so it doesn’t surprise Mike that he’d gush about him to other people. It also doesn’t mean that what he said would have romantic undertones. A person could say their pet goldfish is the best thing that’s ever happened to them. It doesn’t mean that the person wants to fuck the goldfish.

“Did you ask him what he meant?” he questions as he begins peeling the paper cup off his cupcake. "Or did he like...elaborate?"

“Nah, he didn’t.” Brad slips his piece of cake between his lips. “And I didn’t bother asking. I thought it’ll be weird.”

It’s a good thing that Brad covers his mouth while he talks and chews at the same time. The last thing Mike wants to see is crushed and slobbered red velvet in Brad Delson’s mouth. Even without food inside, Brad Delson’s mouth is gross.

Another thing to remind Brad to do — see the dentist. That man has no sense of self-care. It doesn’t matter if he’s busy serving justice. The man needs to look the part too.

“It doesn’t matter,” Mike says off-handedly. “None of that matters anyway. This...liking shit. If he likes me. It’s not like we could… You know…”

Brad cocks an eyebrow. “Why not?”

Mike doesn’t reply, biting into the cupcake.

For some reason, the cupcake doesn’t give him the sugary high it always does. It’s odd considering it looks and tastes the exact same as all the times he’s been here — moist cake, fluffy blue frosting, hint of sweet vanilla all over.

But that’s not news to him. When he was here with Chester, it didn’t taste as good either. But he chalked it up to their strange turn in conversation topic.

Maybe Chester was right. Maybe these cupcakes weren’t all that.

Brad exhales heavily. “Mike, we’ve talked about—”

“Trusting, I know. It’s not that I don’t trust him with...me.” Mike chews the bottom of his lip, his eyes darting between the both of his friends. He tastes a hint of sugar. Must be the frosting sticking to his lips.
Brad and Joe exchange knowing glances. They know the implication to his words. They’ve known him long enough to guess the implications to his silence.

*He deserves better than me.*

“Oh, Mike,” Joe sighs.

For most of the lunch, his friends launch into their Code Blue speech — cheering him up and boosting his ego up. It’s awfully nice of them to do that. They're not obliged to do that at all.

But if Mike wants to have a pity party, he would've invited to Chester. He always knows what to say to make Mike feel better. But hey, not everybody has minors in psychology. And they do mean what they say which is something Mike appreciates.

And he's trying too. He really is. Chester’s a big help throughout these past two weeks, helping to guide him out of the hole of self-loathing and trust issues. He's been super patient and kind with him, which Mike would always be grateful for.

So far, he's been making some form of progress. Obviously, he's not going to make a huge leap out of his pit of despair so quickly. Most of his progress stems from things like trying to be more forgiving of himself every day and not fretting over things that are out of his control. Being a control freak he is, it has been quite a process. But he's been feeling a little lighter, which is pretty good. He's getting there.

Then again, it's only been a week. And there's only so much self-loathing and hatred he could indulge himself in a week. Not to mention that he has work to keep him occupied. Mike's been planning for the upcoming school year and attending dreary meetings.

Chester’s no different, working more hours since Dave's been short of manpower at the moment. Life happens. So when life happens, people don’t see each other often. And when you don’t see each other often, it's easier to hide things from other people.

But Mike’s always been a private guy, never one to indulge in sharing. The problem is that he has a shitty tendency to keep vital information from others if he thinks it might pose a problem for himself.

There are a lot of things he’s hid from Chester. One of it is Chester's job offer. There’s not one day that passes by that Mike doesn’t think of bringing the topic up with Chester. Shawn reminding him of it every time there’s a school meeting doesn’t help matters.

The thing is, he’s not sure if he could handle Chester being at school. It already takes all of him to resist the urge to push Chester against the nearest wall and close the distance between them when they’re home. How would things would be when he'd be around him at school? At least at school, he wouldn’t see Chester as often.
Which is such a fucking awful reason to keep such a wonderful opportunity from Chester. Chester’s a great guy and he deserves good things coming his way. And he’s been such a wonderful and supportive friend. He really deserves it all.

Only lying in bed after that draining heart-to-heart with Chester did he realize that, that he's been such a fucking idiot and he should've told Chester this a long time ago.

However, Mike has no idea how things are progressing in that department now. Neither of them has spoken about it since. And Shawn has shut up about it, which might be for the best.

Maybe.

Mike has no idea why he was even worrying about it in the first place. When he looks back, it's such a simple task to bear.

Then he threw emotions into the mix, emotions that he's unsure of. It’s not like he has feelings for Chester, right? It’s just him being sexually frustrated as always. That’s it.

So if Chester ever drops the bombshell that is, Hey, I’m in love with you, Mike would have to turn him down. Because one, Mike doesn’t feel the same way. And two, Chester deserves better.

Or maybe Chester has dropped the bombshell already. After all he did say, "You make me feel like I’m finally home”.

Speaking of that, what the fuck does that even mean?

Of course, the first thought that leaps into Mike’s head is Fuck, he likes me, he likes me, he likes me, when he first heard it, confirming his worst fears.

But then, home could mean a lot of things. Home doesn’t necessarily mean “I’m in love with you”. It could mean “I feel comfortable being around you” or "You make me feel special". Or something platonic.

But what if Chester meant otherwise?

Which is possible. But then, if he did like Mike that way, wouldn’t he have brought up that night at the hotel to him already?

God, that fucking night at the hotel. Another thing he’s been keeping from Chester.

Okay, so Mike did lie. He might not recall every single detail of it. But from what he could piece out from the fragments floating in his head, things took a weird turn. He does remember the taste of Chester on his lips, the warmth exuded from his body, the breathy groans in his ears.

And Chester jerking off in the bathroom. Can’t forget that. Hell, Mike’s sure that his moans are seared in his brain for all of eternity. That man can’t lower his voice to save a life.

Not that many people could control their voice when they’re masturbating, anyway. Mike knows that pretty well. That’s why he always does it when he’s sure Chester or Joe isn't home. The latter would not let him live that down.

But that’s not the problem, is it? The problem is that Chester never bothered talking about it. And it’s been a week since that very night.

So that means Chester wants to forget about it — their makeout and Chester jerking off. And if Mike
actually had the guts to admit to remembering it all (which would open another can of worms that
he's not sure he's ready to face), Chester would most likely say what a sane person would. That Mike
was drunk and he tried to put a stop to it (which is true) and that he got himself off because he was
horny. It's the rational thing to do anyway — get yourself off when you're horny.

But the problem with the latter is that Chester was saying *his fucking name* when he was climaxing.

Which further cements Mike's paranoia-laced theory that Chester might have feelings for him.
Chester can't like him. He just can't.

But if the teensy-weensy possibility that Chester might be a little in love with him, Mike can't
commit. He can be his friend, his confidant, his companion.

But he can't be more than that.

Because Chester Bennington deserves better than Mike Shinoda. It doesn't matter if Mike feels the
same way. He just *can't*.

Chester's compassionate and hilarious. He's also outgoing and easy. He's a ray of sunshine. Not like
Mike.

Mike's a complete asshole and sarcastic. He's a wallflower and difficult to manage. He's unlovable.

He's mentioned this before. Not that he managed to finish this word salad. But what would Chester
find desirable about Mike? His ugly looks? His broken heart? His fucked up brain? His—?

And there he goes again — being hard on himself.

Fuck.

He promised he'd do better. He fucking told himself he'd come out clawing out of his self-loathing
in triumph. But here he is, sitting alone in his empty apartment throwing punch after punch after—

“Hello? Earth to Shinoda? Are you home?”

Mike snaps out of his reverie, whipping his head up. Chester towers over him, watching him with a
curious look.

Just what he needs right now. Speak of the freaking devil. He didn’t even hear him come in. God
knows how long he’s been home and watching him fall deeper into the dark.

It'd break Chester's heart if he realizes Mike's being self-loathing again. Based on his bright grin,
Chester’s in an awfully good mood. The last thing Mike wants to do is burst that happy bubble of
his.

“Hey,” Mike says, hoping he doesn’t sound as troubled as he is on the inside. “Didn’t hear you come
in."

“That’s because you were stuck in Shinodaland,” Chester replies airily, plonking himself next to
Mike on the couch. The same couch Chester almost kissed him on, the same couch that he cried into
Chester’s shoulder on.

He's going to need a new couch if his brain continues down this road.

“—and you’re doing it again.”
Mike blinks. “What?”

Despite the laugh bubbling out of Chester, his eyebrows are knitted in a worried frown. “You okay? You seem to be lost in thought.”

“Uh, yeah.” A sheepish laugh tumbles out of Mike's lips. “Sorry.”

“Nah, don’t apologize. You’re good.” Swinging his legs on the couch, he moves to sit cross-legged, shifting himself to face Mike. "Penny for your thoughts?”

Well, that didn't work.

Of course Chester would want to talk about it. If this was a different topic, Mike wouldn't mind spilling the beans. Since it involves Chester and Mike's own overly complicated feelings for Chester, well, he'll have to give this a hard pass.

“Uh…” He scratches the back of his neck, wishing the couch would just sink into the floor. “Just the new school year. You know.”

“Your ears are turning red again.”

Goddamnit.

Guess Chester not noticing Mike’s lie about their makeout session was a fluke after all. How he didn't realize it is beyond him.

Unless he noticed and didn't say anything. Then well...fuck.

“Uh… Well— I mean, uh…”

“It’s cool if you’re not ready to talk about it.” Chester reaches over to pat Mike’s hand. Mike tries not to melt into a puddle. “Remember? Baby steps.”

“Baby steps,” Mike echoes.

Their eyes meet again. From above the pit, sunlight shines over him.

If there’s one thing Mike would like romanticized more would be brown eyes. People are always gushing about the different shades blue, grey and green eyes bode. But not brown. No. Brown eyes are always… Well, brown. Just a dull shade with no depth to it.

But Chester’s are different. Most of the time, they’re a rich chocolate. When the sunlight bathes him in a specific angle, they lighten to a warm caramel. In ill-lit places, they’re a dark walnut.

Maybe it’s his artistic background fucking with his mind but god, brown eyes don’t get enough credit. If he showed people Chester’s, they’d change their minds without hesitation.

Something shifts between them. Mike doesn’t know what. But suddenly, Chester’s gaze has dropped down to Mike’s lips, his lips parting. It’s tempting Mike to do the same.

But Mike doesn’t want another mistake, does he? He can’t have as many regrets before as he would have now since he’s sober.

His cheeks begin to warm under Chester’s scrutiny.

Maybe his gut feeling is right. Maybe Chester does have feelings for him. If he didn’t he wouldn’t be
fixated on his mouth as long as he is at the moment, would he?

God, what is he going to d—?

Civil Twilight abruptly blares around them, catching the both of them by surprise.

“Sorry,” Chester mumbles, reaching into his pant pocket.

Mike sighs inwardly. Maybe this is fate agreeing with him that a romantic relationship between the both of them is the worst idea imaginable. Which he wholeheartedly agrees. They’re roommates. Roommates can be friends. Roommates can’t be lovers. What if they decide to break up one day? Then either one of them would have to move out or go back to being just roommates and friends. Based on Mike’s experience, exes never could go back to being friends before they took the plunge.

A short chuckle jolts him out of his thoughts.

Chester has his nose buried in his phone, his thumbs gliding around the screen. There’s a wide smile gracing his lips, the kind that makes his eyes crinkle.

Mike’s never seen Chester’s eyes crinkle before.

Who could it be texting him? Talinda? Dave? Joe?

Or maybe that mysterious friend Chester met with.

Something builds at the pits of his stomach. He can’t seem to be able to identify what it is. Curiosity? Dread? Annoyance? Jealousy?

God forbid if it’s the latter.

But his curiosity is definitely piqued. Maybe a little annoyed for some inexplicable reason. But he is curious. And like always, his curiosity gets the better of him. One of these days he’s going to need a lock and key for his mouth.

Another set of giggles escapes Chester. That's all the convincing Mike needs.

“Who’re you texting?”

Chester lets out a distracted, “Hmm?”, which for some reason makes Mike’s heart sink.

He should shut up now. He should quit while he’s ahead. He should make some stupid excuse and leave Chester to his happiness. Instead, he digs his grave deeper.

“I was just…” He runs his fingers through his hair in hopes of dispelling his nerves. “Just wondering who you’re texting.”

“A friend,” Chester replies, still preoccupied.

Mike frowns, his annoyance building higher. “You’re awfully smiley just by texting a friend.”

Chester lifts his head up, lips quirked to the side. Of course he'd find this all amusing. He finds every single thing amusing. “Are you jealous?”

“I’m not jealous,” Mike snaps.

If there's one thing Mike is not is that he's not a jealous person. Jealous? Him? No way. Mike
Shinoda is not jealous of some random person he doesn’t know that’s making Chester smile brighter than the sun just by some shitty text message. He's never been jealous with any of his past relationships. Even if he doesn't have any experience with the feeling, he's definitely sure that whatever he's feeling is not jealousy.

Not at fucking all.

Chester’s smile dims, turning his phone off and placing it on the coffee table. A wave of guilt hits Mike. He didn’t mean to snap at him at all. He just... Fuck.

God, this is why he doesn’t show his honest emotions often. It’s always inappropriate ones.

“Sorry. I was just teasing. I didn’t mean to offend you.”

“No, you didn’t,” Mike amends, a little too quickly for his tastes. “I was just curious. I’m sorry for being harsh.” Inside, he hopes Chester doesn’t pelt him with more “Are you okay?” questions afterwards. As much as he appreciates them, he’s not made out of glass, goddamnit.

And he’s not jealous either.

“It’s fine. I think I deserve that.” Before Mike could protest, Chester trudges on. “Besides, you should see my facial expression while I text you.”

Mike blinks in response.

A neutral one, he’s sure. What other facial expression should Chester be making?

Hopefully not an annoyed one.

“Do you even know what kind of expression you make?”

“Not in the slightest,” Chester replies cheerily. “Hey! No eye-rolling!”

“Can’t help it,” Mike comments, shaking his head. Of course he’d be messing with him. He always does. “You’re a dork.”

Chester bats an eyelid. “An endearing one, right?”

Mike purses his lips, feigning thought. “Maybe.”

“Just tell yourself that, Mikey. You know you love me.”

Love.

Mike loves Chester? Yes, he does. As a friend. He has come to care for Chester. As a friend. Not...as more. Nope, not at all.

“Anyway,” Chester continues, returning his attention back onto his phone. His fingers move at a rapid fire pace. “That was Ryan.”

And there it is, a name to Chester’s mystery friend.

Ryan? Who the fuck is Ryan? And why hasn’t he heard of his before all this?

Maybe Chester has mentioned him in passing and Mike had forgotten. But judging by the way he
says his name, with such adoration and nostalgia...

He doubts such a person would be named dropped carelessly in a forgotten conversation. Mike’s would though.

“The same friend that’s in town?”

Chester hums. “That very one. We go way back.”

“Way back?”

“Elementary school.” Raising his arms up in the air, he stretches his body, revealing parts of his bare stomach. Mike tries not to pay any mind to that. “He’s actually from Cali but he moved down to Arizona when he was eight. We lost contact some time back. I ran into him yesterday so.” Chester shrugs a shoulder.

Yesterday? Why didn’t Mike know of this sooner? Chester always tells him things like this.

Then again, Mike had a long meeting at school and then hung back to plan for his upcoming classes. By the time he reached home, Chester was already out at the bar. It makes sense that Mike wouldn’t have known.

But he could’ve texted him about it, right? Chester always texts him shit like this and—

*God, Mike. Shut up. You’re sounding so insecure right now. It doesn’t fucking matter who he hangs out with, Jesus fucking Christ. Get a grip.*

“Oh,” Mike utters, not knowing what else to say. “Cool.”

Chester raises an eyebrow. Apparently Mike doesn’t seem convincing enough in his cool mask. He doesn’t bring it up though, changing the subject instead. Mike’s grateful for that. “So enough about me. How was your day?”

*Oh, it was just great. The barista still thinks we’re boyfriends and I still didn’t bother correcting her, Brad and Joe think we’re in love with each other, I told them my absurd theory of you having feelings for me, and we talked about my self-loathing, which I know I shouldn’t have indulged in, I’m fucking sorry. In conclusion, it was just fucking glorious. Just what I needed.*

“It was fine,” he says instead. “Joe was acting like an idiot.”

He’s not completely lying. For some reason, half-lies always go undetected under Chester’s radar. Not that he’s complaining. It’s useful in getting him out of sticky situations and he doesn’t feel as awful as he does when he’s telling a complete lie.

As always, Chester buys it. “Of course he would.”

“Yeah.”

There’s a crease on Chester’s brow as he surveys Mike. It’s unnerving. Mike must really be out of his poker face game. That or they’ve grown close enough that Chester knows when he’s hiding something. “Is something wrong, Mike? You know you can talk to me about it.”

“I’m just tired,” Mike replies. As much as he wishes he didn’t need to lie, he has to. After all, why would he tell Chester he’s being an overcontrolling and entitled friend?

Not that he’s actually done anything. But his concern regarding Chester’s childhood friend is insane.
Mike rises to his feet. “I think I’m gonna nap or something. I feel a headache coming up.”

“You want some aspirin?”

He shakes his head. “No, I’m fine. I think I’m just going to sleep.”

“Take a box with you,” Chester insists. “Just in case.”

“Nah, I’m cool. It’s all right.”

Chester’s watching him with a frown, looking torn. “Sure,” he says reluctantly. “Sweet dreams, Mikey.”

And there he is again, flashing him that smile, that megawatt smile that puts the sun to shame.

With crinkles.

Maybe his eyes have always crinkled when he smiles. Mike wouldn't be surprised. He's pretty obtuse sometimes. Though in the first place, it shouldn’t matter at all. Chester could smile in any way he likes and shit won’t make a difference.

Mike’s not jealous. He doesn’t have a crush on Chester. And that’s the end of the story.

He’s just not used to Chester speaking of his childhood friends, people that seem to make Chester happier than Mike ever could, people who Chester seems to devote his attention towards.

No cause for worry. Not at all. Mike’s just being overdramatic and overreacting as always.
Hello everybody, hope y'all are doing well! This chapter's pretty long so... Have fun! XD Thank you to all that has left comments in the previous chapter! I really appreciate you guys writing them out. They really do keep me going.

Anyway, hope y'all like this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Mike’s an inch away from slamming his face onto the table. Instead he sneaks a peek at his wristwatch.

11.48am. It's only 11.48am.

He swears the last time he checked the time, it was 11.47am.

God, time does pass when you're having the time of your life in a classroom surrounded by your colleagues on a hot summer day. Just wonderful.

Hell, why did Shawn call for everybody to attend this meeting anyway? So far, all that's been discussed is the drama club's next play and the upcoming PTA meeting. And he's not a part of either of those.

Sure, he’s part of the faculty and sure his school days are far behind him, but aren’t summer holidays meant to be the time when he could lock himself up in his room until the middle of August rolls in? Summer is to kick your feet up and relax, not be bored out of your mind in a stuffy classroom, listening to the drones of topics he doesn't give a shit above.

This meeting alone cements a spot on his Top Hundred Worst Events ranking. Or maybe a Thousand. He’s had gotten in one too many rough scenarios to count. And it's one of the many boring ass meeting he's attended for the past decades.

Somebody makes some stupid comment about chaperones at prom. Chaperone at fucking prom?

Really? Really?

That’s the last straw.

A groan tumbles out of his mouth and before he could catch himself, his head lurches forward and
collides with a solid surface.

Nope, this confirms it. This is definitely in the Top Hundred. Because the speaking voice dies down into pin drop silence.

Somebody just end him right now.

Shawn lets out a laugh. He knows it's Shawn. Nobody else sounds like a braying donkey on steroids when they laugh. Mike has always loathed it. It's grating to his ears. And now that's he’s annoyed, bored and embarrassed, he finds it more aggravating.

Scratch that. This meeting jumps up fifty spots.

“Well, looks like Shinoda’s battery juices are used up for the day,” he hears Shawn declare. Mike knows where this is going. Shawn always does this every time somebody isn't paying attention. “Why don’t we cut this short and continue this tomorrow?”

A chorus of groans fill the room, possibly not liking the sound of attending three meetings in a row. Mike doesn’t know whether he should agree with them or relieved that the meeting’s cut short.

He doesn’t have time to decide because he feels somebody elbowing his side, grabbing his attention.

“Nice, Shinoda,” Talinda remarks as their colleagues shuffle out of the classroom. “Way to grant us another meeting tomorrow. And here I thought I’ll have a nice morning out with my girlfriend. We thought of catching ”

“Hey, you were playing Candy Crush on your phone yesterday,” Mike counters. “We wouldn’t be here today if you weren’t doing that.”

“True,” Talinda agrees, slinging her handbag onto her shoulder. “I mean, this happens almost all the time. I don’t know why we should be surprised at this point.”

Mike snorts. “I have no idea.”

They head out of the school building in companionate silence. It fascinates Mike how different his interactions can be when he’s with different people. Silence around Brad and Joe can be uncomfortable at times. They're pretty chatty people, always with a remark in their arsenal. With Talinda, it's peaceful. Unlike two of his longest friends, she's respectful of silence. It’s one of the reasons why he gravitated towards her in the first place.

Usually, he’d bask in it but today, there’s a question at the tip of his tongue, waiting to be asked.

The only reason why he’s not asking is because he’s not even sure he should. Would he come off as obsessive and possessive and insecure and idiotic if he asked? And then again, Talinda’s much closer to Chester than he is to her. So why would she even give him a proper answer? She wouldn’t disclose information like that to him, would she? She usually doesn't so why should he start now, especially when he's being an insecure dumbass?

Again he doesn’t need to come to a conclusion thanks to Talinda.

“Something’s bothering you.”

Mike whips his head in her direction, startled at the sudden noise. “What?”

She taps the side of her head as they come to a stop at her car. “You look like you’re ready to spit
something out.” She crosses her arms in front of her breasts, pinning him with a stern look. It's the expression she’d give when she means business, usually thrown at misbehaving students. He hates that it has the same effect on him. “Might as well spit it out.”

Not seeing her as often does this to him all the time. He's forgotten she’s perceptive. It must be an effect from hanging around Chester. Or maybe sharing classes in their heyday. After all, Chester and her did—

“And there you go again into La La Land.” She pokes a finger at his chest. He almost takes a step backwards. He doubts he’ll ever be used to anybody else’s touch but Chester’s, which now he thinks about is weird. Never did he think he'd be comfortable in another's touch this quickly. “C’mon. You know I’ll keep asking you until you break. I have all day.” A cheeky grin spreads across her face. “Are you gonna ask me what’s Chester’s favourite position? Because it’s—”

Mike shushes her before she could go any further. “That’s not what I was gonna ask!” he hisses. “That’s— That’s…disgusting!”

Most of the time, he forgets that two of his friends used to date back in the day. He's never been around two exes that manage to stay best friends until the both of them. It's a miracle.

Talinda doesn't share his feelings, waving a hand in dismissal. “Please Shinoda. Look me in the eye and tell me you weren’t just a little bit curious.”

He could feel a blush creeping up his neck. He trains his gaze on the car stickers at the side of her door. Hello Kitty isn't alone anymore, joined by Pikachu, the bisexual flag, and a pink Starbucks logo. “I’m not answering that.”

“You’re blushing.”

“I am not!” Mike exclaims hotly. It’s a miracle how they’re the only people in the parking lot. Maybe his colleagues aren’t in a rush to head home.

She shakes her head. “Okay, Mr. Downer. What’s up?”

Mike gulps, mentally preparing himself. There are a lot of assumptions swimming in his mind. Even if only one of them is confirmed, he doubts he’d take it as well as he probably should. He’s Mike Shinoda, after all. Once he’s comfortable with somebody, they’re automatically given full privileges of watching him have an emotionally-charged freakout.

He means to phrase it as eloquently as he can. But as always, his words tumbles out as, “Who’s Ryan?”

Unsurprisingly, Talinda flashes him a puzzled look. “Ryan?”

Mike shoves his hands in his pockets. His left hand begins fiddling with his house keys. This is it. He's going to sound really stupid and insecure and Talinda's going to—

*Shinoda, there's no such thing as a stupid question. Just spit it out and see what she's say. Spit your goddamn question out properly.*

He inhales deeply. “There’s…a— This guy Chester’s been talking to lately. A friend of his. His name is Ryan.” Her frown deepens. “He said he’s known him since elementary school. He moved down to Arizona from California. Ring any bells?”

Something must’ve clicked. Her expression morphs into a sequence of surprise, realization, and
resignation. “Oh.”

Fear clutches at his heart, not liking where this is going. Was Ryan part of a dark past that Chester never brought up? A controlling ex-boyfriend? An old friend that stole Chester’s lover from under his nose? “Oh what?”

Talinda shrugs her shoulders. “Just oh. Ryan’s...a good friend of Chester’s.”

Mike narrows his eyes, his anxiety increasing. “Something in your voice is telling me otherwise.” He tilts his head to the side. “Is he like...you know...?”

“What, an asshole?” Talinda shakes her head. “No. Ryan’s a nice guy. He and Chester get along pretty well. They were always joined to the hip. Best friends for life, kind of thing.”

A different emotion worms its way into his heart. He’s starting to regret opening this can of worms. It’s bad enough he’s going behind Chester’s back just to ask something he could’ve ask him himself. They live in the same apartment for god’s sake.

“Really?” he says, his disbelief starkly clear to his ears. “He’s never mentioned him before.”

Talinda adjusts her handbag strap on her shoulder. “From what I know, they haven’t been in contact until recently.” She rolls her eyes. “I’m not surprised he hasn’t told me they’ve reconnected. I’m not Ryan’s biggest fan.”

Mike cocks an eyebrow, suddenly his thoughts shifting to Anna. When he and Anna started dating, Brad didn't seem drawn to them being together. "You guys don't make a good fit," he told Mike once when he asked. "She always wants you to express your love to her in apparent ways. And I know you, you don't like doing big public displays. And a partner should know the way their partner expresses their affection."

Rob never once said a bad thing about Anna. Then again, they were fucking behind his back.

“I thought you said he’s nice.”

“He is,” Talinda agrees, though grudgingly. “Well, I don’t know about now. But yeah. We weren’t close but he was always nice to me. We got along fine until both Chester and him lost contact with each other about fifteen years ago?” She exhales through her nostrils, mild exasperation on her face. "They got into a friends with benefits relationship at one point. Went on for a while until Chester told Ryan he wanted more than a relationship. Ryan turned him down.”

Mike blinks, not knowing what to say. He didn't expect Talinda to tell him something like that since, well, she's never told most of Chester's personal stuff to him. It must not be a sore subject if she'd tell him this. “Oh.”

“Yeah... I mean, you can’t help that you feel that way for somebody. But they still had sex anyway since Ryan still wanted to be with physically.” Talinda's expression changes again, this time to something that's a mix of sadness and anger. "Which I thought was insensitive as fuck but Chester continued the FWB thing anyway. I think he was afraid of losing his best friend. He just got out of a relationship with me and what he went through with Sam scarred him. He was at a vulnerable time of his time.”

Mike shifts to the side, feeling discomfort. He's not used to listening to Chester being in a somewhat similar past as he had before. Maybe because Chester has blossomed and moved on whereas he hasn't fully done so.
Talinda makes a face. “Then Ryan got transferred to some other state and ghosted him. Chester was really upset when it happened but he never put the blame on Ryan.” Her mild anger morphs into a furious one. "Even though it is that fucking asshole's fault, which he came to accept after a while. They must've talked things out if they're being chummy again. I can't see Chester just accepting him back into his life like that."

Mike wholeheartedly agrees with her. It's the only rational assumption he could come up with.

When he called Anna that night to turn down her offer, she seemed to take it in her stride and they even talked things out, which is odd. When they were dating, they didn't do much discussions, hurling scathing remarks instead. Makes sense that they aren't compatible together.

Now that he thinks back, it was all surreal. Anna admitted to her faults, which is something she hardly does. Mike himself didn't at all take the blame for her straying. Together, they traded apologies for hurting one another, ending with an agreement of not being in each other's lives.

On paper, it sounds terrible but Mike thinks it's for the best. She had an impact on his life, some positive, but that's all that's he needs. And she's happy and he's doing fine on his own. It's for the best.

Though he would be lying if it didn't hurt. Chester must've felt the same way when Ryan upped and left, especially since they were best friends too. It must've taken a lot of careful thought for Chester to take him back after all that's happened.

"Do you...?" He pauses, hesitating. "You know...?"

"Want you to watch him?" Talinda guesses. Mike nods. "Nah, I know Chester can handle himself. Maybe if this was seventeen years ago, I'd say yes. But he's grown since. And I know he wouldn't simply give in." She leans forward, lowering her voice. "Besides, you're the only one Chester has eyes for. So no need to be jealous."

Mike snaps his head, not knowing where this is going. And god, there's that jealous shit again. "What's that supposed to mean?"

She shakes her head, an ironic smile plastered on. “Oh, you hopeless *pendejos.*"

Unfortunately for him, she doesn’t bother elaborating. It's old news. She hardly ever gives him a straight answer. He wonders whether she’s messing with him or she doesn't even know what the fuck she's even talking about. His best guess is both.

Despite that, what she says leaves lingering thoughts in his head. This instance is no exception.

One of the billion reasons why Mike doesn’t get close to people is that he has a tendency to latch onto them when he does. It’s not a “you own me, body and soul” bond or "losing your individuality" shit. Except maybe with Mark but Mark was a fucking asshole and Mike was a teenager who didn’t know shit. Even if he hasn't grown from it much, he's learnt that being in a relationship like that isn't healthy.

What he does instead is end up worrying about his partner more than an average person should. Not in the “I'll-constantly-text-or-call-you-if-you-don’t-tell-me-where-you-are” shtick. He's insecure but not to that point. He understands personal space. Mike just worries about their well-being. He might not show it blatantly but he does care.

So learning the fact that Chester and this...Ryan had something before doesn’t sit well with Mike. And he’s not sure why.
Maybe he’s sharing Talinda’s anger towards Ryan for cutting ties abruptly (which he thinks is such a
dick move, holy shit). Maybe he’s hurt that Chester’s never told him such an important fact even
though he’s not entitled know.

Or maybe he’s a stupid jealous idiot. A *pendejo*. A *baka*.

Why is he even concerned anyway? It’s not his business who Chester fucked or not, or who’s
Chester close to or otherwise. He can be friends with anybody. He can fuck anybody he wants. It
wouldn’t matter to him, right?

And they must’ve mended their relationship. Like Talinda said, he would never allow himself to
rebuild bridges with people he thinks aren’t worth his time. Mike had that pep-talk from him after all.

Regardless, learning that fact has put him in a shittier mood than before. Right now he needs
something to cheer him up. Pronto.

Maybe putting on a video game? Banging on the keyboard? Spinning that poppy playlist that
Chester’s shared to him on Spotify?

Which that reminds him, he should get to listening to it. He’s certain he’ll be vomiting unicorns and
rainbows by the third track, which is something he doesn’t want to do. But Chester made it
specifically for him. Mike will do more than vomit for him.

In any case, he doesn’t have to do any of that after all. His day is made just by looking at the
disastrous state of his kitchen.

His brain doesn’t jump to, *Holy shit, this is hilarious*, first. That’s his third thought. His first thought
is, *What the fuck?* The second is, *What the hell is Chester doing?*, which is also what he says aloud.

Chester fixes him a confused look. Mike assumes it's confused considering Chester's glasses are
covered. “What does it look like I’m doing?”

“Uh…” Mike sweeps an arm around at the sudden mini winter wonderland surrounding him.
“Turning yourself whiter?”

In response to that, he gets a handful of flour thrown at his face.

“You’re such a dork,” Chester comments as he places the cupcake pan inside the oven before
moving over to the sink to wash the flour off his face.

Finally, stage two is done after what feels like forever. They would’ve been done had they not spent
the first five minutes blanketing themselves and the kitchen in flour, the next fifteen cleaning up after
their immature flour fight, and the other twenty to actually bake.
And not just bake anything ordinary. They’re baking cupcakes.

Cup-fucking-cakes.

Well, Chester was baking. Mike was chased out of the kitchen, ordered to get himself cleaned up. Even upon returning, Chester insisted he stayed out of the preparation. He only relented he made the icing when Mike declared he’d confiscate his Cocoa Puffs. God, Mike loves pulling that threat out.

Who knew all this time wasting was because Chester accidentally spilled a large bag of flour. Luckily for him and Mike’s stomach, he bought two.

But as much as Mike's stomach is cheering out of happiness, his brain is left confused. Chester’s never bothered trying to bake before. Neither has Mike because who has time for baking?

This could only mean one thing — the cupcakes are for either an occasion or person.

And what occasion or person would warrant such a gift?

Probably the arrival of an old childhood friend/fuck buddy/asshole named Ryan.

But whatever. Mike’s being a good roommate and a good friend by helping Chester out. He could stomach his unexplainable distaste for the man.

For the moment anyway.

But the most perplexing thing is the reason Chester’s reluctant to allow Mike to help him out. It’s beyond his understanding.

“How am I a dork?” Mike asks, uncapping the blue colouring.

His ears catches the faucet being turned off. “One: You threw flour at me. Two: You didn’t listen when I told you to stay out of here. Three: There's still bits of flour in your hair.”

Mike holds up a finger. “Okay, hold on. One: You started it. Two: I insist you let me help but you’re being a stubborn ass.” He tilts the little bottle, watching droplets dribble onto the frosting. “Three…” He mulls it over, running his fingers through his hair. It has a strange, mushy texture. How did he not realize that? “Alright, fine. I’ll admit I’m an idiot.”

“Well, at least you didn’t walk out of here because that'd end pretty badly for you,” Chester says, ignoring Mike's glare. “I can help get it off your hair if you want me to.”

Mike’s heart skips a beat. What the hell did he just offer him? “What?”

“I mean…” Chester dries his hands with a paper towel. “If you don’t mind.”

The thing is, Mike’s not sure if he minds or otherwise. It has to be a joke. The fact that Chester even proposed the idea of him washing Mike’s hair like he’s a three-year-old doesn’t sound very appealing to him. Especially since Chester would be shirtless. There’s no way he would do try washing his hair with a shirt on.

Chester’s chest and Mike have a strange relationship. Sometimes, the sight of it hardly phases him. Other times, he’s ready to jump inside the nearest bathtub to wait for the blush on his cheeks to disappear. The latter’s been sprouting out a lot lately.

So he should say “No”. He should say, “Thanks for the offer but I’m good.”
Instead, he says this:

“Uh, yeah. Sure. Okay.”

He mentally slaps himself. This is one of the million reasons why Mike’s an idiot. Other people would disagree but it’s true. It’s true and—

God, he seriously needs to stop being so hard on himself. He needs to stop being so hard on himself, goddamnit.

Chester must’ve sense his mental freakout because the smile he throws him is gentle. “Okay.” He gestures towards the bathroom with his head. “Wanna do it now?”

A swell of panic fills his heart. Right now? Chester wasn’t joking at all? What the hell?

“But uh… I haven’t finished mixing the frosting up! And…well… shouldn’t we clean all of this first? And, er…what if we forget about the cupcakes?”

Chester rolls his eyes as he picks up his phone and starts tapping on the screen. “The frosting and clean-up can wait. And I’m setting a timer. We’ll know when they’re done.” Mike’s anxiety must be showing again because he adds a, “But we don’t have to do all that if you don’t want to. I know it’s an awkward thing to do so we can forget about it.”

A part of Mike is embarrassed that he gotten into a position that he's offered such a thing in the first place. Most of him is curious to know what it’d be like to get a hair wash from Chester. Ryan must know. Mike wouldn't be surprised considering their physical past. Would he be gentle with him? Would Chester give Ryan more than a wash? Like a kiss on his shoulder? Or a grind against the—

He makes another mental note — stop thinking about Ryan. It's not healthy at all.

“No, no. I'm cool with it. Don't worry. Um, I should get out of these clothes first,” Mike mumbles. “Hold on.”

Being opposites of each other, it’s no wonder that Mike ends up stripping himself in the confines of his room. They’re friends, sure. Best friends? Maybe. If he’s going by the textbook meaning of "best friends", they are, considering he’s only told Chester certain details of his life to him.

But nudity? That’s a little too far.

He pulls on a set of clothes that he typically wears when he paints — a ratty T-shirt and a pair of shorts. It’s not something anybody would wear to the bathroom but hey, all Chester’s going to do is help wash the gunk out of his hair.

Chester’s already waiting inside, seated on a short plastic stool that’s usually under the sink. For some reason, Mike’s pulse begins to race. It’s illogical to him. All he’s getting is a hair wash from Chester. Why his body is acting strangely doesn’t make sense to him.

He suspects it's because Chester being shirtless. Because fuck, those tattoos are going to be the end of him one of these days. How Mike manages to keep his cool and not run his fingers over Chester’s toned body blows his mind sometimes.

“So,” Chester begins as Mike seats cross-legged on the floor. “Did you shampoo your hair yet?”

Mike feels a light blush dust his cheeks. “Uh, well…”
Chester heaves a sigh. “You didn’t.”

“Hey, I was in a rush to help you.”

A loud squirt fills the room. Something cool covers a part of Mike’s head.

“Which you didn’t need to do.”

“But I did—” His body suddenly stiffens up when he feels hands on his damp scalp. They’re cold against his scalp.

God, this is so fucking weird. Why did he agree to this? Like why? What’s up with him today? Did he get up on the wrong side of the bed?

If memory serves, he rolled out on the left side of the bed. His usual side is right. Maybe he shouldn’t get up on the left next time.

“Relax,” Chester coos. His voice is reassuring, warm as a hearth that Mike’s shoulders loosen a little. “I’m just washing your hair. Just let me know if I’m hurting you, okay?”

Mike nods in understanding, keeping that thought in mind.

It’s quiet for a time, save for the sound of Chester massaging his shampoo-covered scalp. His kneading is gentle and relaxing. The rest of Mike’s body gradually gives in, melting into Chester’s soft touch.

The whole situation is intimate, which is a strange thing to even describe it. Before this, Mike’s only handed out the term during sexual or romantic acts. Washing somebody’s hair shouldn’t be intimate. Hell, hairdressers wash their customers’ hair all the time. That doesn’t make them more than acquaintances. But sitting here in their cold and tiny bathroom while Chester massages shampoo onto his scalp feels intimate. He can’t think of any other way to describe it.

Even if they were fully clothed, he doubts that the vibes he’s feeling would change. It’s uncharted territory for him. He’s never felt so comfortable and vulnerable with somebody else without uttering a syllable.

And he likes it. God, he really does.

Maybe this is the progress he’s making, allowing himself to be intimate with others. He lets himself feel a little proud for a moment.

“All you did is pour food colouring, you know.”

Mike cracks a smile, the tranquility cut short. He doesn’t mind. He likes trading jabs with Chester. “That’s your fault.”

“That’s true.” Chester pauses his movements. Mike almost reprimands him for that. Chester’s really good with his hands. “How is it? It’s been a while since I washed somebody else’s hair.”

“When was the last time?”

“Like, seventeen years ago? I used to wash his hair.”

“I’m guessing you did more than just wash each other’s hair.”

Mike didn’t mean to lace his words in venom. He was trying his best not to betray the fact Talinda
told Mike about Chester's history. So much for that.

Chester pauses, drawing his hands away. “Well,” he answers quietly. “That was in the past.”

Shame pierces his heart like an arrow. Fuck, he just ruined the mood. God, why did he open his mouth and say all that stupid shit? They were having a good time and he just ruined it all like he always does.

He needs to rectify this.

“It’s nice,” Mike says. He almost slaps himself for saying that because, really? That's all he can say?

“Feels good?” Chester asks, threading his fingers through Mike's soaped mane. A tremor courses down Mike's spine.

"Yeah," he replies, his voice sounding oddly strained to his ears. "Really good."

Chester snickers, the mood shifting back to normal. Relief washes over Mike. “That’s what my fingers are for. Getting people off.”

*And yourself, Mike* adds mentally.

“Of course your mind would end up in the gutter,” he remarks out loud. "Typical.”

Another laugh escapes his friend. “I mean, I am Chester Bennington.” The hands of Mike’s head is removed. Mike silently mourns for the loss. “Okay, I think we—"

From the sink, Chester's phone suddenly blares Civil Twilight. Mike's starting to hate that band and that song. He doesn't care that the band is one of Chester's favourites. It pops up sometimes when Chester and him are sharing a moment lately. Hell, maybe even back in the day when they were awkwardly apologizing months ago.

Mike's brain backtracks, suddenly realizing what he just thought. Moments. Chester and him have been sharing moments.

Is that it, though? Have they ever shared a moment? Are they even sharing one now? Well, not anymore. They were seconds ago. But could that even be qualified as a moment? All Chester is doing is wash his hair. It’s domestic. It’s nice. Not romantic at all. Friends wash each others hair, right?

Well, not his. But other people’s. Chester’s an exception.

But hairdressers do it too and—and why is he even fretting over shit like this, goddamnit.

He almost spits out a protest when Chester motions to check on who’s calling, regretting he didn't when he finds out who it is.

“It’s Ryan.”

Of course it is. God fucking Ryan. Interrupting them just like yesterday.

Mike couldn’t help but note the tone in Chester’s voice. It could be his imagination but he could’ve sworn that there was an edge in his voice…

But it can’t be. Sure, Chester has been enthusiastic with Ryan’s sudden appearance this whole time which boggles him still. Because that douchebag ghosted him without a reason, which Mike guesses
is because Chester developed feelings for him. Which in turn, is a shitty thing to do and why Chester has come to accept him he has no freaking—

“You should answer that,” he says before he could stop himself.

What the fuck is he saying? What the fuck what the fuck what the fuck—?

“Ryan can wait.”

And there Chester comes with a rational answer. God, the days when Mike actually considered himself rational. Those really were the golden days, huh?

Talinda's right. He's not buckling under a mere phone-call by an old friend/sort-of flame. Chester's grown. Mike shouldn't expect anything less.

“No, it’s okay,” Mike says instead. He needs to shut up. goddamnit. “Just take the call. I can wash my hair myself.”

Chester’s fixing him with a look like he’s torn. But he concedes anyway with a quiet, “Okay.”

Mike watches him promptly rinse his hands, shoot him a smile, and shutting the door behind him. As soon as the door clicks in place, Mike buries his face in his hands, exhaling a loud groan.

Why did he do that? Why in the ever loving fuck did he just serve Chester to Ryan on a silver platter? Like why? He’s such a fucking idiot. As he'd like to dish out to himself in Japanese around people that don’t understand the language — he’s a kuso baka.

What Chester sees in Mike, he has no idea. That is if Chester even likes him like that.

But it’s about being polite, right? The right thing to do if somebody calls you is that you answer. Even if you get calls from the bank asking if you'd want a shitty loan, you tell them with a polite but firm, "No".

So he's not an idiot. He's just being polite. He's just upholding common decency, like he was taught since he was a little boy.

If Chester and Ryan do start fucking again, he’s going to put the blame on his dad.

Mike’s still toweling his hair when he returns to the kitchen. Despite their attempt at cleaning the place up, there’s still a lot of white areas all over the place. Then again, all they did was clear the island of flour so they can work properly. Apparently, Chester hasn’t bothered cleaning the place up, proven by the frosted cupcakes propped on top of the cooling rack.
And for some fucking reason, he’s still shirtless.

Fate is really out there testing Mike, isn’t he?

“Did you iced them all already?” he exclaims, surveying the mini cakes with a quick glance.

Chester nods. “Yup,” he replies, emphasizing on the “p” at the end.

“What? How?” Mike’s eyebrows knit together as he flings his towel over his shoulder. “That was my job, you asshole. And weren’t you talking to Ryan?”

“I didn’t talk to him long. Probably for like a minute.” Picking up a cupcake, Chester waves it around. “Besides, I told you to stay out of it. And haven’t you heard of the speaker function, Mr Shinoda? Because that’s a thing, if you didn’t know.”

“Oh fuck you,” Mike replies before snatching up another cupcake.

Despite being a first timer, Chester’s cupcakes aren’t half-bad looking. Obviously, they’re not going to be iced to perfection like the store-bought ones Mike loves (or used to, it’s complicated lately). Chester seemed to have only spread the frosting and dusted it with rainbow sprinkles. It’s cute, he’ll give him that.

Then again, just because it looks nice, doesn’t mean it’ll taste the same.

With that thought in mind, Mike takes a large bite.

And… And…

He vaguely hears somebody’s voice in the background. Mike doesn’t bother asking for a clarification.

Because holy shit, this cupcake.

This fucking cupcake.

The voice is still fuzzy, but he catches his name being called. Mike continues to ignore it.

He’s in heaven now. He’s in literal cupcake heaven. Screw the fucking hipster coffee shop. Never has he never tasted anything this good in his life.

It’s everything a cupcake should be — light, airy, moist. And of course, sweet but not overpoweringly so. It’s everything he could ask for. It’s like Mike found a Build-A-Bear that makes cupcakes instead of teddy bears and managed to craft the perfect—

“Helloooo? Mike?”

A finger snap drops him unfortunately back to Earth.

Chester’s wearing his shit-eating grin that Mike hates and loves so much. “Damn, guess Brad was right. You have orgasms to cupcakes. I don’t know if I should be flattered or grossed out.”

Mike blinks, his hazy euphoria clearing in his mind. “Very funny, Bennington. I was just...savouring it.”

“Mm hmm, sure,” Chester dismisses. “Is it better than that hipster place? I refuse to say its name. It’s too pretentious.”
This time, Mike doesn’t care about hiding his enthusiasm. It’s Chester. Nobody should hide their excitement around a ray of sunshine like Chester. “Much. The best thing I’ve tasted.” He swallows, his brain settling on the one person he shouldn’t be thinking of. But hey, he’s here to support his friend in his endeavour to welcome somebody from his past back into his life. “Ryan would love this.”

Chester pauses peeling the paper of his cupcake, pinning him with a confused expression. “What did you say?”

All of a sudden, Mike feels self-conscious. “Aren’t you making this...for him? For...Ryan?”

Mentally, he braces for any backlash he might gain from blurting that out. Backlash for what, he has no idea but Chester hasn't brought Ryan up until recently. The last thing Mike wants to do is offend him.

Instead all Chester does is narrow his eyes at him. “Ryan hates sweet stuff,” he says slowly, as if he’s still trying to process what Mike has just said. “It's for you.”

The gears in Mike’s brain screech to a halt.

Wait, what?

Why would he—? What?

God, what a day this is turning out to be. Why does Mike have weird days? Why can’t he have a nice and normal day when curveballs aren’t shoved in his face?

“Is that why you've been upset yesterday?” Chester continues, his frown deepening. "Is this about me ditching you for Ryan?”

And there he is again, right on the money.

“No, I just…” Mike fiddles with the towel around his neck. “I don’t know. Maybe. Like, don’t get me wrong. I'm not trying to have you all to myself and stop you from going out and being friends and shit. I just… I don’t know man.”

He resumes his bracing, waiting for Chester to laugh at his stupidity or scold him.

“Thank you.”

Mike’s ears perk up at that. “For what?”

“Telling me this,” he answers like it’s the most obvious thing in the universe. “It’s good that you’re telling me this and not throwing a fit. Or whatever jealous friends do. You can’t help how you feel. And that’s okay. Just know that I still love you. Me going out with other people and dividing my time between you and Ryan isn’t change things.”

God, Mike doesn't deserve Chester. Chester shouldn't spend his time reassuring a lover the way he is with Mike. He deserves somebody that isn't insecure about everything.

“I know. I really do.” He sighs. “I’m sorry. I’m an idiot. I don't know what I was thinking.”

“You’re not an idiot.” Chester cracks a smile. “If I did, I wouldn’t be spending my time baking for you.”

“Seriously though, what’s with the baking?” Mike asks because why the hell would he want to bake
for him of all people and not for somebody he cared about in the past. "For me?"

Chester frowns. “Didn’t I say I’d make cupcakes for you? I told you I’d make better cupcakes than that shitty coffee shop so you never have to set foot there ever again. That’s why I was trying to keep you away from the kitchen. I thought right now would be a good time to bake since you have a meeting today.” He tilts his head from side to side. “But you came home early and well…”

Mike’s gears start again, albeit at a slow pace. So all he could spit out is a pathetic “Thanks” and a, “You didn’t need to do all this. Seriously.”

“Hey,” Chester says, grinning boyishly. “I’m always happy to make you stuff. I’m happy you love it.”

"I do," Mike says sincerely before sinking his teeth back into the best cupcake he's ever eaten.

 Seriously, how did Chester pull off baking such a creation, especially on his first time? What else can he do? Fly a plane? Do a headstand for ten hours?

As he swallows, he notices Chester's eyes trained on his lips. It's a little uncomfortable and god, don't tell him he's going to...

“Is something wrong?” Mike asks. “You've been staring at me for the past minute and frankly, it's creeping me out.”

Chester shakes his head. “No. I just… You got some...” He gestures to the corner of his mouth. Mike frowns, baffled.

“Here, let me…”

And before Mike could comprehend it, Chester closes the distance between them.

His touch is feathery, his palm cupping his jaw. Chester’s thumb glides over his lips, gently scooping up frosting off the corner of Mike’s lips. His breath catches as another shiver trembles down his spine. He prays Chester doesn’t notice.

He doesn’t make any indication if he does. In fact, he doesn't seem fazed at all over what he just did. He just sticks his frosting-covered thumb in his mouth and gives it a suck.

Any coherent thought Mike has evaporates into thin air, because fuck, this is… God, what the fuck?

Varying emotions well up inside him, mostly confusion and disgust. But they only bubble for a second, shifting into arousal, which boggles his mind. This shouldn't arouse him because Chester just wiped frosting off his lips and stuck it in his mouth. He should stay disgusted.

Instead, all he wants to do right now is march around the counter and pin Chester against the refrigerator and kiss him senseless. It sounds like a full-proof idea. Or he could smear his body with the leftover frosting so Chester could lick it off him. Or since Chester’s already shirtless, Mike could smear it on him and he can lick it off him and those tattoos and—

Okay, and he needs to stop there before he really gets bothered because that’s not what he needs to be right now.

What he can stick to is confusion. Confusion he can deal with.

Because what the fuck, he didn’t just get turned on by Chester sucking the frost he wiped off Mike’s
lips. Which he did.

What in the world is going on?

This whole day has to be a dream. It has to be. All of this doesn't make sense at all.

“That’s…uh…” Mike barks out something that’s a hybrid of a cough and a choke. ”disgusting.”

“Hey, you can’t let something sweet go to waste.” Chester’s voice is unusually husky when he says this. There's a smirk etched onto his lips and he’s shirtless and oh god, Mike feels his face burning up again.

God, he’s going to buy duct tape one of these days so he can shut Chester up. God, the things that comes out of his mouth. Holy fucking s—

“Hey,” Chester starts, snapping Mike out of his thoughts. “aren’t you gonna help me clean up?”

Whatever bizarre moment that has passed between them dissipates. Somehow, normalcy has begun to settle in again. It’s weird how the both of them could go from being friendly to sharing what Mike assumes is sexual tension and then back to being friends again. Maybe that’s how things are with Chester. Being friends with Chester means you'll get the "friend" and "flirting" package together, tied in a neat bow.

Was it like this with Ryan? This could be Chester's first time baking cupcakes but maybe Ryan did them and kept Chester out of the kitchen. Did they share weird cupcake banters and swipe frosting off each other’s lips? Maybe press some kisses against each other's lips and a grope or two. Maybe they even fucked on the count—

Mike pulls the brakes before his brain could go further. This is not the time for fretting about Ryan or Chester’s relationship with the man. Anything Ryan doesn’t pertain to the present. Right now, Chester chose to be here with him and to surprise him with cupcakes. Just the two of them. Ryan has nothing to do is any of this.

Chester’s with him now and that’s all that matters. What Chester had with Ryan was in the past. That’s the end of the story.

It has nothing to do with the present. There’s no point in worrying about Ryan now. Mike's going to take what he can get and Ryan's definitely not on the list.

Mike’s lips tug into a smirk. “I am. I’m eating, aren’t I?”

Chapter End Notes
Spanish translations:
Pendejo.: Dumbass.

Japanese translations:
Baka.: Idiot.
Kuso baka.: Fucking idiot.
Thank you guys for all of the comments from the previous chapter! I won't lie, I was pretty burned out while I was writing this chapter. I'm still burned out actually but rereading your comments gave me enough motivation to complete this chapter. So really, thank you guys!

I don't know how this chapter will go over but well, you're welcome to tell me your reactions about it, haha. I'd love to know.

Usually, Mike’s good at video games. He usually could beat his friends up at any video game they challenge him to.

So watching Wonder Woman’s ass getting kicked for the sixth time in the row is just soul-crushing. Not because he, the self-proclaimed champion of video games, just lost. It’s because Wonder Woman deserves better than getting her ass kicked by fucking Joker of all people. And especially since Joker is being played by Joe of all people.

“How’s it not feeling right?” Mike asks, trying to his best to hide his frustration. “You beat me up. Fair and square. Unless you found a way to hack my game when I wasn’t around.”

“As much as I’d like to take all the credit for beating you — six times in a row, by the way — I know something’s up.” Joe clicks his teeth, shooting him a look. “And no, I didn’t hack you either.”

Mike heaves a sigh, dropping his video game controller on his lap.

Most times, he’d pride on the idea that he’s good at masking his emotions. However on occasions like this, he’s proven wrong. Maybe he was good at it, once upon a time. But nowadays, he’s shit. It’s probably the old age catching up with him. Or Chester. Chester’s wore him down to the point that Mike doesn’t have time to rebuild himself.

“It’s nothing, man. Just me being stupid. Normal shit.”
Normal shit meaning stressed out over planning for the upcoming school year, Chester’s weird signals towards him, and Ryan. Most of it is the former but well, Ryan is always stressing him out.

While he hasn’t invaded his headspace as often as before, the thought of him still pops up every now and then. He can’t help it.

Joe shakes his head, crossing his arms, like a pouting toddler refusing to eat their vegetables. “I know you, Mike. Your normal is not being stupid. I mean, if you’re stupid, what am I?” He taps the side of his head. “Brain dead?”


“You know what sucks, Mike?” Joe starts, loud and dramatic. “Every time Brad or I are down, you’re always there to pick us up. Like you say all these things that we’re good at or what makes us unique or something. You’re kind to us. And I think I can speak for Brad when I say we love you for that. But you’re not kind to yourself. You don’t see yourself the same way. It fucking sucks and it hurts to see you like this.”

Despite the loud and dramatic delivery, it manages to accomplish its mission — make Mike feel guilty.

Okay, maybe not exactly. He knows Joe meant all that to pick him up (despite the exaggerated flair but hey, it’s Joe), to help him understand this self-loathing isn’t healthy. But all Mike feels is guilt and frustration. He hates worrying his friends and right now, he’s sure that he’s been worrying them for decades. Even if Mike was busy flaunting his calm and aloof demeanour them, they probably have seen through it all.

Goddamn, this is why he needs to get better.

“You’re an amazing person too, man. Anybody would be lucky to have you in their lives. I do.”

Mike shifts uncomfortably, fiddling with the joysticks on his controller. While Joe has known him longer, Mike still doesn’t feel at ease with being vulnerable with him than with Chester. Maybe if Joe is like Chester, he’d have a better way to reply. Mike can’t figure out why.

“Except the kids I give Fs too,” Mike says, deflecting all of Joe’s emotional shit. Again.

He seriously needs to stop doing that, Jesus Christ. What’s the point of being aware when you don’t make any changes? He’s told his students to not deflect. Why can’t he follow through his own goddamn advice?

Joe’s oblivious to Mike’s inner turmoil, going with what he said. “Except them. But hey, who knows? Maybe they took your guidance into account and tried to work for that A.”

Mike lets out an inaudible grunt. “I doubt that.”

His friend shrugs his shoulders. “Well, you never know.” Tossing the controller carelessly next to him (which Mike almost reprimands him for), Joe jumps to his feet and heads towards the front door.

Mike’s brow creases in puzzlement. He messed up again, didn’t he? He said something wrong or disregarded Joe’s feelings or—?

God, he really needs to stop jumping to negative conclusions. Maybe Joe forgot to water his plants or
turned the stove off or something of the like. Those are better assumptions that won’t add to his crippling self-worth.

“Where’re you going?” Mike calls out, just in case.

“Where’re we going,” Joe corrects him as he opens the shoe cabinet. “I’m going to loosen you up. Since your head isn’t in video games and you won’t tell me what’s up with you, we gotta find a different solution.”

Familiar annoyance creeps in. Typical Joe. “Don’t tell me I’m gonna pose for you again. Because I told you before, that shit doesn’t work.”

Joe smirks. “I’m not digging shit out of you. You’ll see.”

“You know,” Mike begins as they stare up at the sign above their heads — ‘Meteora’ emblazoned in neon red. “When you said that you wanted to loosen me up, I didn’t think we’d be...here.”

“Well, what’d you think we’d be doing?” Joe breaks into a grin, jabbing his friend with his elbow. “Going to a strip club? Getting drugs?”

Mike cringes at the thought of both. They’re way too old to be visiting strip clubs and Mike is undoubtedly anti-substance use. All his life, he’s never consumed any drugs, which is quite a feat considering Mark dabbling in cocaine during their time together. And well, he remembers quite clearly how things went down then.

So yes, no drugs and he plans to keep it that way until the day he dies.

“I don’t know.” Mike waves his hand around lamely, searching his brain for a suggestion that makes sense. “The, uh...cinema?”

“Nah,” Joe dismisses. “cinemas are overrated nowadays.”

“As if bars aren’t.”

“Hey, booze is good for the soul.” He pauses, as if giving it a thought. Mike’s sure he is. Joe’s has deejayed at enough clubs to understand the detriment of alcohol. “Every now and then anyway. ‘Sides, I’m sure you’ll be lit like a Christmas tree at the end of the night.”

“I’m not getting drunk,” Mike replies automatically. “Besides if you wanted to loosen my mouth, you didn’t need to drag me all the way here.”

Joe rolls his eyes. “I’m not getting you drunk, dummy. We’re just gonna get a couple of drinks in you. Just to cheer you up. Besides, the last thing I wanna do is to handle you drunk.” His lips twist
into a teasing smirk. “You’re such a clingy ass when you’re drunk.”

“And you’re a crybaby when you’re drunk,” Mike counters, his own mouth tugging into a tiny grin.

Joe snickers in response as he pushes the door open. “You goddamn right I am. And unlike you, I’m gonna own up to that shit.”

The place is in full swing when they enter. Most of the booths have been taken up by people of different walks of life, chatting boisterously and drinking away. For a regular Thursday night, it’s oddly crowded. Mike has a love-hate relationship with crowds. On one end, it’s easy to get lost in one. However, it’s such a pain to navigate through one. There’s always a probability of breathing problems but well, that’s not the biggest problem with crowds.

The bar itself is also filled with people, save for two empty seats at one end of the bar, which is where Mike and Joe plant themselves at.

“Anyway,” Joe continues where he left off, his voice rising to compete with the surrounding chatter. “That’s not the only reason why we’re here.”

Judging by Joe’s waggling eyebrows (which he needs to stop doing, it’s freaky), Mike has a gut feeling on where this is going. He doesn’t like it one bit.

“Fuck off, man,” Mike mutters, glancing around the room. At the moment, there’s no sign of Chester. Whether that’s a good thing or otherwise, he doesn’t know.

“Hey, you’re the one with the crush on the bartender. Not me.”

Mike is about to clamp his hand over Joe’s mouth and give him a wonderful lecture on secrets and learning to keep his mouth shut when a shadow falls over them.

“Hey, Mike,” Dave greets him with a friendly smile. From Mike’s occasional meetings with the man, he always exudes a laid-back demeanour. A good foil to Chester and Joe’s hyperactivity. Mike wonders how he managed to juggle being around such personalities every day. Chester, he gets, since he has his quiet moments. But Joe? “Been a while since I’ve seen you. How’ve you been holding up?”

Before he could reply, Joe cuts in with a huff. “Um, Farrell? I’m right here.”

Dave’s eyebrows knit in confusion. “Say, did you hear something?” His gaze darts around the room, craning his neck above oceans of heads. “Huh. Must be the wind.”

Mike snorts in laughter. Joe shoots the bartender a glare.

“Oh, so we’re resorting to the silent treatment.” He holds out his hands in surrender, bobbing his head vigorously. “I get it. That’s cool, man. No hard feelings whatsoever.”

A wide smirk spreads over Dave’s lips. He leans forward, cupping his hand to whisper in Mike’s ear. “Is he always like this?”

Mike mimics his gesture, all too willing to participate. “Extreme? Unfortunately, yes.”

“You know I can hear you guys, right? You guys ain’t as subtle as you think you both are.”

“Wasn’t planning to be,” Dave replies, flashing him a wink.

Joe sticks his tongue out at the bartender, who rolls his eyes good-naturedly. “What can I get for you
both? Hahn?"

“A gin and tonic.”

“Mike?”

He shrugs. “Just cider. Blueberry if you have one. Apple, if you don’t.” As his rule during social drinking, the last thing he wants is to end up drunk. He could order something non-alcoholic but knowing Joe, he’d pester him until he caved. And pestering Joe can be pretty annoying. Anyhow, he can handle a little buzz. Better than tipsy and definitely hammered. Drunk Mike is always up to no good.

Exhibit A: Making out with his roommate.

Usually when Mike orders stuff like this, he’d draw arched eyebrows from bartenders, maybe even an offended look or two. But as all the other times before, Dave doesn’t make a comment, choosing to bitch with Joe as the two of them head to the middle of the bar.

While waiting, Mike takes the time to survey his surroundings. Despite the crowd and chatter around him, it’s somewhat comforting. Unlike the snobby wealthy at Anna’s wedding, the patrons here don’t carry any ounce of superiority.

It’s nice to be among people sometimes. Generally, he enjoys being in isolation. But there’s something about being in a corner, reveling in the chatter and movements of others. Most times, he doesn’t scrutinize. He prefers mindlessly jumping from patron to patron.

If only he did this tonight.

Because he just found Chester.

He’s at the other end of the bar area, deep in conversation with a man Mike doesn’t recognize. But a name crosses his mind and everything clicks in place.

All the times he’s been here, Mike never gave a shit on who dragged Chester into a conversation or otherwise. But he’s getting a different vibe from them here. Usually it’s just friendly and polite with a good distance between bartender and customer. Now, there’s a more flirty vibe to it. The way they seem to hold each other’s gaze, the lack of personal space between them, their foreheads barely grazing.

Maybe it’s his eyes playing tricks on him or his brain messing with him but from what he can tell, this isn’t any ordinary customer. This is Ryan. It has to be. Mike’s gut may be off sometimes and hell, there’s a high possibility he’s jumping the gun, but his brain and heart are both screaming in agreement. They hardly do. Which means, his gut is on the money.

In the end, it shouldn’t matter, right? It shouldn’t matter whether Chester and Ryan are flirting or dating or just talking or whatever. Chester said they weren’t together so that’s that. Besides all that, it’s none of his business. He’s not dating Chester. It shouldn’t goddamn matter.

But then maybe-Ryan leans over to graze Chester’s hand while they’re in mid-laughter. Chester doesn’t pull away, his grin widening instead. The blood flowing through Mike’s veins move from a simmer to a boil.

Why is Ryan touching him like that? Is that a come on? Does Ryan think they can go back to fucking after what he did to Chester before? Hell, maybe they are doing just that, fucking behind Mike’s back? Judging by Chester’s reaction, it’s a good guess.
But wait, how could they be fucking behind Mike’s back if Mike isn’t with Chester in the first place? That wouldn’t make sense, right?

Chester is now speaking, gesturing around with his hands. Mike couldn’t help but smile at that. When Chester gets overly excited, his gestures go wild.

But then Ryan’s head is tilted to the side, propping his head up with an elbow. He dampens his lips with his tongue as he nods to what Chester’s saying. His gaze trails down Chester’s arm tattoos. It could be his irritation playing tricks on him or the distance between the both of them, but Mike swears he’s—

A finger taps his shoulder. Mike whips his head up. “What?”

He immediately regrets sounding harsh. It’s not Dave’s fault that Ryan’s being all touchy.

The bartender has his eyebrow raised, a mischievous twinkle in his eyes. “Nothing,” he says innocently as he slides over a glass filled with plum-tinted liquid.

Dave’s facial features suggests otherwise. Mike’s tempted to ask but the last thing he needs is confirmation. But it’s better to have things in concrete than not at all.

“I doubt it's nothing,” he notes as he raises the glass to his lips. The tangy mix of berries and cider stings his throat as the cider glides downwards.

Dave cocks an eyebrow, shouldering his dishcloth. “Do you honestly wanna know?”

Mike shrugs his shoulders. “I mean, why not?”

The bartender’s other eyebrow goes up. “Okay,” he says, elongating his syllables. “You asked for it.” He inhales deeply. “You're jealous.”

Jealous.

Mike’s jealous.

He’s been hearing that word way too often. First Chester, Talinda, Brad when he was on the phone with him the night before, and now Dave.

Not to be mean to the person who coined the term, but Mike’s starting to hate the word.

“Jealous?” Mike exclaims, sounding a little high-pitched than he should. “What makes you say that?”

Dave nods his head at the other end of the room. “You’ve been glaring at them for the past couple of minutes. Like legit daggers and all. Remind me not to get on your bad side. You could start a wildfire with that look and the last thing I need is to renovate this place. I just got the walls repainted.”

Mike ducks his head in embarrassment, taking another gulp from his drink.

At this point, if people are pointing out something, chances are they’re probably right. Which is just downright horrifying. The fact that somebody could pick up his emotions before he can doesn’t sit well with Mike. He’s used to people trying to see through his wall, guessing what’s on the other side. Now, he’s crystal clear.

So there it is. Mike Shinoda is fucking jealous of a man he hardly knows and a relationship he has little knowledge of its dynamics. Even though he doesn't have the right to be, he is jealous.
Just fucking wonderful.

People say that owing up to your emotions and feelings is a step forward. To Mike, it’s regression. Because it’s...jealousy. He has no right to feeling this way.

Yet, here he is — green from head to toe.

*Just wonderful. Congratulations to everybody who’s figured out, which is practically everybody in general. Just fucking wonderful. Such progress.*

While he’s able to admit this to himself now, admitting it to somebody else is a different story. Because ego.

“I’m not jealous,” Mike lies. “I was just…thinking about...stuff. His right hand drops from his glass to pat the countertop. “Just wondering who was talking to Chester.”

All he gets in response is another skeptical look and a, “Whatever floats your boat, buddy.” That’s not a good thing. “Ryan, an old friend of Chester’s. Don’t know him well. They drifted apart when I came into the picture.” A small smile crosses his face. “Funny how life turns out to be.”

Mike hums in agreement with both Dave and his gut. Life sure is funny. Really, really funny.

God, he guessed right. He should buy a lottery ticket tomorrow. He’ll definitely score a jackpot.

“He’s been here every night since Monday night,” Dave continues. Mike freezes. “Probably lonely or something.”

Ryan’s been here since Monday night. Today is Thursday.

Huh.

Huh, huh, huh.

“He sure does have a lot of time on his hands,” Mike comments out loud, which is something he wasn’t supposed to do. Now Dave’s going to think he’s an overreacting, insecure asshole.

If Dave does, he doesn’t voice it out. All he does is hum in reply. “Well, people have different ways of spending their time, don’t they? Plus, they just met by accident. I don’t blame them for making up for lost time.”

Guilt washes over Mike’s bubbling fury. What Dave says is true. At the end of it all, they are friends, old friends reconnecting. Mike shouldn’t be obsessing over all this. Chester himself has said that there isn’t anything between the two of them. If Chester could trust him with all that he’s said, he should do the same for him.

After all, it’s none of his fucking—

“Mike!” a voice calls in the distance, snapping him out of his thoughts.

Dave has disappeared. Not that Mike ever thought it was him calling him. He can recognize that voice anywhere. But at the moment, it’s not a voice he wants to hear. Chester should be catching up with Ryan, not spending time with Mike. They could do it later at home.

Unless Chester wants to introduce him to Ryan, which is a scenario he’d like to not be in, thank you very much.
He pretends to not have heard the call, scanning the area for Joe to goddamn save his ass. Unfortunately and unsurprisingly, he’s at the back, shamelessly trying to show off his dart skills to a group of college kids who seem to enjoy his company more than they should. The wonders of alcohol, Mike supposes.

“Hey, Shinoda!”

He almost jumps at the contact on his shoulder. Lo and behold, his friend. Mike’s heart soars. His roommate and friend in the flesh, dressed in a thin V-neck.

God, why did he think ignoring Chester was a bad idea? Chester could always make him feel at ease, like he’s home.

*You make me feel like I’m finally home.*

Mike pushes that out of his head, focusing his attention on the present.

“Hey,” his friend says, his smile as bright as the simmering sun. He seriously could give that annoying ball of fire a run for its money.

Mike breaks into his own grin. It’s difficult not to. “Hi.”

“Fancy seeing you here,” Chester drawls out, leaning forward. The collar of his shirt dips, revealing part of his chest tattoo. Mike tries hard not to switch his attention towards it. “And here I thought you would be stuck in that hut of yours.”

“Joe’s idea. Thought he’d bring me out of our little hut. You know how he is.” Mike nudges his head in his friend’s direction. “As you can tell, he’s doing a wonderful job at keeping me entertained.”

Chester lets out a chuckle. “Well, never fear. Chester’s here to save the day,” he says, winking.

Mike shakes his head fondly, feeling a blush creep up his neck.

“Anyway,” Chester continues, oozing of eagerness. “since you’re here, there’s somebody I want you to meet.”

And just like, the carpet underneath Mike’s feet is dragged out.

He is not going to be sharing a conversation with Ryan the Ex-Friends-With-Benefits guy. No, no, no.

Just no.

Every single god out there must be watching out for him because Dave pops up next to Chester and says, “Hey, Blondie over there wants another round of margaritas. Could you get that for me? I gotta make a couple of piña coladas.”

“Sure man,” Chester tells his boss before turning back to Mike. “Be right back,” he says, winking at Mike again before hustling away. As soon as Mike’s certain Chester is out of earshot, he exhales in relief.

As much as he’d love to have Chester around him, he’d rather not if it means he doesn’t meet Ryan. It’s only a setback to the evitable but hey, he’ll take whatever he can get.

But then the gods must have went back to being assholes because suddenly he feels a tap on his shoulder.
He’s much paler close up, a stark contrast to the all-black getup he has on. Mike snorts inwardly at the leather jacket he has on. It’s hot as hell today. You’d have to be a vampire to think that another layer is needed.

Then again, judging by his appearance, Mike wouldn’t be surprised that he’s secretly one. Or maybe he’s a huge fan of Twilight.

But he’s quite a looker. He’ll give him that. Talinda and Ryan. Goddamn, Chester does have good taste. He can’t make a comment on Sam since he’s never seen her face. He doubts he ever wants to.

Chester has been with a bunch of good-looking people, at the very least sexually. Mike doesn’t fit the bill for either of those cases.

“So,” Ryan starts matter-of-factly. He’s not sure if it’s his prior assumptions of the guy but he swears on his grandparents’ graves that Ryan’s words have a hint of smugness. “you’re Mike.”

Even though he’s aware of his identity, Mike feigns ignorance. He doesn’t want to give away the fact that he’s been sneaking glances at him and Chester. Making himself out as a stalker won’t be a good first impression. “I am. And you are?”

Taking a swig of what Mike guesses is whiskey, he sticks his other hand out. “Ryan,” he says coolly. “Ryan Shuck.”

Mike eyes the hand warily before giving it a short pump. “And…”

He knows he’s being an asshole, which is his average demeanor when he’s around strangers. It’s no secret that he’s shit with socializing with strangers. The difference is this time, he cranked it up to a thousand for not any other reason other than that this guy’s here to ruin his pretty average night.

Why couldn’t he just mind his own business?

“Just wanted to say hi, is all,” Ryan answers, pulling away. “You’re Chester’s roommate, right?” He slips into the seat next to him. Mike mentally curses Joe for running off to one up a bunch of kids and every other person in this room for not taking the spot.

God, why can’t this guy just sit somewhere else. Jesus, it’s like as if there aren’t any other places to sit. He had a seat right over there. Why can’t he just slink back to where he came from? Jesus fuck.

“Oh, yeah. I am.”

“Heard a lot about you. Nice to finally meet you in the flesh.” He swirls the alcohol in his glass. “And here I was thinking Chester made you up or something.”

Mike narrows his eyes at his condescending tone. It’s subtle but hell, he’s been around too many assholes to not let that slip under his radar. “What makes you think he made me up?”

Ryan shrugs his shoulders nonchalantly. “He keeps talking you up. Had to see if you’re just like what he said.”

Mike shifts in his seat uncomfortably, crossing his arms on the countertop. It’s strange to hear somebody raving about him to a stranger. He won’t lie that he finds it endearing.

But coming out of Ryan’s mouth, Mike sounds like…a nuisance?

God, now he definitely has reason to dislike him. Ryan reminds him of all those assholes from high
school.
As much as he’d like to jump out of his seat and yell *sayonara* at the top of his lungs, Mike’s curiosity gets the better of him.

“Like what?”

Ryan’s lips curl upwards into an enigmatic smile. “Don’t know. Can’t remember.” He turns away to take another gulp, switching his gaze towards the other end of the bar. “Chester’s wonderful, isn’t he?”

Mike’s eyebrows knit together at the sudden change of subject. *What the fuck is he on about?*

“I mean,” Ryan goes on, turning to face Mike. “you’ve been roommates with him for a while, right?”

Seriously, what the fuck and where the hell is he steering his pointless conversation to.

*Fuck fuck fuck.*

“Yeah, he’s a great guy. We all don’t deserve him.” Mike almost bashes his head against the nearest wall. That’s such a stupid thing to say and god he’s embarrassing himself in front of this asshole. Somebody punch him. Him meaning Mike.

Ryan barks out a laugh. “I’ll drink to that.” Again, another swallow. Mike follows suit, taking several gulps at a time. His head screams at him to stop, the same way it did when he was stuck with Rob. He always drinks more than he should when he’s in uncomfortable social situations. That’s why he seldom drinks during social functions. It makes him less likely to make a fool out of himself.

Well, at least he got cider this time.

“So tell me, is there something going on between the both of you?”

Mike almost spits out the contents in his mouth. He swallows slowly, easing himself as he processes his shock because what?

What?

What the fuck, what the fuck, what the fuck, what the—?

“What?”

“I’ve seen the way he looks at you,” Ryan says. “It’s the same way he looked at me when we were…” He trails away, glancing from his whiskey to Mike’s face. His smile broadens into an impish one. “Did he tell you?”

Mike could guess what he’s referring. Chester didn’t tell him. Talinda did. Would it be a lie if he said no?

It wouldn’t matter, would it? After all, he hardly knows about this dude at all.

Unless he reports to Chester, which is just bad news. Then again, Mike did sort of hint at it when Chester was washing his hair. So Chester wouldn’t be upset if he said anything, would he?

“Hey, dude.”

A finger snap brings him back to reality. Ryan’s fixing him with a smirk. Mike wishes he could wipe
it off his face. It’s fucking aggravating.

“Well, Chester’s right about one thing. You space out a lot.”

Heat spreads across Mike’s cheeks, either in discomfort or anger because can this guy get anymore shittier? Seriously, how did Chester and him become friends, let alone best friends? Chester’s way too good for him.

“Never mind,” Ryan says. “Doesn’t matter what he told you.” He throws his head back, draining the last of his whiskey. He sighs in contentment, slamming the glass down. “You two fucking or something?”

Mike starts at that.

What the fuck? What in the…? What?

Obviously, they’re not fucking. Why would this numbskull even assume such a thing?

Not that it’s a bad thing to assume because, it’s Chester. But even if they were fucking, what does that have to do with anything at all?

This would be a perfect time to throw out an excuse, about leaving the stove on or feeding his non-existent goldfish, to get out of this godforsaken conversation with Mr Dumbass here. But since Mike is a bigger dumbass, he just throws out a, “No, no we’re not. We’re just friends.”

Now, this is another great opportunity to dash off. But all Mike does is study Ryan’s facial expression shift from annoyance to disbelief to mild interest. “Oh. Cool. Chester’s has a weird habit of making friends with every single person he meets. But that’s Chester for you. Good to know that he has you though.”

The last part sounds tacked on, like an afterthought. Mike frowns. “Why?”

“Nothing. Just wondering.”

Something in Ryan’s voice doesn’t sit well with Mike though. He sounds like he’s...hopeful? And there’s that shit-eating grin and oh no.

_Oh fuck no._

At the same time as Mike says this mentally, Chester returns, his grin still plastered on.

God, he’s not mentally prepared for this. He’s not prepared at all.

“Hey, you guys finally met,” he says, grinning. “Made my job easier.”

It’s a wondrous shift in mannerism from Ryan. “Well, you took forever,” he replies in a honeyed tone. “And I thought this lovely man right here was lonely so I thought I’d keep him company.”

Mike mentally snorts. _Yeah, by indirectly insulting me._

“He is lovely, isn’t he?” Chester echoes, regarding Mike with a soft smile. If Mike ears aren’t deceiving him, he detects a hint of affection in his voice. It warms his heart. “And c’mon man, I’ve only gone for a couple of minutes.”

“Really? I could’ve sworn it felt like a year.” Mike has to refrain himself from rolling his eyes. That’s one of the cheesiest things he’s ever heard in his life.
Somebody hand him duct tape because goddamn, he’s tempted to shut his mouth.

At least he has somebody else in his camp in the form of Chester. “That’s so fucking cheesy, man.”

“Aren’t I always?”

Mike watches something that looks like tension pass between the two, their eyes on each other. All of a sudden, he feels out of place, unneeded and toss aside. He should definitely go. He should make some excuse and run on home.

But his legs won’t move. No matter how much he wishes, he’s glued to his seat, watching his world fall apart.

“So what’d you call the past seventeen years?”

Ryan twists his mouth into a wicked smirk. Rising a few inches off the stool, he leans across the counter, his lips drawing closer to Chester’s ear.

Mike gulps, frozen in time.

It’s like watching a disaster happening in slow motion. This can’t be real. This just can’t. He’s dreaming and he’s going to wake up any moment now.

Any moment now.

For now, all Mike could do is watch Ryan draw away, drifting down to ghost his cheek. He drifts lower, stopping until he’s an inch away from Chester’s lips. Chester himself, on the other hand, is stunned. Mike doesn’t blame him.

Who he does end up blaming is himself.

He should be looking away. He shouldn’t be watching Ryan stake his claim on somebody that’s...that’s...

Fuck, he has to go. He’s not going to watch Ryan and Chester kiss. He’s not going to subject to any more of this seduction game shit that Ryan wants to put up.

Is that what he wants to know? That he won? Because god fucking damn, he won. Hands-down with flying colours.

This is a mistake. Mike's a mistake. How could he have been so stupid?

He has to go. It doesn’t matter if Joe doesn’t come along. It doesn’t matter how much of an idiot he’s going to look by suddenly running off. None of that matters. What matters is him leaving.

Mike probably would’ve made a stealthy escape had his bar stool not make a loud noise against the floor. He could feel unwanted gazes zeroing on him. He mutters a string of curses in English and Japanese.

From the corner of his eye, Chester gapes at him in surprise, jerking his head back. Mike doesn’t dare check if Ryan mirrors him or is scowling. He doesn’t want to know. “What—?”

“I gotta go,” he mumbles as he carelessly tosses bills onto the counter. He doesn’t care that he’s overcharging. Losing an extra ten bucks is better than seeing whatever the hell this is with his own two eyes. He needs to get the fuck out of here. “If Joe asks, tell him that I’m home first.”
He doesn’t let Chester continue his question. He’s out of the door within seconds.

It’s a ten minute walk back home but fuck it, he’d crawl a thousand miles if it ever came to that.

It doesn’t matter. Nothing matters but him running home. Back to his sanctuary.

As he puts more distance between him and the bar, he picks up a voice calling out to him. Mike doesn’t heed it. It doesn’t matter. Nothing matters besides getting far away as possible.

He needs time to reevaluate everything he’s known, which is just stupid.

How could he be so stupid? How could he be so stupid to think that there was a possibility, that they might be a possibility? How could Mike ever think Chester would feel that way for him? In what universe did Chester would fall in love with him?

In what universe could he compete with a man like Ryan Shuck?

And Ryan. He didn’t deserve all the angry thoughts Mike harboured. Maybe the condescending shit with him, yes. But not about Chester. Definitely not him. All Mike was doing is projecting his unnecessary frustrations onto him because he was too chicken to do what Ryan could do.

It’s not his fault that Mike’s nothing compared to him. It’s not his fault that Chester’s never Mike’s in the first place.

The voice calling him is louder now, approaching, enough for him to recognize. Mike quickens his pace.

Happy. He needs to be happy for Chester. He could do that. If Chester does want to try out whatever this is with Ryan, he can be there for him. It doesn’t matter if it’ll be long distance after the next couple of days. A man like Chester could handle long distance well. He could make whatever that is with Ryan work. As long as Ryan doesn’t fuck things up, Mike’s good. Really good.

It all makes sense. This is fate. Childhood friends finding each other again after years of separation. Totally straight out of a Hallmark film. But it doesn’t make it any less realistic.

All he needs to do is tell that stupid brain and heart of his to make a truce and agree that this is all for the best.

But for now, he needs to get out. He needs this all to stop.

“Mike!”

He breaks into a run. His chaser does the same.

Go away. Get the fuck away from me.

“Mike!” Chester yells. He’s closing in on him.

Now, Mike isn’t the best when it comes to athletics, especially things that require running. His performance in Gym class could attest to that. He’s an artist, for god’s sake.

So it’s unsurprising that he’s only managed to round the corner when a steel grip latches onto his arm, yanking him backwards.

Chester drags him into the nearest alleyway, which stinks of moldy cheese and god, Mike swears he sees a couple of rats scurrying off. It’s dimly-lit, thanks to a lamp hanging above their heads, casting
their surroundings in a bronze glow. The uptight part of him is screaming at him to jerk his hand back, kick Chester between his legs, and high tail out of there. It doesn’t matter that he’s Chester and Mike’s sort of in love with him, he’ll—

Wait.

He’s in love with him. He’s in love with Chester Bennington.

Oh god.

As quick as the thought conjures, it disappears.

But his reaction to it doesn’t. Mike stumbles over his own feet, his back colliding against the nearest wall. Another hand joins the one latched onto his arm, steadying him by gripping his shoulder.

He’s really shit at running. It’s only been a short run and he’s already winded.

If the wall he’s leaning against has stale vomit or rotting mayonnaise or something of that sort, he swears to fucking god he’s gonna...do something. Like probably puke all over Chester.

Chester.

He’s in love with him. It all makes sense now.

Jesus Christ, he’s a dumbfuck. He’s in with goddamn Chester Bennington who’s cornering him in a dank alleyway full of garbage instead of canoodling with Ryan Shuck. Unless his ears playing tricks on him.

Mike dares himself to look his assailant in the eye. It is Chester in the flesh, the concern and confusion he’s exuding amplified by the overhead light. Even when he’s worried and puzzled, he’s as beautiful as ever.

But he’s also the last person he wants to see right now so fuck.

All he wants to do is fling himself into the vacuum of space. But since that’s out of question, he’d like to lock the door behind him and bundle under his quilt, away from the living. It sounds awfully ideal at the moment.

“Let go of me,” Mike says quietly between pants.

“Not until you tell me what’s up with you,” Chester replies, surprisingly gentle.

Mike frowns, confused as hell. “What’d you doing here? You’re on shift. Ryan—”

“You ran. I was trying to—”

“I know that,” Mike snaps, finding it difficult to hold in his emotions. There’s annoyance and there’s hatred and there’s humiliation and there’s godfucking jealousy. “I want to know why the fuck you’re doing out here spending your time chasing me and dragging me instead of—of—”

“You ran out,” Chester repeats. He pauses, inhaling. “You just suddenly ran out and I wanted to know if you’re—”

“I’m tired,” Mike answers shortly, eager to wrap things up. He needs to go, fuck. “Just wanted to head home. That’s all.”
“You looked upset.”

The blood on Mike’s face drains.

“Is this because of—”

“It’s nothing.”

“Mike—”

“F*ck off, Chester!” Mike shouts. He can’t hold it in any longer. He hates that he’s yelling but goddamn, anything to get Chester away from him. He needs to be alone right now. “Leave me alone! Just get back to Ryan and leave me the f*ck alone! Go back to flirting or eye-fucking or whatever the hell you guys do! Okay? I’m sorry I ruined everything! I’m sorry you’re stuck out here talking to me! I'm sorry I came tonight! I’m sorry Ryan thinks I’m dirt! I’m sorry I didn’t tell you what happened when I was drunk at the hotel! I’m sorry I don’t say or do the right things! I’m sorry for dragging you into my problems! And I’m fucking sorry I’m not good enough for you! So go away and leave me alone, alright?!”

Neither of them speak for the moment, both of them stunned into silence. Besides the thumping of Mike’s heart and his own heavy breathing, it’s quiet between the both of them. Thankfully, there’s nobody to be seen around them. Otherwise, things would’ve been pretty awkward.

Fatigue hits him like a train wreck. He hasn’t been this drained since he told Chester of his past. And just like then, he’s simultaneously tired and relieved.

What he needs is sleep. All he wants is sleep. A way out. Home. Sanctuary.

It’s amazing what an outburst can do. It’s the first time Mike has seen him this tongue-tied, this speechless. Maybe he should do it more often.

“What?” Chester finally whispers, breaking the silence. His grip on Mike slackens.

This is it. This is when he pushes him away and runs home. Away from all this complicated web of emotions and drama.

Like before, his legs don’t move a muscle. Reality hits him harder than his fatigue.

That’s it. That’s fucking it.

He ruined it. He ruined everything because he said too much. Now Chester’s definitely going to hate him for keeping all that information from him.

What did he do? What did he fucking do?

“You know what?” Mike mumbles. This is it. Why bother? Now, Chester’s going to hate him and fuck, he hates himself more for ruining everything. “Forget it.”

He only managed to turn his head when he feels another body press against his own. A pair of lips follow after, harshly pushing against him.

Mike could hardly form a coherent thought. Because Chester’s kissing him. Chester’s fucking kissing him.

He doesn’t have time to process everything else because Chester pulls away abruptly. He licks his lips, training his gaze onto Mike’s. His dark eyes blaze. “Now you get it? I wouldn’t have ran out in
the middle of my shift if I didn’t—"

No, he doesn’t want to know. He really doesn’t want to know.

Not now. Not at all.

Mike should go. Leave him hanging. Save himself.

Instead, he grabs a fistful of Chester’s collar, yanking him into a bruising kiss. Chester gasps in
surprise at the unexpected contact but reciprocates the next second, suckling at the bottom of Mike’s
lip. A wordless noise echoes around them. Mike swears it’s from him.

Mike’s moaning gives Chester the opportunity to slip his tongue inside. He fights another moan as
their tongues brush against each other. Chester tastes of nicotine. Mike’s always hated nicotine. Mark
always reminded him of nicotine. So does Anna.

But Chester doesn’t. Kissing him doesn’t fill him with dread, but with comfort and arousal.

His fingers tighten their grip on Chester’s shirt. He needs him. All of him. He wants the shirt off him.
He wants to take what Chester can offer him.

God, he doesn’t deserve him. But that doesn’t mean he wouldn’t take him if Chester allowed him to.

He feels delicate fingers tracing across his bare skin, sneaking under the hem of his shirt. Mike jumps
at that. Their bodies shift, their clothed arousals brush against each other before Chester pulls away.

His eyelids are closed, his lips parted in pleasure. Mike almost drops to the floor.

They just made out. Chester and him just made out in a smelly ass alleyway.

Sober.

Fuck.

“Mike?”

Chester watches him between hooded eyes, lips parted. Mike’s tempted to drag him back into
another kiss. Chester exhales lowly. “You wanna get out of here?”

This is a bad idea. They should go home and talk things through, clear the air. Going home with
Chester like this, when they’re both aroused is dangerous. Because Mike doesn’t deserve him. God,
he doesn’t.

But right now, everything is too much. As much as he shouldn’t, he wants this, needs this. He needs
Chester. He’s going to regret needing him tomorrow but right now, it doesn’t mean shit.

Because his brain is haywire and his dick has taken control and fuck, he’s screwed. He’s fucking
screwed.

Mike nods his head.
It’s been a while since Mike had sex, let alone had sex with a guy. His last relationship was with a woman several years ago. With a man, it was at least a decade back. He could've indulged in a one-night stand or two but he never liked the idea of that.

Which this whole situation with Chester kind of strange and awkward. Besides the fact that Mike bailed over his insecurities, Chester chased him down, and made out with him in an alley way.

But those facts don't matter now. Because Chester wants to fuck and god, this might ruin everything they’ve built. One-night stands between friends might destroy everything, change everything they know. Mike doesn’t need to look far for examples.

But Ryan and Chester somehow wound back together, even if it was by chance. There could be hope for him.

Which begs the question — if Chester wants sex, why didn’t he just run back to Ryan? Why go to Mike the idiot who hasn’t had sex in years instead the man who you used to be friends-with-benefits with? Mike doubts he could satisfy Chester. Hell, he doesn’t even know his favourite position. And that weasel does.

Well, that is if they’re actually having sex. Going home could mean anything, like talking things out like normal and civil people should. Like they should have a long time ago. A proper discussion between the both of them has been long overdue.

But then Chester’s fingers are trailing under the hem of his T-shirt and he’s leaning over to nibble his
earlobe and fuck, Mike wants to drag him into another alley way so they can get this over with. They'll probably traumatize a passerby or two but it's not like they're doing that already. Then again, it's not like Mike knows what they could do. Mainly him because well, it's been a while. There's a possibility it could all come back to him. But what if it doesn't?

He could give Chester a handjob and he supposes Chester could fuck him. But he doesn’t want Chester doing all the heavy lifting. He deserves to be on the receiving end of pleasure. If Chester wants a good time, Mike would have to give him that. Hopefully. He owes him that much.

God, what has his life come to? How could he be thinking about all this? He’s in his forties for god’s sake, not some teenager who recently hit puberty.

It’s a little embarrassing, now that he thinks about it. Or tries to anyway because his brain is swimming with promises of pleasure and fuck, Chester's such a tease. He needs to stop touching him because god, he's one second away from ramming him against the nearest wall.

It's stupid. He's thinking with his dick, not his head. He hardly does that. When Mike thinks with his dick, he becomes a different person, more possessive and domineering. It's peculiar considering his initial sexual awakening but he's been with other people. People who lets him take control, even if it isn't often.

Also in Mike’s defense, he can’t help but let his dick take over his brain. There’s something about Chester that makes him gravitate towards. It could be his dark lashes or his tongue swirling languidly around his lips. It could be the storm brewing in his eyes or his nimble fingers trailing down Mike's trousers. But god, Mike wants him. He wants him more than anything else in the universe. Even though the aftermath is going to be shit, Mike still wants him.

Thank god Joe’s not home. Otherwise, he’d definitely hear the racket they’re stirring up and knowing that nosy asshole, he’d peek his head out in time to watch Chester corner him against their front door.

“Jesus,” Mike gasps as Chester dips lower to caress his stubble-covered jawline. Most of his previous lovers would leave that area alone. He doesn’t hold it against them. By the looks of it, it wouldn’t be comfortable.

But god, he was missing out a lot. The combination of the prickle of his jaw and Chester's supple lips is amazing. Even if his nostrils could pick up a whiff of nicotine, it excites him further. This is all new and uncharted and god, it feels so good.

Chester doesn’t stop there, continuing down south and teasing his jaw with a light graze of his teeth. Mike’s breath hitches in surprise, his cock further straining against his trousers. Never has a movement like that turned him on as much as before.

Mike’s grip on Chester’s shoulder tightens, silently begging for a continuation of his assault. Chester squeezes his side in response as he travels down the side of his neck, coming to a stop at the exposed skin of his shoulder. Mike swallows hard, digging his nails into Chester’s shirt.

Maybe taking Chester against this door wouldn’t be such a bad idea, would it be?

Fuck, I've officially lost my mind.

“Aren’t you going to get that door open?” Chester asks, his warm breath coaxing a shiver out of Mike. “Don’t think you’d want to scar your neighbours, do you?” He hums softly, the tune vibrating against Mike’s skin. “Or maybe you do,” he whispers before tipping down to swirl his tongue over
that spot. Mike’s eyelids flutter shut, his knees buckling at the sensation.

If he has any lack of decency, he would’ve let Chester fuck him out here. Or he fuck him. Mike would love to take Chester, just to watch him fall apart, cry out because of him.

Hell, would they ever fuck? Is it too soon? Is a one-night stand between the both of them a good idea? Mike’s never had a one-night stand. If he ever indulge in one, he sure as hell won’t do it with his roommate. Unlike the usual, you’d have to live the person you fucked.

But god, he’s weak. He can’t stop himself. Only Chester can. Only Chester could put a stop to all this.

Judging by his previous reaction, they won’t be stopping any time soon.

“I—I’ll get to it,” Mike mumbles as he reaches down to his pocket. It should be an easy move to just scoop up his keys but his hands are shaking so hard and Chester won’t stop turning him on and god, he can’t pull out his goddamn keys, Jesus fucking Christ.

This is it. He’s going to end up coming in his pants. Chester’s going to think he’s some shithead who doesn’t have any self-control and bail, crawl back to Ryan and—

“C’mon, Mikey. We don’t have all night,” Chester murmurs, pulling away. Even though his body is left cold, Mike’s insides are on fire. He swears a quiet whimper fills his ears. Most likely his. “God, I’m trying hard not to fuck you against this door right now.”

His stomach flips at that.

Fuck. Chester wants to fuck him. He wants to fuck him against this door. Where people could easily find them.

Jesus Christ, he has the same mind as him. This shouldn’t turn him on as much as he should.

That’s when his brain comes swinging in, trying its best to push his arousal out.

They’re actually going to have sex. Chester wants to have sex with him. Mike’s going to have sex with Chester, his friend and roommate. Who deserves better than sex than somebody like Mike. Who shouldn’t be indulging in a one-night stand with.

This is a mistake. He shouldn’t have—God, what are they doing? What is Mike doing?

He should stop this. Stop this before this could get out of hand. He managed to seize his sanity back. Now he can—

“Hey,” Chester’s soft voice cuts through his thoughts. His tone has returned to normal, levelled to a more assuring one. “We can stop here if you don’t want to go any further.”

Mike averts his gaze, gluing his eyes to the floor. He fucked this up. Now Chester doesn’t want to have sex with him because he ruined it all. He ruined the mood and he ruined their relationship.

That’s what they should be doing, right? Before things get out of hand.

But it’s not what he wants.

He shakes his head. “No. I do want this. I want you.”

And he does. He really does. He wants Chester’s touch to burn him. He wants Chester’s lips to
devour him whole. He wants to be the sole reason Chester reaches his climax. He wants everything Chester could offer him.

But does he deserve it? Could he satisfy his needs, much less make him orgasm? Mike hasn’t had sex in years. He’s so rusty that nobody would give two shits about—

“Mike,” Chester says. “I don’t want you to feel pressured to do something you don’t wanna do.”

“I do want to,” Mike insists, finally looking Chester square in the eye. “I do want this. With you. I was just overthinking, that’s it.”

As always half-lies do the trick. Chester seems to buy it. “I’m not gonna hurt you,” he says, leaning back in Mike’s space. He drops his gaze down to Mike’s lips, worrying his own with his teeth. “We don’t need to go all the way.” He tilts his head to the side to rest his lips close to Mike’s ear. “Just… Tell me to stop and I will.”

The move reminds Mike of what Ryan had done to Chester not long ago. He wonders if he did that to elicit a reaction out of Mike or—

No, he shouldn’t be thinking of that douchebag right now. Right now, Chester’s here about to initiate sex with him. And here he is thinking about that creepy weasel.

“Wait,” Mike interrupts, trying to piece his befuddled mind. “What about Ryan?”

He almost pulls away and bangs his head on the door. Ryan? Really Why didn’t he say the bar? Or Dave? Or anything that isn’t the bar. Why did he say Ryan? Why, why why?

God, he’s such a dumbass.

Mike could hear the smile in Chester’s whisper. A hand slithers up his shoulder. “Fuck Ryan.”

That sets him off. Resting his palm behind Chester’s head, Mike crashes his lips against Chester’s. A throaty groan slips out of Chester as he tightens his latch on Mike’s shoulders. He takes the opportunity of Chester’s parted lips to slip his tongue between them.

At this rate, they’re not going to get that door open. Mike’s at a point that he doesn’t care about anything in the universe, even if there’s a massive meteor’s approaching or a tornado heading their way. It still won’t matter. Fuck the meteor and the tornado. Fuck the bar. Fuck Ryan. Fuck his self-esteem and hatred.

Chester wants him. That’s all that matters now.

“Ches,” Mike breathes as Chester resumes his attention on Mike’s reddened shoulder. This time he softly nips at it, an act that’s driving Mike to the point of insanity. He’s going to start grinding onto him if he doesn’t stop. The last thing he wants is to do that. He wants more than a heated makeout session and clothed grinding. “Door. Gotta… God, fuck— Door.”

With one last bite and a flicker with his tongue, Chester pulls away. Mike doubts he’ll ever get enough of the sinful grin he flashes him.

It takes him several seconds or centuries to get the goddamn door open. But once it is, Chester’s lips and tongue find his again as they stagger inside.

“Where?” Chester asks breathlessly, breaking their kiss. They’re both still clutching one another in the dark, neither bothered turning the lights on.
“Bedroom.”

A quiet chuckle rumbles out of Chester. “Why not the couch?”

Mike tries to give this a good thought, his brain clouded with lust. It’s definitely big enough to house the both of them.

“Don’t wanna traumatize anybody who sits there.”

Despite his eyesight having adjusted in the dark, Mike could hardly make out Chester’s wolfish grin. “Well, then we won’t tell them.”

Mike shakes his head, even if there’s a part of him that wouldn’t mind. He’d be lying if he said couch sex isn’t one of his fantasies when he jerks off.

But if this is going to be the one chance that he might have Chester all to himself, he’s going to this the right way.

“Bedroom.”

“Yours or mine?”

“Anybody’s good.”

A hand slips between Mike’s, lacing them together. He allows Chester to lead him into his bedroom.

Even here, they don’t bother flipping the light switch on. While Mike would love to get a good look of Chester's lust on his face, there’s something enticing about being intimate in the dark.

“Okay,” Chester murmurs underneath his breath.

Their mouths are on another again as they stumble towards the bed. Mike could barely keep up with everything, his brain pooling further. All he could feel is heat and sparks and it’s messing with his ability to think. The only thing he could do is allow his arousal take control, leading his hands down south and under Chester’s cotton T-shirt. Chester inhales sharply at the contact.

He’s warm. Goddamn warm and smooth. As Mike inches forward, he could feel the rough folds of his stomach. He lightly swipes his thumbs over Chester’s hardened nipples, dragging a gruff groan from his roommate.

Suddenly, the warmth of Chester’s body dissipates and before he knows it, Mike's lying on soft cotton sheets. It’s a good thing that he decided to take things to the bedroom. It wouldn’t be good for his back to land on his PlayStation controllers.

Chester towers over his body, planting an arm next to Mike's head, another reaching forward to cradle Mike’s cheek, thumbing his lips. It’s distracting, scorching Mike with each stroke. “How far do you want to go?”

“How far do you want to go?” Mike shoots back before he tilts forward to bring Chester’s thumb between his lips, sucking slowly.

Maybe he’s not off his game after all if Chester’s squirming on top of him. Which doesn’t help things. All it does is just stiffens Mike's member.

“Fuck,” Chester breathes as he grinds his clothed arousal against Mike's. “You're killing me, man. Jesus, who knew you're like this in bed. And also, I asked you that first.”
Mike almost bucks his hips forward, desperate for friction. Frankly, he’d like to go all the way. He wants Chester inside of him, or him in Chester. Anything as long as he could feel it all. If this is a one-time thing, they should go all the way.

With a loud pop, Mike releases Chester’s thumb, which is now lightly coated in saliva. “Whatever you can offer me.”

“Well,” Chester leans forward as he pulls his shirt off him. If it’s possible, Mike’s mind descends further down into hell. If only the lights are on, then Mike could savour them. “I guess we’ll figure it out as we go along.”

Something in his words snap Mike back into lust. He pushes himself to sit up, as Chester moves to straddle his lap. They meet halfway, their lips and hands on each other again.

In the midst of it all, Mike’s stripped of his shirt. Both of their hands descends down, marking as much skin as they can. Chester’s the one who starts with his mouth first, angling his head downwards to mouth at Mike’s left nipple. A loud hisses forces itself out of Mike as Chester’s cool tongue laves at it.

“Fuck,” Mike cries out, his hands cradling Chester’s head in place as he laps at them. Just like that, his nipples are hardening. Jesus fuck. “Please, fuck. Please.”

“God, you feel so good,” Chester murmurs between licks. “I’ve… Fuck.”

Mike gasps, Chester’s words turning him on further. He’s never been this lost in desire ever. Not with Mark, Anna or any other person he’s had sex with. Just having Chester’s mouth on his nipples was a better feeling than any other blowjob or penetration he’s gotten. It’s all too overwhelming, too much.

Chester pulls away, his dark gaze flickering up to meet Mike’s. A soft whine escapes Mike. “What do you want?”

“Anything,” Mike breathes. If he could actually think coherently, he would’ve slap himself for blabbering all this shit out. “Just… Fuck.”

“You want me to fuck you?” Chester turns away to swirl his tongue around Mike’s other nipple, bringing out another set of mumbling from him. His teeth nibbles at it, making Mike cry out. “Or…you fuck me. I’m good with either. Unless…”

That’s it. He needs it.

Pushing Chester away from his chest, Mike’s hands fly down towards Chester’s jeans, eager to rid of them. The problem with Chester is that he always buys the skinniest jeans. While it has provided Mike with quite a view countless of times, it’ll certainly be a nightmare to get it off him.

But goddamn, it’s such a bitch to pull of him and—

A quiet laugh sounds from Chester. “Here, let me do it.”

He takes his time too, popping the button as slowly as he can. Chester’s eyes never leave Mike as he tugs the zipper lower and lower and…

“Fuck,” Mike growls. “I’m gonna rip it off you if you don’t hurry up.”

“Patience,” Chester coos, shimmying out of his jeans. His hips are hypnotic, moving in the most
slowest and—

Fuck, it’s too slow. This is taking way too long.

As soon as he sees a peek of stripes, Mike slips a hand inside, grasping Chester’s length.

It’s been a while since Mike held a cock in his hand and for a scary moment, he’s afraid that he doesn’t know how to give a proper handjob. But as soon as Chester gasps into Mike’s ear, his reflexes kick in. He jerks him slowly, thumbing the slit every time he reaches the tip. Chester’s head drops to rest on Mike’s shoulder, breathing soft moans and kisses into his collarbone. Mike wants to bottle it up, to keep all of Chester’s excited sounds in his mind forever. Sounds he wants to hear for the rest of his life.

And finally he has him. All to himself. Even if it's for tonight. Just tonight. He has him.

Chester’s lips are back on his as Mike continues his stroking, plunging his tongue back into Mike’s mouth.

He’s his. For tonight, Chester is his. All of him is his.

“Mike,” Chester says, sounding out of breath. His chest heaves, drawing Mike’s attention down to his tattoos for a brief moment. He gently pries Mike’s hand off his member. It’s wet.

Fuck, Mike got him wet. He managed to make Chester wet. How the hell did he do that? He hasn’t had sex in god knows how long and he hasn’t even—

A surprised gasp tumbles out his lips as he finds his own trousers and boxers being pulled down from his waist. Chester’s now kneeling down on the bed, having gotten Mike’s last articles of clothing down past knees. He recoils slightly at his erection being exposed to the cooler air.

This could only mean one thing.

“Wait!” Mike starts. Shivers tremble down his spine as Chester glances up at him. It’s the hottest thing he’s ever had the pleasure of seeing in his life. Chester, on his knees, watching him with the sultriest look ever. It’s amazing how long he’s managed to last. “Ches, you don’t—”

“It’s okay,” Chester whispers as he draws Mike’s legs over the edge of the bed. “I want this. I want to watch you lose yourself to me like this. Let me feel you like this. We can stop if you—”

“Fuck,” Mike interrupts. He doesn’t think he could stop here, not when he’s on his way to coming. He needs that and the only person he wants to give him that is Chester. “Don’t stop.”

Don’t ever stop. Don’t make this a one-time thing. I don’t know what I’ll do—

“You want me to suck you off?” Chester continues, voice low as he closes the distance between his lips and Mike’s erection.

A pleasurable ache hits Mike like a cannonball, his thoughts flying out the window. He almost thrusts his cock right into Chester’s mouth. He needs him, needs Chester to take him in deep, to brush his teeth across his length, to suck him dry, to bring his previous fantasies to life.

“Yes,” he breathes out, half-certain Chester doesn’t hear him.

But then Chester leaning forward, slowly taking him into between his wanting lips. Mike has to stop himself from rocking his hips into his mouth. He almost latches his grip onto Chester’s hair but
clutches the sheets underneath him instead.

It’s hot and wet. Desire was building in the pits of his stomach, steadily rising as Chester sucks him in, lapping at his length. He’s only done a couple of sucks and Mike was already losing his grip on reality.

It’s been so long, so long since he felt lips over him like that. And it’s been worth the drought. Because Chester is different. He’s reinventing pleasure for Mike. And god is it all worth it. He’ll definitely think otherwise tomorrow, but fuck not now. Not fucking now.

“Fuck,” Mike bites out, taking every part of him not to push himself deeper into Chester. He doesn’t want to choke him. At the same time, his hands fly over to Chester’s head, running his fingers through his cropped mane. There isn’t much to grapple onto but it provides him with another sensation that contributes to his mounting pleasure.

Chester’s tongue swirl around the tip of Mike’s dick. A loud groan tears out of him.

“Please, fuck.” Chester bobs his head, taking him deeper and fuck, it’s so hot. So fucking hot. Mike groans, removing his fingers from his hair to push the back of his head. “God, yes. Please...”

It’s all too much. He’s losing it. There’s too much shocks and heat building inside him and he can’t take it. He can’t, he can’t, he can’t—

“Ches, please,” he whimpers, scooting a little closer. He needs more. He needs to get closer, so much closer. He could feel his dick slipping in deeper, getting hotter, getting wetter, getting, getting,—

He’s going to come. At any moment, he’s going to spill in Chester’s mouth. As much as he wants to let Chester taste him, there’s a greater want, a greater fantasy he wants fulfilled.

“Wait, wait.” Mike gently eases Chester off his arousal. He makes a mistake of watching Chester pull away, his puffy lips coated in saliva and pre-cum. Mike’s own pre-cum. He almost spills right there and then. “I need to... I need to grab some stuff.”

Chester narrows his eyes in confusion. “Grab what?”

“You know...” Mike clears his throat. “Lube. Condoms. Stuff.”

While he does keep a bottle of lube in his room, Mike's unsure if he has condoms though. He might have a couple lying around but they’re probably passed their expiration date.

God, has it been that long since he got laid?

“Oh...” Jumping to his feet, Chester heads over to his closet, kneeling on the floor as he paws through his things in the dark. “I have some.” He glances back at Mike’s arched eyebrow. “A man has needs, you know.”

It’s not the lube that he’s worried about. Not that he should be worried about any of this shit in the first place. Whoever Chester fucked before all this isn’t Mike’s business.

But whatever, he’s Mike and the haze in his head has cleared a little so he can’t help but ask before he’s an insecure idiot.

“You mean since I moved in here? Nah. I...sorta did a couple of days before I came down here.” Chester harrumphs as he gets to his feet with his found items. “Nobody noteworthy though, so don't
worry. All I want is you now.”

Mike nods, not knowing how to reply to that. On one hand, he’s relieved that Chester hasn’t slept with anybody since they got here, which is pretty shallow of him. On the other, he’s flattered that he’s going to be the first person Chester would be sleeping with in months.

“So,” Chester starts. “How do you want this?”

“Um…” Immediately, his nerves flood in, battling with his lust for dominance. Why is Chester asking him to be the one calling the shots? Why can't he decide what Mike should do so he wouldn't fuck up?

Frankly if he isn’t such a sucker for his doubts and nerves, Mike would drag Chester onto the bed, turn him around, and take him from behind.

But would he like that? What if he mess things up? What if he ruins it all? What if he can’t make Chester orgasm? What if—?

“Mike,” Chester interrupts again. Mike could feel the other side of the bed dipping. “Don’t overthink this. None of this has to be perfect. Just be in the moment.”

A hand on his shoulder makes him twist his body behind. Chester’s fixing him with a soft gaze, full of trust and want. “Be with me,” he whispers, holding out the lube bottle and the condom packet.

Mike inhales deeply. Be with Chester in the moment. That’s what he’s been doing so far, before they stopped for a moment.

Yeah, he could do that again. He could be in the moment. He could shut his brain off and be in the moment.

Just him and Chester. Just Mike and Chester being in the moment.

Yeah, he could do that.

Gingerly, he takes the items in his hands.

“You’ll tell me if I’ll hurt you, right?”

Chester nods firmly, his faith unwavering.

“Okay… Okay. I’m gonna...stretch you first.” Mike swings his legs off the bed, getting to his feet. His body is tingling. Due to nerves or excitement, he has no clue.

It could be both, he thinks as he sticks his fingers into his mouth, coating them with saliva. His eyes trail down Chester’s heaving chest as he shucks the last of his clothes off, exposing his erection to the air.

It could also be the fact that it’s Chester. He’s going to stick his fingers in Chester. And after that, they’re going to fuck for real.

God, this is all too much.

“I know my dick looks great. I’d say it’s pretty but I don’t know if dicks are supposed to be pretty.”

Mike couldn’t help but roll his eyes. Even in bed, Chester’s going to be a shit about things. Then again, he’s Chester Bennington for a reason.
Man, he can't wait to reduce him to a mess.

“Oh shut up. Just come over here.”

“Tsk, tsk. Getting pushy, are we?” Chester shifts into position. “Anyway, fuck how things should be. If I think dicks can be pretty, they can be pretty. Yours is the prettiest, by the way.”

Mike could feel his face heat up further, which is miraculous considering his whole body is already burning like a furnace. Not to mention, the electricity ignited in his body. Every neuron inside of him is ready to push into overdrive.

“Shut up. You can’t see it. It’s too dark.”

Chester laughs. “Well, it looks good in the dark.”

As he slips a finger into Chester, Mike keeps his head trained on him, seeking for any indication of pain. All he gets are shut eyes and a quiet moan.

“How does it feel?”

“Good,” Chester breathes, nodding vigorously. He shifts on the spot, grinding against Mike’s finger as Chester toys with his own erection. Mike has to hold back a moan of his own as he presses deeper. Chester’s tight as he thought it’ll be and god, it feels just right. Tight and right.

“No, don’t touch yourself,” Mike whispers. He’s not sure why he’s whispering. There’s only the both of them here. And maybe their neighbours but whatever, fuck the neighbours. He's too aroused to care. “I’m going to make you come myself. Not like this. Not yet.”

Chester pauses his stroking, flashing him a smirk. “Is that a promise, Shinoda?”

Mike grins as he adds another finger, coaxing a louder groan and several calls of his name. It’s amazing how he could make Chester Bennington writhe like that, reduce Chester Bennington into a salacious mess.

To think Mike Shinoda would be on his knees finger-fucking his roommate tonight. To think he'd be finger-fucking his roommate at all, the one he thought an immature and nosy chatterbox.

Life is strange like that, he supposes.

“Please,” Chester is blabbering now, pressing further down on Mike’s thrusting digits. “Take me now. Fuck, I need you inside me. Fucking hell… Please.”

God, he’s begging now. Chester Bennington is begging him, Mike Shinoda, to fuck him. He’s heard his fair share of urging from his previous lovers. But not like this. Not as urgently as Chester is doing now.

Then again, Mike isn’t often given the opportunity to be the dominant one in sex. Especially with Mark because well, he’s Mark.

“How do you want this?” Mike asks keeping his eyes on Chester as he extracts his soaked fingers. He couldn’t help but slip them between his lips, tasting salt on his tongue. Chester visibly swallows as his chest heaves. “How’d you want me to fuck you? On the bed? Bend you over the table? Against the wall? All of them are pretty good ideas too.”

“Fuck Mike, since when d’you have such a dirty mouth?” Chester plops his back on the bed. “Not
that I’m complaining. Just something I didn’t expect out of you.”

Mike shrugs his shoulders as he pulls the condom packet open, his heart racing at the anticipation of having his fantasy being brought to life. “Just a kink of mine.”

“An kink of yours, huh?” Chester’s teasing tone shifts to a more wanton one. “Any way you want. I don’t care. As long as you fuck me good. I want to come so hard, come for you.”

It’s a frustrating answer. A frustrating and an arousing one. But whatever. If Chester won’t tell him how to do this, he’ll figure this out himself.

Mike hums in thought. He could do what he’s been waiting to do. Fulfill his masturbatory fantasies and all that.

Or...

“What’s your favourite position?”

He expects a cocked eyebrow and a question. Instead, Chester bares his teeth at him, spins around and positions himself on his hands and knees, his ass in the air.

If he thought he couldn’t get any harder, he definitely does at that simple act alone.

Apparently Chester’s favourite position is the same as Mike’s fantasy? Life is strange. A good strange. A pleasurable strange.

A laugh bubbles out of Chester as Mike fumbles to put the condom on. “I know you’re excited and all. But we have time. There’s no rush.”

Mike huffs as he covers his hand with lube, the scent of watermelon filling his nostrils. “You’re one to talk,” he replies as he coats his condom-covered cock with it. “You’re the one on the bed with your ass in the air. I gotta lube up. Plus, it’s dark.”

“We could do without it,” Chester jokes. Mike does another eye-roll as he positions himself behind him. The tip of Mike’s cock brushes against the crack of Chester’s ass. His breath hitches as Chester pushes against him, grinding himself on Mike. “Fuck, just put yourself in me. I need you right now. Stop being such a fucking tease.”

“I’m not— I’m not teasing,” Mike replies, his voice coming off shakily, almost rutting against Chester’s squirming ass.

This is it. He’s finally going to do this, going to act out what he’s thought of doing for so long. All those times he’s denied himself and questioned his sanity for visualizing fucking his roommate. This all ends here.

He couldn’t help but roam his hands all over Chester’s back first. If only he could actually see Chester’s tattoos. Right now is a good time for him to get a better—

“Mike,” Chester whines. “Stop holding out on me. Just fuck me. I can’t take any of this.”

He almost bites back a “I’m not holding out on you” but that doesn’t seem appropriate to his brain now. So all Mike does is ease himself inside slowly, making sure he doesn’t hurt Chester.

It’s a strange feeling to be sheathed inside somebody after years of not doing so. But it’s a good feeling. He thinks. It’s good for him. But Chester...
Chester has tensed up a little and fuck, he better not have messed up. He better not be in pain.

Did he lubricate himself enough? Should he pull out? Fuck, fuck fuck.

“Ches?” he asks, craning his neck. He could feel beads of sweat trailing down the side of his head. He’s already perspiring and they haven’t actually fucked yet. “You okay?”

Chester nods, clutching the sheets beneath them. “Yeah. Just a little uncomfortable. You know how it is. Keep going.”

Mike does, pressing forward cautiously. The more animalistic part of him is dying to simply shove himself in him. He can’t. He doesn’t want to cause Chester pain, let all of finish before it should. He wants to take his time to devour Chester’s moans and relish in the heat surrounding him.

“Okay, you can move.” Chester shifts himself against Mike, pushing Mike deeper inside him. Mike groans, his grip latching onto either side of his thigh, easing himself. “Just move faster, goddamnit.”

This is too much, too tight, too hot. He wants this to last, wants this moment to last. And Chester is making everything so goddamn hard.

“You’re so bossy,” Mike remarks as he pulls out and thrusts back in. “You’re—” A pleasurable thrill rushes through his body. “Fuck, you’re so tight. Jesus fuck.”

He’s definitely not going to last, not when he’s feeling this electrified, this heated. Just being inside Chester is exhilarating, addicting. He’s on the verge of bursting of falling off the precipice of the cliff. And god, he’s so close on doing just that.

His hips quicken its pace, slipping in easier than before. For a split second, he almost stops, fearing of hurting Chester. But then he hears him call his name, hears him to fuck him harder.

And that's what he does.

“Touch yourself,” Mike hisses. “Touch yourself for me.”

“Shit Mike,” Chester exhales out, his hand wrapped around his own erection, jerking supposedly in time with Mike’s pounding. “Fuck, you feel so good. So— Oh fuck, please. Please, please, please.”

If Mike isn’t wrapped up in his own gratification, he would’ve ordered him to lower his voice. What if Joe is already home? What if their other neighbours start banging on their door, demanding them to shut up?

Right now, he can't figure out what he'll do. He's too wrapped up in the moment, of being in the moment.

As he plunges in Mike bends forward, pressing his lips against Chester’s ear. “Tell me how this feels,” he breathes.

Chester’s wordless moaning intensifies. Mike winces at its ferocity. He probably found his prostate.

But it's so addicting. Listening to Chester's screaming is music to his ears. Hell, Chester’s moaning alone is intoxicating on its own. The fact that Mike could make him feel this way, get him to call his name out is such a thrill on its own. And he craves for more.

“I didn’t hear you.”

Chester doesn’t reply for another several seconds, only the sounds of slapping skin and heavy
“Good,” he finally gasps, tilting his head to the side. Mike could barely make out the lust reflected in his eyes. “So fucking— Fuck me harder, Jesus.”

“Good,” Mike echoes as he tightens his grip, digging his nails into Chester’s skin. He’s so close. It’s been so long and he’s not going to last, fuck. He’s so close, so fucking close to coming. “Tell me how close you are.”

Chester groans, dropping his head onto the bed. “So fucking close. Please, Mike. Please, I’m so close! I’m going to come, fuck.”

“So am I,” Mike growls. “Call my name. Come for me, fuck. Chester, come for me. Fuck.”

That’s all Chester needs to intensely spill onto the bed sheets. He does so with an ear-piercing scream. Mike follows a second after, finishing with crying out Chester's name. A soft whimper tumbles out of Mike as he feels Chester convulse under him. His grip gradually loosens as he slumps his stomach over Chester’s back.

Never has he had an orgasm as fierce as this. He’s had more physically intense sex but what he just felt wasn’t like all those times. Sex with Chester is different. A good different.

The only problem is that it didn’t last as long as he would’ve like. But then again, he hasn’t had sex in years.

Pulling out off Chester, Mike flops on his back, inhaling as much air as he can. Right now, he doesn’t want to move a muscle, let alone leave this bed. He hardly cares that he still has a soiled condom on. His body and bones limp and sated, sinking into the plush mattress. He’ll be getting a goodnight’s sleep from all that.

And it’s all thanks to Chester. Chester who could put a smile on his face at any time of the day. Chester who’s ready to listen to him and respects him for who he is. Chester who took him to highs he never thought he’d reach.

Chester who deserves better than him.

The gears in his brain are already sluggish from the past minutes (or hour, Mike has no clue) comes to a halt.

What has he done? What has he fucking done?

He fucked Chester. Took him from behind and— and—

“Wow. Holy fuck,” he hears Chester’s awed whisper next to him.

Mike dares himself a look. Chester’s eyes are transfixed on him, glazed in satisfaction, weariness, and adoration. Mike never thought any of those three emotions would be elicited because of him.

Chester adores him. Chester adores the hell out of him, enough to let him fuck him.

Mike’s pulse begins to accelerate even further against his chest.

“You’re amazing, Mike,” Chester continues, pressing a kiss onto Mike’s nose. His eyelids flutter shut, savouring the feathery touch. “I’ve never… Fuck, I don’t think I have the words to describe how much I loved that.”
He loved that. Chester loved what they did. He loved that.

Does that mean this wouldn’t be a one-time thing? Would Chester want to continue with whatever this is?

Jesus fuck, this is too much. This is all too much.

“Ches,” Mike mumbles out as he opens his eyes again. “I… About just now— The bar, I—”

“We can talk about it tomorrow,” Chester murmurs as he peppers him with soft kisses down his cheek, stopping at his lips. Snaking a palm around Mike’s body, he presses him flush against him, kissing him tenderly. He tastes of smoky nicotine and salty sweat. Mike’s never felt so at home in his life.

Home. Now he understands why Chester could feel in such a way.

But does he deserve that home? He could call a palace home but that doesn’t make him fit to call it such if he isn’t a king, right?

He doesn’t have time to muse about that stupid analogy because Chester is trying to pull the condom off him.

“Let me,” Mike insists, swatting Chester's hand away so he can tie it up and toss it in the garbage can.

He should get out of here, return to his room and piece out what the hell just happened between them. It's obvious that their world has shifted. If he'll be around Chester, he'll definitely be thinking about his touch, his moans, his heat.

He needs to figure all this out, fuck because this is all happening too fast.

But Chester is beckoning him over and like a magnet, he heads over. As Mike settles beneath the covers, Chester pulls him close and intertwines their legs.

“Goodnight, Mikey,” Chester whispers as he buries his face in the crook of Mike’s neck. He says something else. Mike thinks it's "I love you".

He's out of his mind, obviously. Both out of his mind and tired as all hell.

As he feels Chester’s breathing steady against him, all Mike could think about is that home is not something he deserves and that’s an established fact. And Chester needs to know that.

But he’ll worry about that later. Right now, he needs some sleep because goddamn, what a night.
When Mike’s eyelids flutter open, he expects to wake up to the sun high up in the sky, light filtering through the drapes.

Instead, he rises to darkness. It must be in the middle of the night, or at least the early hours of the morning, which means he has more time to sink back into blissful sleep. Mike would’ve done that if he hadn’t realized that there’s a pair of arms around his naked waist.

*Wait, what?*

He almost leaps out of bed in surprise, ready to kick whoever it is off the bed and demand why the hell they’re both naked.

But then every moment that happened before comes flooding through his mind. That’s Chester snuggling up against him, his dick pressing against the swell of his ass. Because they had sex. And before that, Mike threw a hissy fit, said shit he shouldn’t have said, and they made out in a stinky alley.

Just wonderful. Just fucking wonderful.

His brain switches towards action. He needs to go. Everything is all confusing and god, he shouldn’t have slept with Chester. Chester isn’t his to take.

With a quiet intake of breath, Mike gently pries the arm off him. He could feel his heartbeat accelerating, thumping loudly against his skin. It’d be a miracle if Chester doesn’t hear it.

Chester doesn’t wake to that. He wakes to Mike trying to untangle his legs from his.

“Mike?” the voice behind him asks groggily. He freezes, his heart squeezing against his rib cage. “Where’re you going?”

He’s been caught. He’s been fucking caught.

Oh god. Oh fucking god.

He should turn around and give Chester a well-constructed and thought out explanation about why he’s trying to roll out of bed. To take a piss, redress because it’s too cold, wash the sweat and come off himself.

As always he doesn’t. Instead, he yanks himself away and throws the covers from his body. The
sharp sting of summer heat hits his body like a wave. It doesn’t stop him from dashing off the bed and scouring for his clothes in the dark.

Which itself is a really bad idea because he might be thumbing Chester’s jeans and, fuck where’s his red plaid shirt? It’s one of his favourite shirts and he’s not going to leave it lying on Chester’s floor while he freaks out in his own room goddamn—

“Mike,” Chester repeats. Mike could feel him towering behind him. Knowing him, he’d want to pull Mike into his arms and comfort him.

“It’s not here,” Mike finds himself babbling. “It’s not fucking here.”

“What’s not here?”

“My shirt!” he cries out, twisting his body behind. He could barely make out Chester’s face in the dark but he could tell the concern radiating off him. From the outside, he definitely looks like he’s lost his mind. And maybe he has. “I can’t fucking find it! I need to go and I can’t leave without it and—”

“Okay, okay,” Chester cuts in, still utilizing a gentle tone. ”Let me turn the lights on.”

With a flicker, the room is suddenly flooded with light. On instinct, Mike squints through the glaring illumination.

“Here, I found your clothes.”

Several articles of clothing fall in front of him. Mike tilt his head downwards as he pries his eyelids wider while trying to ignore the burning sensation on his eyes. Lo and behold, his red plaid, his black trousers and matching boxer shorts.

“Thanks,” he mumbles out as he gathers them into his arms. The best thing to do is put them on. Doing the walk of shame back is less embarrassing with clothes on. But his room is across the hall and the sooner he gets out of here, the better he feels.

As usual, Chester doesn’t let things go easily. The hand he lays on his shoulder stops Mike in his tracks.

“Mike,” he begins, his voice soft. “Look at me.”

He doesn’t.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong.”

“You freaked out,” Chester says quietly. “I don’t think that everything’s fine.”

“It’s nothing.”

He could hear Chester heave a sigh. “Is this because we had—?”

Mike whirs around, his eyes finally adjusted enough to be wide opened. He makes sure to focus his gaze above Chester’s collarbone because the last thing he needs is reminders of before. “Can we just... Can we just forget about what happened... Before?”

Chester’s eyebrows dip into a frown. “Us having sex?”
Mike’s about to fire a harsh retort at him because he's way too calm about the whole thing when his eyes decide to trail upwards. There’s pain written behind Chester's eyes, maybe even desperation and worry. Suddenly guilt hits Mike like a trainwreck.

He’s reverting, he’s regressing to the self he loathed with every part of him. He's on the verge of blowing up towards somebody he cares about. He's losing himself all over again.

His gaze flicker down to his bare feet, his answer soft and full of shame.

“Everything.”

“Mike—”

“It’s not a big deal,” Mike continues, hoping he sounds as dismissive as he thinks he’s being. “It was just sex. A one-off thing. We don’t need to worry about it. We were just horny and decided to sleep together. It’s nothing. Roommates probably do this pretty often and—”

“It wasn’t just sex to me.”

Mike freezes, his eyebrows knitting together. Did he hear that right? Did he hear Chester right? It’s not unbelievable. After all, he had his suspicions.

But the way he said it... He was firm and unwavering, like he’s so sure about his feelings, how he feels for Mike.

No, this can’t be true. Chester can’t be attracted to him, can't be in love with him. He can’t.

“Did you regret it?” Chester’s voice cutting through his thoughts.

Mike fiddles with the hem of his shirt, sinking a tooth onto his bottom lip.

Truthfully, it’s complicated for him. He does like it. He likes it a hell lot. It’s hands down the best sex he’s had since... Well, god knows since the sex he remembers doesn’t compare to the one they had. Then again, it’s been a while since he did it.

But sex with Chester means complication and complication means Mike can’t do this.

So yeah, he kind of regrets it and not at the same time.

God, he’s such a mess.

“Did I...do something wrong? Did I...?”

Mike’s eyelids squeeze shut. No, it’s not you. It's me. Don’t blame yourself. It's not you. It's me, it's me, it's me, it’s—

He shakes his head vehemently. “Not now. I can’t... I’m sorry, I have to go.” And he’s pulling away from Chester’s grasp and dashing into his room, locking the door shut behind him.

He can’t. Not now. It’s too early, the memories are too fresh in his head. All he could think about was the taste of nicotine against his tongue, the grazing of teeth against his skin, the warmth enveloping his cock, Chester hoarsely calling his name out—

His ears barely catch the sound of clothes dropping onto the floor. He exhales out of his nostrils,
slumping against his door with his face in his hands.

He fucked Chester. How could he let this happen? How could he, somebody that is undeserving of Chester, fuck him? And how could he himself let this happen?

No, he can’t. He can’t. He can’t. He can’t.

He needs to out of here. He needs to sort all of this shit out right now. Not later, not tomorrow.

Now.

Rising to his feet, he crosses over to turn his bedside lamp on before moving over to his closet to dress himself. As he pulls a hoodie over his head, his ears catch the rapid knocks on his door.

“Mike,” Chester calls from the other side. “Let’s talk. We need to talk about this.” His voice drops into a soft and desperate murmur. “Please don’t shut me out. Please talk to me.”

Mike’s heart cracks.

He’s shutting Chester out. He’s shutting Chester out like he has shut everybody he cares about like he has done countless times before.

This is not right. Especially Chester who was ghosted by somebody he cared about.

And Mike’s not Ryan. Mike will never be like Ryan.

But... But...

Fuck, he can't. He can't.

“Mike,” Chester breathes out when he pulls the doorknob. Thankfully for him, Chester is dressed himself in a wifebeater and a pajama pants. He didn’t think post-sex Chester would look this good. Even the dimly-lit room can’t hide his swollen lips, his slightly tousled hair, his glistening skin. All reminders of what they had done, which is the last thing Mike needs. He doesn’t need another reminder about what transpired between them. His brain is already feeding him too much of that shit already.

His lips part, apologies and explanations on the tip of his tongue. They don’t come out.

So all he could do is push past Chester and out of his apartment, out of his building, out of Chester’s life because that’s all he’s good at.

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*Got a tattoo and the pain’s alright*
“Piece of fucking shit,” Mike growls as he reaches over to shut his player off. Of course the album lodged in his fucking player would be the breakup/heartbreak album. Of fucking course.

Everything reminds him of Chester. The songs, the Rubik’s cube on the passenger’s seat, the the shadows cast by the lampposts.

Mike exhales through his nostrils as he stops at a red light, space for him to finally think.

He’s in love with him. He’s in love with Chester.

It’s not the first time it’s hit him. It’s hit him many times before. When Chester was standing up for him, in the hotel bathroom, on the dance floor, when he woke up hungover. But Mike always chased them off and repressed them, never bothering to give it another analysis. Because after all, what are the odds that Chester would love him like that?

But he does. At least, has some form of romantic feelings for him. Mike still finds that surreal. He shouldn’t. Mike gave him hell since the moment they met, dragged him in the drama that is his past. Chester should’ve ran away.

But he stayed. He stayed and fell in love with him.

He loves him. Chester loves him and wants him the way he is. Everybody he was with wanted him to be a certain way. Mark wanted him broken and bruised, Anna wanted him to be more emotionally-present and expressive, and so forth. Each of his exes wanted him to be somebody he wasn’t, to be the perfect model of their dreams.

But not Chester. Chester wants him the way he is, the good and the bad. He loves him for who he is.

He saw the darker side of him and didn’t run.

It’s surreal. Everything is surreal.

Why couldn’t he have met Chester first? Then he wouldn’t be so jaded. They would’ve been wonderful together, without all the pain and the shit they had to endure.

But life is unfair but hey, things should be fine now, shouldn’t they? Chester’s in love with Mike and Mike’s in love with Chester. They should be an item at this point.

As much as Mike wants to do just that, there’s another part of him that isn’t ready yet. It’s almost there, ghosting that finishing line. For some reason, he can’t plant his foot forward.

He shakes his head vehemently, turning his stereo back on. Music might be a better alternative than listening to himself wail about himself, even if the music itself is doing the wailing for him.

However, he doesn’t have to wait long because soon after, he finds himself pulling up in front of a modest house. Brad’s house, to be exact.

If anybody could help him deal with everything, it’ll be Brad. Sure, he’ll start motherhenning and being an impatient asshat about everything but Chester’s the topic of his problems and Joe lives right next door to them. Chester could swing by.

There’s Talinda but she’s much closer to Chester. For all Mike knows, she’d just haul his ass. Which is what he needs but she’ll be bias about it all.
So Brad it is. Maybe it’s a good thing. Maybe tough love is what he needs at the moment.

He doesn’t budge from the seat yet, choosing to soak the music in for another minute. Just another minute more, damage himself, lose himself for another minute.

_Tell me you love me_ 
_If you don’t then lie_ 
_Oh lie to me_

With a heavy sigh, Mike turns the ignition off.

When Mike was sure he had a good distance between his apartment, he had dialed his best friend’s number and ignored all of Chester’s four missed calls. Fortunately for him, Brad’s wide awake, having just finished filing paperwork. What makes things better is that his wife had taken their kids back to visit her parents for the weekend, which leaves them alone. One less reason to feel guilty of ruining another person’s night.

Brad’s a weird guy at night. Mike tries not to judge. After all, he’s always busy slaving at his work until the wee hours of the morning. And he’s seen Brad’s law stuff. He'll always admire the guy for being able to comprehend its contents.

But who makes dessert at midnight? Then again, Brad probably needs the sugar to himself going.

Tonight he’s made a chocolate chip cookie in a cast-iron skillet, topped with two large scoops of vanilla ice-cream. Maybe things wouldn't be so bad after all.

“Fuck man,” Mike remarks as Brad places the skillet in front of the both of them. “You were actually going to eat this by yourself?”

Brad huffs, pulling his Sesame Street mittens off his hands. “Hey, it’s my cheat day. Well, night.”

Mike rolls his eyes, resting his arms on the surface of Brad’s dining table. “Every night’s your cheat night.”

“Well, excuse me for wanting to treat myself every night.” Brad stifles a yawn as he slides into the seat opposite Mike. “So, what’s so important that you need to swing by my humble abode at...?” He sneaks a peek at the wall clock next to the fridge. To this day, Mike could hardly believe that the Delsons would have such a clock hanging in their dining room. “2.28am?”

Mike bites the corner of his lip. This is it. This is when he’s going to tell somebody that he’s in love again. That he’s in love with his roommate and he doesn’t know what to do. That he has ran to his best friend for advice on how to deal with the fact that he’s in love with the person who might feel the same, who he had the most incredible sex with just because he wants more.
It sounds so stupid, now that he thinks about it. Mike shouldn’t have ran out on Chester, shouldn’t have left him behind because of all that. They should’ve talked things out.

“Dude, you’re gonna wear my table down with all your finger drumming, Jesus Christ. I just got it waxed.”

Mike pauses in place, a flush creeping up his neck. “Sorry.”

Maybe this isn’t a great idea after all. It all seemed pretty sound in his head before. After all, he’s just trying to sort things out. He should’ve thought all of this through and not when he’s so groggy that he can’t make a rational decision. He has no need to crash Brad’s night or break Chester’s up.

“God, I’m a fuckup, aren’t I?”

“No, you’re not,” Brad answers instantly. His features soften. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to snap.”

“I know,” Mike replies miserably. He traces invisible patterns onto the wooden table, distracting him from literally dying in his best friend’s dining room. “So…uh… Chester and I slept together.”

There it is. Out there. In the open. First person that knows about it. Except maybe Joe who had bombarded him with countless messages suggesting the encounter. Mike hasn’t bothered firing any replies back to him.

He doesn’t expect saying it out loud to feel as heavy as it should, to hit him as hard as he feels.

As he expects, Brad exhales in relief, a broad grin spreading on his lips. “Fucking finally! This has been long overdue, jeez.” His elation slowly slides off his face. “Then, why—?”

With a heavy sigh, Mike tells him everything. Not of the night of the wedding and him opening up to Chester. Brad knows all of that. Instead, Mike tells him of Ryan, of what was going through his head at the bar, of his sexual encounter with Chester the night before, of his freakout. He tells him everything.

By the time he’s done spinning his tale, his tea has turned lukewarm and the whole cookie is covered in white liquid.

Brad finally reaches towards his cookie, spooning a huge helping between his lips. There’s a disappointed look on his face. Mike’s unsurprised. He’s in his Mother Hen mode again. Criticism-Heavy Mother Hen mode. “You bailed on Chester? Again?”

The way he says it makes Mike’s stomach turn. It’s like he’s in one of those police interrogation rooms or seated at a witness stand in a courtroom. He’s assuming that’s how it feels. He’s never been put in either one of those positions. Yet.

But that’s Brad’s effect on people sometimes, being a lawyer and all.

“Yeah…” Mike murmurs as he gingerly picks his own spoon up. “I know I shouldn’t have done that. I didn’t know what to do and so I ran off and I got in the car and I called you and…yeah.”

Brad surveys him wordlessly for a long moment before gesturing to his baked treat. “Eat. You’ll feel better.”

He doesn’t hesitate slipping a mouthful of cookie and ice-cream between his lips. It does make him feel better. Sweets always does for him. And the cookie is warm and soft and the chocolate is gooey. The ice-cream makes it sweeter than he’d like but hey, whatever Brad likes.
“It’s good.”

“Yeah,” Brad answers, sounding more distracted than he should. He’s usually all-ears when anybody says anything positive about his baking skills. “I know. Did you tell him where you are?”

Mike shakes his head. “He tried calling me and he texted me but I… I couldn’t pick up.”

Brad heaves a sigh, running fingers through his bushy mane. “You should’ve picked up,” he scolds. “He’s definitely worried sick about you. Fucking hell, Mike.”

“I know,” Mike replies apologetically. “I just...panicked. I didn’t know what to do! And I—”

As if on cue, Mike’s phone vibrates in his pocket. He stills.

It’s him. He’s sure.

Mike knows he should text him back, let him know that at least he’s safe. But doing the right thing doesn’t help wrestle down the anxiety bubbling inside him.

Brad cocks an eyebrow. “What?”

“Got—” Mike clears his throat, his voice breaking. “Got another text.”

His best friend nods, a solemn expression on. “Text him back.”

He’s steeling his glare, reminiscent of the scowls Mike’s father used to give him when he did something wrong. The problems with having your best and childhood friend being the same person.

With a loud sigh, Mike flips his phone out.

He scrolls downwards, away from Chester’s six previous messages. He could skim through them later.

*Mike, please tell me you’re okay. I know you’re scared but I really want us to work things out. It’s okay if you don’t feel the same way. I’m sorry if you were put on the spot. I didn’t mean to put you in that position. We seriously need to talk. Please don’t shut me out.*

Another text pops up as soon as Mike finished scanning through the previous part.

*Just let me know you’re safe.*

He’s worried about him. He’s worried about his safety. He’s worried that he’ll disappear from his life.

Just like Ryan did to him.

God fucking damn it. Guess Mike’s not that different from him, is he?

“Fuck,” he mumbles to himself, followed by several Japanese curses. He ignores Brad’s curious look, shooting Chester a reply.

*I’m so sorry for freaking out on you without letting you know. I’m safe. I’m with Brad now. I just have a lot to think about.*

Chester’s own answer is swift.
It’s much different than his previous messages which were genuine and heartfelt. This one feels cold and clipped, right to the heart of it. Then again, Mike shouldn’t be surprised. Chester’s reliving one of his worst nightmares. Only this time, Mike feels the same so he has no excuse for ghosting.

God, he’s the worst.

“I told him.”

“Good,” Brad says, sounding satisfied. “That’s one problem solved. Sorta.” Picking up his spoon, he stabs it into his cookie. “By the way if we ever spot this Ryan dude, please point him out so I can deck him.”

“He’s the least of my problems. I think.”

“I agree,” Brad replies, pointing his vanilla and cookie-coated spoon in Mike’s direction. “Fuck Ryan and fuck him for being some an ass to both you and Chester. I don’t care if Chester and him made up. He’s an asshat and he’s obviously up to something fishy.”

“Fishy?”

“I mean, he was being a creep,” he clarifies. “Like what the hell was he trying to pull at the bar?”

Mike shrugs his shoulders. “I don’t know,” he says meekly, poking at his food. “Make me jealous?”

“Well, regardless if that was his motive, it worked.” Mike opens his mouth but his best friend cuts him off. “And no denying it. You were jealous. There’s no other explanation for that kind of behaviour besides jealousy.”

“I could’ve been rushing home to water my plants.”

“You don’t have plants,” Brad replies indignantly. “And you wouldn’t blurt all that shit out to Chester.” Brad pauses to take another gulp from his coffee. “Also, I thought that kind of shit happens on TV.”

Mike tilts his head in agreement. “I mean, considering all the shit that has happened lately, life’s been pretty much a soap opera.”

“I second that.”

They lapse into silence, saved for their chewing and the ticking of the clock. For some reason, it unsettles Mike.

“I don’t get it.”

“Get what?”

Brad's in midst chewing when he replies. “You.”

Something stabs at his heart. Even if he didn’t mean to make it sound the way that Mike thinks he’s speaking in, it’s probably true. Brad means well, always does. He’s the kind of guy that doesn’t mince his words, be it in court or at home. It’s a good thing to have honest friends.

But god, he can be pretty brutal. Brutally honest. Having a brutally honest friend who also is a lawyer can suck sometimes.
Then again, he was seeking for some tough love. But it hasn’t worked before so why should it now? Because he’s changing?

Well, so much for changing. He's back to square one.

“I mean,” Mike begins, ducking his head. “I don’t get myself either so that makes the two of us.”

Another sigh. “Mike.”

“What?”

“Stop deflecting. That’s not what I meant and you know it.”

Mike lifts his head back up, meeting Brad’s arched eyebrow. “How’d you know that?”

“Because I’ve known you since we were kids. I know when you’re deflecting.”

Mike doesn’t respond to that, shoving more cookies and ice-cream into his mouth instead.

With another heavy sigh, Brad sets his spoon on the edge of the skillet. He’s fixing him a serious look, one that Mike’s all too familiar with. Brad’s going to burst into some kind of lecture and Mike would start groaning and god, why did he think this was such a good idea again?

“Look, Chester’s in love with you.” Mike opens his mouth to protest but Brad doesn’t let him.

“Don’t fight me on this. He said that it wasn’t just sex to him. It’s obvious what he’s implying. So it isn’t speculation anymore. And I know you’re in love with him too.” He’s earnest when he says this, leaning forward. “No matter how much you deny it to anybody, you’re in love with him. You wouldn’t have come to me telling all of this if you aren’t. If you didn’t feel the same way towards somebody, you would’ve flat out told them straight. So nothing should stop you from getting together with him, right? Not even that fucking creep. Which by the way, Chester said he isn’t into—

“Going off-topic here,” Mike points out flatly. “Again.”

“Okay, fine,” Brad concedes. “We can talk about me kicking this Ryan’s ass later. But seriously, why’re you denying yourself this? You and Chester being together, I mean. You’re in love with him, he’s in love with you. That should be the end of it, shouldn’t it?”

Mike exhales through his nostrils. “You’re simplifying things.”

“You’re complicating things,” Brad retorts. “You shouldn’t make love complicated.”

Mike couldn’t help but arch an eyebrow at that. He’s known Brad for most of his life and he’s said a bunch of weird and cheesy shit throughout the span of their friendship. This is undoubtedly one of them.

“Since when did you become such a romantic?”

“Since when did you become such a cynic?”

“Hey,” Mike defends. “I’ve always been a cynic.”

Brad sighs heavily, burying his face in his hands. Mike mentally slaps himself. He definitely should win an award for his tendency to deflect. Like a Nobel Prize or something of that caliber.

In all seriousness, he should put a stop to that. If he could be vulnerable with Chester, he can be
vulnerable with his best friend. Despite his harsh and direct methods, Brad has a good heart. He does genuinely care for Mike’s well-being.

Mike could barely recall the number of times he was truly vulnerable with his best friend. Sure, he’s confided in him many times throughout their friendship. But to really expose himself to him? Hell, he didn’t even tell Brad about the whole truth regarding Mark.

“I’m just…” He pauses, trying to piece the words in his head. “I don’t want to drag him down. He’s such a wonderful guy. Like, I don’t want to lose him. What if things don’t work out? What if he finally realizes I’m a mistake? And I mean… I don’t want him to…” Mike’s gaze drifts towards the skillet, watching the lump of ice-cream slowly dissolve into a puddle. “I don’t know.”

Brad clicks his tongue. “You don’t want him to waste his time on you?”

Mike knits his eyebrows as he takes in his suggestion. “Something like that? I don’t want him to spend all his time dealing with all my shit. He deserves better than that.” He could feel a lump form in his throat, constricting his windpipe. He’s not sure why. Maybe he’s overwhelmed by all these emotions and thoughts he had bottled up inside of him, that he’s finally admitting all this out loud, admitting his true feelings about the whole scenario to somebody that isn’t him. “He’s too good to be like me. And he’s too good to be with somebody like me. He deserves better.”

Silence befalls them again. It’s unsettling for Brad’s home to be this quiet. Then again, he hasn’t came around at this time of the day. Or night. Whatever it is.

“Mike, can I tell you something?” Brad pipes up. “Just something I’ve noticed over the past week and so.” A pause. “Well, not just me. Joe was thinking the same thing too.”

Mike trains a scowl at his friend. It’s not out of jealousy. He’s aware that the both of them have their closed-off conversations the same way he and Brad and he and Joe have. It’s only natural to have sub-friendships in a three-way one. He’s just wary about what they’re talking about behind his back.

“I’ll be honest,” Brad begins and Mike’s nerves shoot up. Nothing good ever comes up from a conversation that starts with words like that. Anna used to do that a lot when they were in mild disagreements.

This might be it. This is when Brad tells him that he doesn’t want to be his friend anymore, that Joe and him are done with all of his self-deprecating bullshit. He wouldn’t be surprised. He’s been wondering when that day would come when he’d be all alone.

Today could be that day.

“I’ve never seen you this open and emotional in a long time.”

Mike stills at that.

Open and…emotional? If this was Chester speaking to him, he’d understand. He’s been more outspoken of his feelings around him. But towards everybody else? He felt like he was being the same old him.

Then again, if people could notice him being a jealous ass, he might have to rethink that.

Something must’ve showed on Mike’s face because Brad quickly adds, “Not that it’s a bad thing! Being intuned with your emotions is good and I’m glad you’re more comfortable in your skin lately. Like you’ve made so much progress this past week alone that I’m really happy, you know? Both Joe and I are. And I know that it’s all thanks to Chester.” He shoves another mouthful of cookie in his
mouth, continuing after he swallows. “And I’m not discounting your own effort because fuck, this wouldn’t be possible if you hadn’t made the effort to be better. But he definitely had a hand at helping. I’m really happy you allowed to tear down those walls and let him in.”

Mike frowns. As much as he’s touched by the sentiment, it doesn’t connect with what they’re talking about. Like it’s nice and god, his heart is warm and maybe it’s something he desperately needs but, what does that have to do with anything?

As if he read his mind, Brad answers for him. “Like, goddamn Mike. You’ve never talked about anybody the way you talked about Chester. Every time we meet and you talk about him, it’s like…”

He shakes his head. “You’re starstruck. You say a lot of things about him. About how optimistic and how friendly he is. How kind he can be. When I met him, he’s the exactly the way you described him. So no, I don’t think you ruined him at all. He’s exactly who he is and from what I’ve heard, I don’t think he would change anytime soon.”

The gears in Mike’s head keep spinning, too fast for his liking. It shouldn’t. After all, it’s true. In the haze of his frazzled mind, he gets where he’s coming from. Even after all those times they spent together, Chester’s the same guy he’s known and fell in love with. He’s still compassionate and assured and beautiful and wonderful and not ruined. Not even close.

Mike takes a sip from his tea, suppressing a grimace. Peppermint tea at room temperature always taste weird. He would’ve opted for coffee but Brad shot him down immediately, blaming on his anxiety. “Really?”

Brad nods, ghosting line around the rim of his mug. “You didn’t ruin anybody. I’ve known you for so long and I’m still me. So is Joe. And I mean, I can’t say much about Chester but I can bet you it’s the same in his case. You didn’t ruin anybody. You never did.” He pauses to suck in a breath, pinning Mike with a solemn look. “This is going to sound fucking horrible but I gotta be straight with you — you’re sabotaging yourself from being happy. Don’t do that. Don’t ever sabotage yourself from being happy. You deserve to be happy. And I know Chester makes you happy. You are good enough for him, Mike. You deserve him. You do.”

Mike nods slowly, processing his sentiments. Which are a lot. It’s not unlike him to dump stuff like this onto him. But god, his brain is frazzled and it’s too early or late or whatever the time is and god, why did he think a heart-to-heart with his best friend now would be a good idea?

Well, it’s not like there’s anything he can do about it now. That’s what he did and he has to live with that.

**Sabotage. Brad’s thinks I’m sabotaging myself from being happy. Is that what I’ve been doing this whole time?**

It’s probably true. After all, Mike’s spent most of his life convincing himself he’s unworthy of love and affection, that he’s the reason why everything around him falls apart. That’s why he builds walls so that he can’t get too attached or invested in the people around him, be it with strangers or his friends. So he doesn’t get hurt. So he won’t watch people walk back out of his life and pin the blame back on himself.

Those thoughts on their own strike him like a lightning bolt in his head.

Fuck. It’s not “probably true”. It’s the cold hard truth, one he’s ran away from for the longest time, one he hardly confronted at all. Even after he spilled his past to Chester and vowed to get better, he didn’t think it through. All he thought is that if he’s a fucking idiot who needed to keep his act straight. That if he’s stronger and less idiotic, nobody would walk out.
But now as he sits at his best friend’s table with a chicken-face for a clock and bits of chocolate between his teeth, it makes sense.

Brad’s lips curve into a gentle smile. Mike likes it when he smiles like that. It makes him at least a decade younger. “Seriously though, I’ve never seen you this light in a while. Despite the circumstances. But you’re smiling more and laughing more ever since Chester came into your life and I— I’m just happy, man. Really happy for you.”

Mike beams, raising an eyebrow. “Really? I smile and laugh more?”

“Dude, I ain’t wrong, okay? Remember when we were at Dave’s bar last month? Chester was cracking jokes and telling all these stories to you and you were laughing.” There’s a twinkle behind Brad’s eyes. Mike’s wonders if that’s the lighting’s doing. “You always quiet in public. You even laugh quietly. Like it’s something to hide, like somebody was gonna call you out on you laughing. But that night… You were literally throwing your head back and laughing...and…” He makes an exploding gesture, his grin widening. “It’s been a while since I’ve seen that.”

Mike tilts his head to the side, trying to recall that memory. He could vaguely picture that particular moment in his head. Chester has spun so many tales that he could hardly remember what any of them are about.

But knowing Chester, all of them were funny. Chester’s stories never fail to elicit a full-on laugh out of him.

“Really?”

“Really,” Brad affirms. “Honestly out of everybody I know, you deserve love the most. You’ve been through so much in the past. And… Fuck man, you deserve to be happy.”

Mike couldn’t help but snort at that, though his chest warms at that. “That’s what Chester would say.”

“Well, Chester’s a wise man,” Brad says. “You deserve love, Mike. Now, later. Hell, back then too. But you can’t change the past. But you can change the present. Your future. You can be happy, Mike. You deserve the best.”

Mike averts his gaze, casting it on the clock. It’s one of the creepiest things he’s ever seen in his life — a monochromatic analog sandwiched between the lips of a rooster. The fact that it doesn’t have irises or pupils doesn’t help things.

“What if things don’t work out?” he says quietly. “What if we’re not meant to be and I lose him?”

“You can’t control everything, Mike. That’s not how life is. Sometimes things don’t work out. And that’s okay. But just because things don’t work out in the end, it doesn’t mean you shouldn’t take chances. If that’s the case, everybody would be stuck in the past.” His ears pick up the sound of a chair being pushed forward. Brad’s voice is softer now. “I mean, what if you guys do make it? You’ll miss that if you don’t try to find out.”

Mike’s eyelids flutter close.

It is true that there’s a chance he could lose Chester, lose him to cruelty that is life. That one day, they’d part ways. But that’s the inevitability of life, isn’t it? Everything is based on chances, including relationships. People meet, people connect, and they see how everything unfolds. Sure, there’s a chance Chester and him would go part in the end and Mike would be left heartbroken.
But there’s also a chance they make it to the end.

Yeah, they could. They really could. If they could overcome that rough patch in the initial parts of their relationship, they could overcome everything else.

Chester loves him. He’s in love with him and fuck, Mike is too. Mike’s in love with the crinkle around his dark eyes, the Cheshire grin he’d flash, the coloured ink adorned around his body. But most of all, he’s in love with Chester’s golden heart.

He wants them to work out, wholeheartedly wants them to make it to the end. They could make things work.

They really could.

“Seriously, I’m really happy you have him,” Brad continues, his voice trailing into a somber place. He’s made so much progress with you compared to… You know… Back then.”

His statement is vague, which is unlike Brad. He’s always clear and direct with his words. If Mike’s somebody else, he might not have caught the catch in his voice.

Mike open his eyes, fixing him with an uncertain look. “Brad—”

“I should’ve tried harder, you know?” Brad continues, flashing him a weak smile before dropping his gaze downwards. “You didn’t give up on me when I was down but I— I should’ve done the same.

“Brad—”

“Fuck,” he bites out, his voice trembling. “I should’ve—”

“Brad!”

His best friend halts, as if surprised at his sudden outburst. His best friend whose eyes have glazed over, whose cheeks are pink and fuck, he’s sniffing. Brad always has been emotional.

And before he could comprehend it, Mike’s on his feet and so is Brad and they’re locked in a tight embrace.

He could barely recall the last time they’ve held each other this way, affirmed their mutual care and affection to each other like this. Graduation day? Bidding their goodbyes at his college gates? When Brad finally discovered all the things Mike had to go through?

Whenever it was, it happened a long time ago. This is the present. And that’s what matters.

Mike’s pouring all his thoughts and emotions, everything he can’t articulate into a mere gesture, his regrets and apologies. Because he did him wrong too. He shut the man who’s been there for him since he could remember, who’s seen him at his lowest, who accepted him without a question, who despite not knowing the whole truth, didn’t abandon him.

It’s overdue. Hell, all of this has been overdue.

Mike’s going to do better. This is just a setback, but not a permanent one. He’s going to do better and make peace with himself. He’s going to let his friends in, like they let him into theirs.

“No,” Mike murmurs into Brad’s ear, his own tears threatening to spill out. “I pushed you away when all you did was try your best to fix me. You were trying your best. You being there for me
then — all those times since Mark, since Kyle, since everything — is everything I could ask for already. You did more than enough and all I did was shut you out and I’m so fucking sorry.”

He pauses, sniveling. It could be the fact Brad’s crying into his shoulder. It could be the fact that they’re conversing about something vital and personal. It could be the fact that all these things should’ve been expressed earlier.

But fuck, Mike’s going to cry too. Mike’s going to start bawling in a dining room. He’s going to break down with his arms wrapped around his best friend in his house at possibly three in the morning. He would’ve been bothered by that months ago. But this is not months ago any more.

He could feel a tear trickle down his cheek and then two and then several more.

“But I’ve made peace with the past,” Mike continues, feeling his own hoodie dampen. “I’ve made peace with the past. I’m putting that behind me and... and I’m...I’m fixing myself, Brad. You tried fixing me and I’ve hit a lot of stumbling blocks and— and you did your best. You really did.”

Brad chokes on a sob.

They stand like that for a while, dampening each other’s clothed shoulders with a clock with a chicken face looming over their heads.

Which Mike ends up blurting out because god, he’s not comfortable with being vulnerable with somebody that isn’t Chester and well, he’d be lying if he said he’s starting to feel uncomfortable.

Brad couldn’t help but bark a sob-laced laugh at that, loosening his grip on Mike’s waist. “Fuck, I should get rid of it, shouldn’t I?”

“You should.”

“But it’s a Christmas gift.”

“A creepy Christmas gift.”

Brad snickers as he disentangles himself from Mike’s arms. “Yeah, but it’s funny.” He heads over towards the living room, returning with a box of tissues. “God,” he breathes out, wiping his eyes. “I didn’t expect that.”

“What?” Mike asks as he accepts Brad’s offer of a piece of tissue. “Us crying?”

“Yeah.” Brad balls his used tissue in his fist, reaching for another with his other hand. “I mean, I knew you wanted to talk some deep shit since you wanted to meet in person. But...not like it. But it’s good. Cathartic.” He breaks into a grin, accentuating his blushed cheeks. “I think we both needed a good cry and we talked about all that shit. I mean, it’s not all of it. I don’t know if we’ll ever get everything out. But right now, it’s a good start.”

Mike mirrors him, dabbing at his eyes. “Yeah, it is.”

“Yeah.” Brad sighs. “I’m glad you’re getting better, Mike. I’m glad you’re bettering yourself. That’s all I could ask for, for you to be happy.” He grasps Mike’s shoulder, forcing them to be at eye-level. “I love you. I always got your back, man.”

Mike’s lips quirk to the side in amusement. Not often does Brad affirm his love for him in those words. He always figured it’s his way of respecting Mike’s penchant to avoiding such matters.
But maybe he won’t need to hide away from it anymore. He could get used to this change in their dynamic. It’s probably for the better too.

“I love you too,” he replies. He almost blurts out an “I’m sorry” but catches himself before he could do so. He needs to stop apologizing for being who he is — an imperfect person who’s trying to better himself, who’s worthy of the love his friends and family showers him in.

Worthy. He’s worthy. He’d never think he’d associate such a term to himself.

But it's nice. It's nice to be kind to himself for once.

“Thank you,” Mike says instead. “For everything.”

“Thank you for everything too.” Brad claps his shoulder, almost making him stumble. “Well, now that’s out of the way, wanna play Mortal Kombat?”

Mike shakes his head in disbelief. God, he loves his friend and all, but fuck isn’t he a mood killer. But so is he. They’re not raised to be vulnerable. It's okay. They have lots of time to remedy that. And they need to drag Joe into this because hell, that man sucks at that too.

His eyebrows shoot upwards. “The fuck? It’s like three in the morning. I need to get back to Chester. Plus, sleep. I need sleep and so do you.”

“C’mon, it’s only three. You’ve went through a day without sleep before.

“Worst idea ever,” Mike moans. "I thought you were a chicken nugget. A fucking chicken nugget.”

Brad’s lips twist into a smirk. “I mean, that was pretty funny. Besides, it was one time. Maybe this time, you won’t.”

“Hell no,” Mike answers firmly. "I'm not doing that no matter how much you beg me. We're not teenagers anymore. Besides, you’re still bitter I pummeled your ass last time.”

“Fuck you. That was a fluke.”

“I beat your ass seven times in a row.”

“You have a PlayStation! Obviously a guy that uses an XBox would suck.” Brad takes a swig from his coffee. “And fine. Tomorrow!” He waggles his eyebrows. "Unless you're spending the whole day fucking Chester.”

Heat spreads across Mike’s cheeks. He lets out a groan, covering his face with the hood of his sweatshirt. Brad cackles next to him. “Aw, you’re blushing! Tell me, was it good? Out of this world amazing?”

And there’s his friend being a nosy asshat. That’s always been Brad’s brand — an intrusive, overbearing, sharp mother. Mike wouldn’t want anybody else as his best friend.

“Fuck you, man. Your fixation on my private life is weird.”

“Please,” Brad says, grinning. “Don’t you already have somebody waiting for you to fuck?”

“Hilarious, Delson,” Mike says, rolling his eyes, taking a step backwards. Another step closer to Chester.

God, he’s going to see Chester.
His stomach flips at that. Is he ready to finally address everything now? Unless Chester wants to address when the sun’s up. But would it be any better in the daylight? Would he run away again?

He can’t, right? He can’t.

No, not “can’t”. He won’t. He’s going to stick his head up, make amends with Chester, and figure everything out.

He will.

But first.

“Hey, hey,” Brad starts as Mike resumes digging into his best friend’s cookie dish. “Didn’t you say you’re supposed to be getting home?”

Mike flashes him a grin. “I need fuel for the right home.”

Brad groans before pursing his lips. “Fine. I let you eat half of it and you come over and we play Mortal Kombat with me on Sunday. Deal?”

“As long as you’re not digging for info,” Mike says suspiciously. “I mean, haven’t you learnt anything from Joe?”

“Hey, I’m much more subtle than him.”

Mike shakes his head in disbelief. “Right.”

“Fuck you.”

“Fuck you too.” Mike breaks into a grin. “And deal.”

Chapter End Notes

I’d like to take the time to appreciate the positive feedback I got for my previous chapter. I was pretty anxious about it but I'm glad it went over well.

Lyrics are from "Ink" and "True Love" by Coldplay. Also another fun fact. Once, my best friend hallucinated that a classmate of ours was a chicken nugget. But she hadn’t gotten any sleep for over 24 hours so I guess it's excusable, haha.
It has started drizzling by the time Mike reaches the final traffic light before his apartment. Rainfall during the summer in Los Angeles is a rare occurrence. Mike couldn’t help but wonder if it’s an omen, or a foreshadowing of sorts. Not that he’s aware if there’s such a thing.

Mike has always liked rainy nights. Rainy nights make the perfect sleeping weather, especially if it's a heavy. Every time he’s away from his apartment during these sort of times, his heart immediately long for his bed. No feeling could beat curling under the covers to the sound of rain pattering against your window as soft music lulls you to sleep. Absolutely nothing.

Unfortunately for him, he can’t do that. Not yet anyway. Chester’s likely still up, awaiting his return. Mike could imagine him right now, wearing the floor down with his pacing, endless questions on the tip of his tongue. Maybe he’d be on the phone with somebody. Talinda, most likely.

Okay, he definitely did, judging by the text message he got from Talinda. He didn’t bother opening it up yet. Just the passing thought of Chester sparks Mike's nerves. He doesn’t need Talinda lashing out at him.

In fact, his initial courage has been waning the further he gets from Brad’s. It’s like his idealism and positivity are slowly evaporating along with the rain, his anxiety and cynicism setting in.

Then again, it’s not like a sudden realization could turn everything around. Sure he's feeling more hopeful that he's been in a while but he still has his doubts, self-hatred and deprecation at the back of his mind.

Maybe those feelings would always be there, lurking behind the shadows. It’s how he tackles and deal with with his demons, to tell himself that he could pull through this. The optimistic part of him is certain that everything would go over well. They’ve been through a lot, too many rocky paths that Mike’s surprised they've even made it this far.

In spite of that, he wouldn’t be surprised if Chester decided not to pursue anything with him, or hell,
even move out and live far away from Mike as possible. Mike’s walked out on him one too many times and broke his heart one too many times. If Mike were Chester, he’d scram.

This could be the last straw. This could be the time that Chester’s patience finally snaps and leaves him. It’s possible, judging by his last text.

And he’ll let him go. Mike could do that, let him go.

Mike tightens his grip on the steering as he pulls into his designated parking space.

God, he messed up. Mike’s messed up a whole lot. Just like Ryan did. Both of them broke Chester's hearts, running off without a word with his heart in their hands.

But no, things are going to be different. Mike's not going to wait for decades to see the error of his ways. Mike's not going to wait for a chance encounter to give Chester closure. Mike's going to actually sit down and talk. Before things escalate, no matter how scared or anxious he is, he’s going to go through this.

If he starts breaking down, he’ll deal with it. If their talk turns ugly, he’ll deal with it too. If Chester decides he’s done with all the drama, he’ll deal with that as well.

That’s what he tells himself as he stands in front of his door. His nerves are at an all-time high here, his hands perspiring and his pulse throbbing against his skin.

He didn’t bother rehearsing a speech in his head. Every time he did that, nothing turns out right. That means he’ll have to wing it, which is a shit idea coming from a guy who’s awful with words.

Only one way to find out.

“Here goes,” Mike breathes out before unlocking his front door.

It’s exactly the way he left it, save for the lit lamp next to the couch, bathing everything in its proximity in warm lighting, from the coffee table to the figure sprawled over the couch.

Chester.

His heart plummets at the sight. Sure, he figured Chester would've stayed up waiting for him. But assuming and seeing are vastly different from one another.

Mike's mind wanders again, painting Chester pacing the living room with a phone to his ear. He'd mutter impatiently to himself, hoping he doesn't reach voice mail, begging Mike to come home when he does. Chester would continue his pacing, firing text after text before collapsing onto the couch. He'd ring Talinda up while he fights his fatigue off in vain.

Well, it has been a long night, especially for Chester. They could talk about it tomorrow. Chester definitely needs some respite for all the stupid drama he got dragged into. He deserves the rest.

As Mike carefully approaches Chester, a quiet moan leaves his roommate's lips. Mike freezes in place, goosebumps cropping onto his skin. He expects to meet opened eyelids and a scowl.

Instead, Chester shifts in his sleep, turning from his side to lying on his back. He doesn’t open his eyes and neither does he rise, his chest continuing to steadily rise and fall.

He should go, leave Chester to his dreams. He’d fetch him a blanket to make him comfortable and Mike would turn in for the night too. Leave the rest of the nightuntainted.
But Mike can’t move a muscle, his gaze transfixed on Chester’s disturbed expression. His features are all scrunched up, like he’s furious or perturbed.

Mike couldn’t help but wonder if he’s dreaming of him or if he has anything to do with his discomfort.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers into the night. “I’m sorry for hurting you.”

Chester doesn’t respond.

A part of him wishes to stroke Chester’s hair or plant a kiss on his forehead. Anything to help chase away Chester’s disturbance. But Mike could end up waking him, which could be worse.

He turns on his heel, heading towards Chester’s room to grab his quilt. Judging by the increased torrent happening outside, Chester would feel cold. He’ll feel more comfortable having something covering him anyway.

“Mike?”

Immediately, his whole body stills, his anxiety spiking.

This isn’t supposed to happen. Did Mike step on something? He’s positive he’s managed being stealthy this whole time.

Guess not.

Inhaling deeply, Mike spins around.

Chester is now seated on the couch, surveying him with an unreadable expression. “Hey,” he greets him sleepily.

“Hi,” Mike replies timidly, remnants of his confidence thrown out of the window.

Chester doesn’t utter a reply, eyeing him critically. It doesn’t help settle Mike’s nerves. It’s unlike of Chester to look at him like that, to not be staring at him with some form of affection. The last time he could recall him doing this was when they had that huge blowout. Most likely anyway.

Mike points a thumb behind him. “I didn’t want to wake you up. I was gonna get your quilt but well… You’re awake now.”

“Yeah,” Chester answers, sounding distracted.

Mike shoves his hands inside the pockets of his hoodie, digging his thumbs into his palms. He could practically hear Chester’s probable questions and answers echoing in his anxiety-riddled mind, floating around and meshing together.

Why did you walk out on me?

Why aren’t you saying anything? Talk to me, Mike. I’m not a mind reader, you know.

You’re right. We shouldn’t have done this. This was a mistake. We can forget about it.

I can’t take this anymore. All I’ve done is try to help you but all you’ve done is push me away.

And on and on and on and on. All of the possible questions — be it positive or negative — circle around his head, deterring him.
But he made a vow to himself to not walk away. No matter what Chester throws at him, he’ll take it.

“Look, I know it’s late and you probably don’t want to talk right now but…” Chester trails away he runs one hand through his hair, messing it further. “But I think the sooner we clear things out, the better.”

Mike nods in agreement. “Yeah. Sure. Yeah. I mean, unless you wanna get some sleep first.”

Chester’s features shift into a mix of confusion and surprise. He must’ve thought Mike would put up some kind of resistance. He doesn't blame him if he does feel that way.

“No,” he says, shaking his head slowly. “I’m fine. What about you? You want to sleep or…?”

It’s a tempting offer but it’ll just be delaying the inevitable. Like Chester said, they need to clear the air out as soon as possible.

“I’m fine,” Mike echoes. “I can—” He stifles a yawn. He swears a sliver of a smile graces Chester’s lips but it disappears instantly. “I can stay up.”

Chester doesn’t respond, nodding stiffly.

They don’t speak for a long moment. Mike awkwardly hovers over Chester, not knowing how to start repairing their relationship.

What should he say? That he messed up big time? That he’s hopelessly in love with him too? That he’s sorry that he freaked out on him?

Well, apologizing seems like a good place to start. Apologizing is always a good start.

Before Mike could start doing just that, Chester beats him to the punch.

“You scared me.”

His anxiety spikes again. It’s a miracle how he hasn’t exploded yet. “Scared?”

“Fuck, Mike,” Chester begins, raising his voice. Mike almost jumps at that. “I was so scared that you were going to do something… That something happened to you! I was so fucking scared for you and I freaked, you know? I was so scared about everything and I called T and... I was praying. Like I prayed to God that you’re okay and you weren’t—” He chokes up. “You know I’m not religious. Like you make me prayed to God.” He squeezes his eyes shut, tightening his grip on the edge of the couch, his fury shifting into pain. “I was so scared, Mike. I…”

Deep down, Mike knows what Chester’s implying, what his unspoken words are. It pains him that Chester can't even bring himself to say such words.

You could’ve been hurt. You could’ve been dead and I wouldn’t have known.

Mike finds himself dropping to his knees, forcing himself to meet Chester at eye-level. For the first time since he’s known Chester, there’s fear in his eyes. Genuine fear. Chester has always been the calm guy. The easygoing one. Even when Chester’s worried about something, there’s only concern reflecting back at Mike.

Never this.

Was this how he felt when Ryan walked out of his life?
“I know what I’m going to say won’t take away the feelings you were having,” Mike starts. He suppresses the urge to take Chester’s hand and squeeze it in comfort. “And they won’t justify what I’ve done. But I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have ran off like that without saying something. I didn’t mean to scare you. I never wanted to scare you. I should’ve told you. I should’ve answered your calls and texts earlier and I’m so fucking sorry I scared you.”

Chester watches him, his features finally softening up. “I know,” he whispers. "I know you didn't mean to run out. You’re safe and that’s what matters.” His palms lift off the couch, wringing them. “I… I won’t lie. I felt used. Like I mess up somehow. But that’s on me.”

“What?” Mike exclaims. “No, you—”

“I shouldn’t have slept with you. I wasn’t thinking straight. I shouldn’t have pressured you into—”

“You didn’t pressure me into anything,” Mike interrupts fiercely. “I wanted to sleep with you. That was my decision. I knew what I was doing.” He shuts his eyes, his heart banging against rib cage. This is it. This is when he has to open his heart out again. It’s going to be painful. But he has to. He can’t run away anymore.

“Then—”

“I was scared.”

Chester falters, his words dying on his lips. “What?”

Mike swallows thickly, trying to find the words, trying to force something that isn’t air.

He can’t.

Calm yourself down. Calm yourself, Mike.

He’s losing grip again, losing his grip on what he’s realized over the past hour.

Just say it. Tell him of your anxiety, your lack of self-worth. Tell him you’ve been fucking up and you just want him and only him. Just tell him.

“I was scared. I was scared I wasn’t good enough for you,” he breathes out, only meant for him to hear. He should speak up, make his statement loud and clear. But Mike’s losing again.

Maybe it’s because his emotions are running high at the moment.

“Mike—”

For some reason, that’s what makes him let go, the dam gushing and flowing his bloodstream with intensity and feeling.

Mike’s eyes flash open.

“I was scared because I’m me,” he cries, his voice sharp enough to cut through steel. “All I bring to you is chaos and drag you into this self-pity bullshit that I try to get out off. But I can’t. Every time I think I’m okay, that I’m fine, I look at you and that smile you give me and I feel like I’m unworthy. I’m unworthy of everything you could give me because you touch everybody’s lives and all I do is ruin them. I’m not smart or funny or kind or— or— Hell, I can’t even take your advice! I just ran out on you and I come home and you’ve been worried and you feel used and I can’t even— I can’t— I...”
He pauses to inhale in more oxygen, his throat suddenly dry. He’s trying to collect himself, gather whatever rationality and logical thought he has left. He’s losing it again. He can’t lose it again. He’s lost it too many times in the past couple of weeks and he doesn’t plan on doing it again.

But in losing himself, he raised his fears. He raised his fears and thoughts to Chester. Chester’s staring at him, his lips parted in shock? Surprise? Disgust?

“Mike—”

“There’s a part of me that believes I deserve you. That even though I’m a mess, I deserve you. And maybe I do. But you don’t deserve drama. You’re too good to be with somebody imperfect like me.”

Some of the heaviness weighing on his chest lifts, finally free of the emotions he bottled up.

*This is it, he thinks. This is when Chester realizes how broken I am, that I’m beyond repair. That he has wasted his time pinning after and attempting to fix a goner.*

It doesn’t help that he’s fixing Mike with this strange look, a mix of torment, sadness and, pity. Maybe something else too.

Every time he sees Chester upset, it pains him, especially when he’s the one inflicting it on him. But pity? He doesn’t want pity. He wants Chester to stop giving him that look and—

“Okay.” Chester jumps to his feet, walking past him.

A chill creeps up Mike’s spine. This is it. This is when Chester decides they’re done, isn’t it? He mentally braces himself.

“Where’re you going?”

Chester pauses in front of his room, fingers curled around the doorknob. “C’mon. We’re gonna talk.”

Mike tilts his head in confusion as he follows suit. Would it make any difference if they talked in the bedroom instead of the living room?

He gets his answer when Chester takes a seat at the edge of his bed. He pats the space behind him instead. “Lie down.”

Mike’s mouth hangs over. What in the world is Chester cooking up?

“Just lie down,” Chester repeats nonchalantly, swinging his legs onto the bed. He pats the mattress again, crooking his finger. "Well, you could change out of your clothes 'cause I don't think trousers would be comfortable to lie in."

Mike’s eyebrows knit together, skeptical. “Are you trying to pull off some Freudian shit with me?”

Chester makes a face. If they were under different circumstances, Mike would’ve teased him about his evident hatred towards the psychologist. “Ugh, you know how much I hate that dumbass. I’ll never do anything Freudian, ew.” His features soften, as if he recognizes the situation they’re in. “We’re not going to do anything weird. We’ll just talk.”

Talk. That’s all they’ve been doing ever since he opened himself up to Chester. All they’ve done is talk about Mike and his shitty self-esteem. He hates that that’s how his life as come to — talking about him. They should talk about Chester one of these days instead. Then again, Chester isn’t the one with the issues and Chester always has been forthcoming with his emotions. But it still isn’t fair.
Nevertheless, Mike and emotions are hardly lumped together and discussed at length. Sure, Brad and Joe has visited it but only when his emotions are apparent, like his heart-to-heart at Brad’s not long ago. Rarely is it ever, thanks to Mike’s skillfully crafted mask. Hell, not even his parents or his brother notices anything amiss when he swings by home.

But somehow, Chester managed to see through it all, even punctured enough holes to let his emotions leak out. Nowadays putting on that mask is never the same. He feels more, every single feeling that courses through him is amplified. It’s like he’s alive again. And it hurts.

When things hurt, Mike runs. He runs and runs and runs and doesn’t look back.

But he can’t anymore. He’s going to stay to sort everything out.

Mike takes his pants off but keeps his hoodie on. Even though he’s mostly covered, he never felt as exposed as he does. Not even when he told Chester about Mark and Anna.

Their bare feet brush against each other when Mike gets under the covers. Immediately, Mike pulls his body away, leaving several inches of space between them.

If Chester is offended by the gesture, he doesn’t show it. All Mike notices is how peaceful Chester seems to be. The table lamp next to Chester bathes him in a soft glow, accenting the gentle smile he’s giving him. He’s beautiful and dazzling. He’s not just radiant like the sun. He’s gentle like the moon, hopeful like the stars.

“Why’re you looking at me like that?” Mike asks, his voice lowered into a whisper.

“Like how?” Chester returns as he sweeps Mike’s face. “Does it make you uncomfortable?”

“Yes. No. I mean…” Something coils at the pit of Mike’s stomach, threatening to consume him. “I feel...loved. I feel loved and it’s a little uncomfortable. So I guess yes and no?”

“You are loved.”

He doesn’t seem affronted by Mike’s lack of reaction. He twists his body behind him to flip the lamp off. Darkness blankets them again. The only light source comes from the distant lights outside, which doesn’t help Mike’s lack of clear sight. But he doesn’t need that. Because even if the world is pitch black, he could easily map Chester’s features out — the puncture on both of his earlobes, the thin strip of hair etched between his nostrils and lips, the crinkles around his eyes.

Mike’s not sure what they’re supposed to be talking about in the dark. He wholely expects to be showered by a series of never ending questions, which he can’t provide proper answers to. What he ends up getting is unexpected.

“Remember when we first met?” Chester begins. Their gazes don’t stray from one another. “On the sidewalk when I ruined your shirt. The one your brother got you?”

Mike snorts as the memory flies through his head.

“I was trying to wipe it off you and was apologizing like crazy.” Mike could hear the amusement in his tone. “Not gonna lie, I thought you’d start yelling or demanding I get you a new shirt or something. But you didn’t. You were so nice to me. And I’ve spilt drinks on people before. Before you, the nicest person told me to fuck myself. You could’ve flipped. But you didn’t when you could’ve.”

“I don’t know how to flip out,” Mike answers, puzzled at where Chester’s going with this. “I’ll just
end up saying stupid shit that cross lines. Just like when we fought.”

Chester shrugs a shoulder. “People always do in the heat of the moment. You may be awkward and you’re not the most eloquent person around. But your intentions are where it’s at, you know. An eloquent person could say things they don’t mean. But you’re honest and that’s not a bad thing all the time. Like when we were at the art show, the way you were interacting with the kids was really sweet. You weren’t dismissive of them, you didn’t treat them like they’re five. You treated them like they were your equals.”

Mike frowns. He doubts that makes him any better than any average teacher. Well, he’s known some of his colleagues to be assholes towards their students, which he despises. But isn’t that the point of being a high school teacher, to collaborate with your students and not order them around?

“I don’t get where this is going.”

“I’m telling you the strengths I see in you,” Chester replies like it’s the most obvious thing in the world. “You’re kind. You’re compassionate. You hold your beliefs close to you. You’re brave. You’re—”

“Brave?” Mike exclaims. “How the hell am I brave? Or strong?”

He could guess Chester’s answer. They’ve touched on this before, after all. Doesn’t mean that it doesn’t confuse him still.

“The hotel.”

Mike stifles a groan. Just what he predicted. That goddamn fucking hotel. That disaster of a night. If only he had some memory wiper. He’d love to put that whole fiasco behind him.

“I know you said that was brave before. But you can’t deny that I was a dumbass. Nobody but me would be stupid enough to go to a place full of bigoted assholes just because I felt like I owed somebody there. I went through a lot of shit just because of I felt indebted.”

Chester shakes his head. “I think despite all that shit you went through that night, some good came out of it. You got yourself out of that toxic thinking, you stood up for yourself in front of everybody. Like not just in front of those assholes. I think everybody was listening. I mean, I can’t speak for everybody but what you said was powerful. It was something that was needed to be said. And the fact that you brought it up in a place full of bigoted assholes is brave.” He pauses, turning his head away. His voice lowers into a whisper. “Even if it was my fault that you were in that position in the first place.”

Mike won’t lie, he was furious when Chester outed him. He almost punched him that night. His sexuality isn’t something he takes likely or spouts to random people. And without a doubt he’d keep his sexuality a secret from those assholes.

Only when he was washing his face in the bathroom did he manage to calm down and piece everything in his head. Despite the slipup, Chester has been a good friend to him with sincere intentions all around. He wouldn’t have anything to gain from outing Mike on purpose. And besides, he’s remorseful about what happened, which is a plus.

But apparently, Chester isn’t at peace with the whole fiasco as Mike thought he was.

“You didn’t mean to,” Mike consoles. “You weren’t thinking straight.”
“You could’ve gotten hurt.”

That’s true. But Mike doesn’t want Chester to feel worse than he feels right now.

“But I didn’t.”

Even in the dark, Mike could make out his unsettled expression. His eyes trail down the side of Chester’s neck, all the way towards the palm resting at his side. Gingerly, Mike reaches over to lace his fingers with his, their palms fitting perfectly. His heart steadily beats against his chest.

He could feel Chester switching his gaze between their entwined hands and back up to Mike’s face. For a split second, he’s surprised and confused but the tautness of his features smoothen eventually.

“See?” Chester says. “You are strong. Strength comes in different ways and believe me, I know strength when I see it.”

Ryan’s face flashes in his head, a silhouette of a woman following.

“Whatever the case, you’re making progress,” Chester continues. “It doesn’t happen overnight. I see you growing and that’s enough. Even if it’s just a little, it makes a huge difference.” He swings their hands. “Hell, you’re even initiating touch with me. Maybe for other people, it’s nothing. But I’ve known you for some time. Maybe not as long as I wish I had. But long enough to know that touch isn’t easily given out by you. You are strong. You are good.”

You are good enough.

“I’m scared,” Mike confesses, his gaze drifting down to their laced hands. “I’m scared of hurting you. I’m scared that things won’t work out and you’ll walk out of my life and I don’t want the best thing that’s happened to me leave because I made you leave.” Their gazes meet again. “People leave, Ches. And you mean too much to me and I don’t want you to leave.”

Pulling away from his grasp, Chester moves to cup Mike’s jaw, stroking his cheek with his thumb. Mike exhales, closing his eyes. It’s a comforting gesture.

“I’m not going to leave you,” Chester murmurs. “I know you think it’s a bunch of crap but I don’t think I could bear being away from you.”

Mike snorts at that. Chester exhales a mock gasp. "Hey, I know that's corny as hell but it's true."

"I'm not doubting you," Mike answers. "I mean, the fact that you didn't move out the first week is proof enough."

Chester rolls his eyes. “I mean, sure we got off the wrong foot. I won't lie that living with you during those first several weeks was awkward and—"

"To say the least."

"Mikey," Chester begins fondly. "Let me finish?"

"Sorry."

Chester chuckles quietly. "But yeah, it was pretty weird coming home to somebody who hardly acknowledges your existence. Sometimes I wished you wouldn't be home or you'd be asleep when I returned. Then, I wouldn't need acknowledge the fact that I have a roommate. Then one day, those feelings slowly faded away. I started missing being home. Which makes sense, you know? Who
doesn't? But then, I realized it wasn't the place I was missing." Chester fixes him with a look so intense that Mike almost averts his gaze. But like a magnet, he holds his attention.

"I was missing you."

Mike's breath hitches.

"I started hoping you'd be around when I come back home. I hoped to hear you cursing in Japanese because you lost a video game. I hoped to smell the mac and cheese you’d make when you’re not in a rush. I hoped to see you covered in paint as you work on a project." He lets out a short laugh. "And every time we greet each other with “hey” and “hi”. Which I don't know why. It always warms me on the inside. Just saying hello just..." He shakes his head. He bursts into a bright smile. Radiant like the sun. Gentle like the moon. Hopeful like the stars.

"I've never felt that way before. I’ve never connected to anybody the way I connected with you."

At this point, Mike’s at a loss of words. Chester’s been throwing punch after punch at him, pouring his heart and soul to him, pouring himself out freely and descriptively because of him.

He can’t remember the last time anybody did that. Not even his own family’s like that with him.

But Chester, this man that waltzed into his life unexpectedly is doing that, telling him of all people this. It’s unbelievable.

There's no denying it. This is a confession. This is the truth.

Chester's in love with him.

“When I woke up that morning at that hotel and we were lying together...” Chester stops stroking Mike's cheek but doesn't pull away. "It should feel weird. It should feel weird that my roommate, my friend is sleeping next to me, all tangled up like we're lovers. But it didn’t. It should, but it didn’t. What hit me was how much I wanted to wake up next to you every morning. How I wanted to have your arms around me. How I wanted to kiss you awake. And whatever you say won’t change how I feel about you. It didn’t when you told me about your past. It didn’t change every time you freaked out on me. So why would it change now?"

As he falls into silence, Chester returns his hand to his side. Mike almost reaches over to put it back in place. Instead, he swallows hard, trying to process what has been said. It's difficult to do that though. The emotions inside of him clawing, begging to be unleashed.

“I'm sorry,” is all he can say.

“It’s okay. If you don't—"

“No, it’s not okay. I...” Mike squeezes his eyes shut, forcing his tears back down. His voice cracks when he starts speaking again, his tears almost spilling out. “I’m sorry. And I know that’s not enough. I’m sorry for hurting you. For making you feel like you felt used and unneeded. I didn’t mean to..."

I didn’t mean to make you relive your own past.

He could feel arms snake around his neck, pulling him into his arms. His nostrils are filled with the strong odour of cigarette smoke and a whiff of sex.

“It’s okay,” Chester breathes, his breath tickling his nose.
And then the dam breaks and all of a sudden he’s bursting into tears and fuck, he’s crying into Chester’s shoulder. It’s the second time he’s cried tonight and in front of Chester.

Slowly, he reciprocates Chester’s embrace, pressing their bodies as tightly as he can while intertwining their legs together. He basks in the solace of his arms, the odour of cigarettes a comfort for the first time ever.

Here, this is sanctuary. Being in Chester’s arms is like he’s protected, a cocoon of his own.

This is home.

“I’ve seen your progress over the past few days,” Chester soothes. “You’re making so much progress. Don’t let that go to waste. It’s okay to run into setbacks. It’s normal. Just know that you can dust yourself up and try again. You are worthy. You have to remember that at the end of the day, you should change for yourself. Not for anybody. Not even for me.”

Mike nods as he pulls away from Chester's shoulder. Those are sentiments he's fully aware of, be it from his revelation from Brad's or any of the previous pep-talks he's gotten.

How could he have not understood those sentiments until now?

He tilts his head to press his lips against Mike’s temples. He leans into the touch. “We should get some sleep. We can continue talking tomorrow. We have a lot of time to talk about things.”

As soon as the word "sleep" leaves Chester's lips, fatigue washes over Mike. It has been such a long night, full of passion, anxiety, and tears. Not just for him but for Chester too. They definitely could use the break and resume their talk when they're fully rested.

And this time, Mike won't run. He won't run away again.

Mike could feel Chester distangling himself from him. He doesn’t want him to go. He probably should, given what has been said. Mike would need some distance to think and figure things out and get his shit together.

And also, Chester not knowing where Mike stands in this whole intimacy thing. Chester declared his affection for Mike. It's about time he does the same too.

“Wait,” Mike begins, fingers latching onto Chester's arm. "Where're you going? This is your room."

"Well, yeah," Chester replies. "But I could sleep on the couch. It's fine."

"No, it's not," Mike says. There’s a burning sensation building at each side of his cheeks. He could offer to return to his room but that doesn't sound inviting at all, lying in bed alone.

God, what has gone into him? He, Mike Shinoda, who enjoys being cooped up alone, wants company in his bed? And not for sex?

Never thought he'd see the day.

“There's enough room for the both of us. Just stay.”

“Stay?” Chester echoes, sounding perplexed. He sits back down on the bed. “Like sleep together? Are you sure...?”

Mike clears his throat. “Uh yeah. I mean, if you want to. You don’t have to, if you don’t want to. I—”
“No,” Chester cuts in. “I can do that. Yeah.” He swings his legs back onto the bed. He would’ve slept on the very edge of the bed had Mike not pull him close, their bare knees knocking against one another and Chester's palm hovering over Mike's waist.

"Um," Chester begins uncertainly "Is this...okay?"

"Yeah," Mike breathes. "That's okay."

Carefully, Chester lets his palm rest against Mike's side as he hooks a leg over Mike's. Mike adjusts his position as well, nestling his head at the crook of Chester's neck, laying a hand on his chest. The comfort he felt before returns.

He definitely could get used to this.

“I don’t want your friendship.”

Chester’s body stiffens against his. Mike immediately regrets the second the sentence leaves his lips, his heart in his chest.

“I didn’t mean it like that!” he exclaims, lifting his head up. The confusion behind Chester’s eyes are palpable. “What I meant is I don’t just want your friendship. Like, I don’t want to be just friends. I want…” He groans loudly, hoping a hole would appear beneath him and swallow him whole.

God, he sucks at conversations.

“I’m an idiot.”

Chester shifts around, propping his head up with a fist. “Mike—”

“No, listen,” Mike cuts in. He doesn’t want to lose his train of thought, not when he finally has something coherent to say. “I am an idiot. I did have rough time. A rough past with relationships. People messed me up, made me believe that everything was my fault. It was my fault that I couldn’t make them stay. It was my fault I destroyed everything. And I grew to believe that. I took that and continued believing that this is the right thing to do. That running and hiding was the right thing to do. Because I don’t trust myself and I don’t trust other people either.”

Mike pushes himself to sit upright, the covers slipping off his body. “But you came into my life and you fucked everything up. That day when we fought, I thought you’d leave like everybody else. But you stayed and suddenly, I didn’t know what to. Nobody stayed before. And then we got closer and I got even more scared. You were getting too close and I was afraid that one day I’ll let you in and you’ll leave. Like Anna did. And I…” He gnaws at his lip hard enough until he tastes blood on his tongue. "I wasn’t sure what to do.”

He pauses, waiting for a reaction from Chester. He's watching him with curiosity, not voicing out his thoughts. All Mike could do is pray he doesn't sound like a big idiot.

“And then we went to Anna’s wedding and everything just got even more fucked up. I was feeling something for you. I felt it when you stood up for me. I felt it when you came for me when I ran off. I felt it when we were dancing, at the hotel room, and every other moment after that.” He allows himself to reach over and cup Chester's cheek. He doesn’t shy away from the touch. “So, no I don't want your friendship. Not on its own, anyway. I want everything you can give me.” Mike's voice drops into an inaudible whisper. “I want you.”

For a long moment, neither of them make a move or sound. All Mike could feel is the racing of his heart. It's tenfold per usual. Maybe it's not just his heartbeat he's hearing.
Chester finally lets out a low whistle, his lips quirked to the side. “Wow.”

It's a reaction Mike didn't expect from Chester, which only increases his anxiety.

“Did I…?” Mike cuts himself off, hoping his nerves would calm down. “Did I say something wrong?”

“No, no!” Chester exclaims frantically. “That's not what I meant at all! It's just… Wow.”

Mike frowns in puzzlement. “Is that a good wow or a bad one?”

“Oh, a good one,” Chester says, poking at Mike's heart. “I'm hardly speechless, you know? And if you could leave me speechless, it's a good thing.”

Something blooms in Mike's chest. Whatever it is, it leaves his light-headed, even giddy with euphoria. He hasn't even said shit and he's riding high.

God, he definitely is sleep-deprived.

“I love you,” Mike blurts out, cringing as soon as his words leave his lips. Now, his whole body feels like it's floating on air. He's floating on air and he feels weightless and god, how he wishes he could take that back.

Not that he regrets confessing his love for Chester. Never that. It's just that Mike could've worded it all better, maybe make his words colourful, flowery. Chester deserves colour and flowers.

Then again, words have never been his strength. That has always been Chester's.

Speaking of Chester, he has broken into a wide grin, the same one he flashed when they first met lifetimes ago. Mike's confidence rebuilds itself.

“I love you in a way I've never loved anybody else,” he continues, his fingers skimming down Chester's neck. He can't recall how they got there in the first place. “And that scares me.”

Chester's expression softens. “Love can be scary.”

“It is,” Mike echoes. It could be the airy feeling in his bones or the lack of sleep addling his brain but he's shifting closer until there's barely space between their lips. “For a long time. I was lying to myself, that this was nothing. That what I'm feeling for you is nothing. I've been running away from my feelings for so long and I'm tired, Chester. I'm tired of running away from my feelings.”

Chester's breath tickles his lips. “Then don't run away,” he murmurs, as he tucks an invisible lock of hair behind Mike's ear. “You are right. You are imperfect. But I don't want somebody perfect. I want you.”

That ignites a spark in him and suddenly Mike’s pulling him close, melding their mouths together.

All the kisses they've shared before this was fueled by intensity, by lust. It was the need to quench their physical thirst.

But this is different. There's still intensity and there's still passion. But it's not rough and hurried. It's soft and languid. Mike's stomach stirs at the flames slowly ignited inside him, his fingers trailing down to rest against Chester's shoulder.

He can't remember feeling like this, craving for something as simple as a kiss. Not with Mark or Anna or any of his past lovers. Only Chester and Chester alone has made him feel this way.
That terrifies him. It terrifies and excites him at the same time.

Mike gingerly presses his other palm against Chester's back, pushing him closer. Chester's lips part at that, allowing Mike to slip his tongue inside. Chester's own arms snake themselves around his waist, closing any gaps left between them.

It's perfect. Everything about this is perfect. The quiet raindrops against the window pane, the soft sheets blanketing them, the taste of cigarettes on his tongue, the feel of Chester's smile against his lips. It leaves Mike dizzy and breathless.

But it's a good feeling. He's content. He's happy. He's loved.

Why did he wait this long for this to happen, to allow himself this?

God, he's an idiot.

Their lips part after a moment for air but they don’t fully pull away from one another, their foreheads resting against each other's.

“I love you,” Chester murmurs, his warm breath fanning him and his dark gaze boring into his, oozing of affection and trust.

And there it is in plain writing. Finally, no more synonyms or implications. Just the stark true.

Even though it's been said before and that Mike has known for a long time, it still doesn’t fail to steal the air from his lungs, send his mind reeling, his pulse racing.

He loves him. Chester loves him.

He loves him.

Per usual, his first thought is to run, run and get out and put as much distance from Chester as much as possible. To save himself from future heartbreak.

But he's tired. Mike’s so fucking tired of running. All he wants is to put down his roots somewhere safe. Somewhere nobody could hurt him.

Maybe, just maybe this is the best place to do just that.

“I love you too,” he whispers before surging forward.
The next time Mike wakes up, it’s to the glaring sunlight peeking through the curtains and an empty bed that isn’t his.

Mike bolts upwards, his heart in his chest and sleep shrouding his brain.

What the hell happened last night? Did he get hammered and had some one-night stand with somebody—?

Oh wait.

Wait.

Right. He slept with Chester, freaked out, drove all the way to Brad’s, came back, had a heart-to-heart, and told Chester he’s in love with him.

How could he forget all of that, especially that little detail?

But where’s Chester?

Mike's heart sinks.

Maybe it was all a dream. They didn't have sex and they didn't tell each other they're in love with the other. Maybe it was Mike's brain being stupid as always.

He blinks several times, trying to rid the gogginess plaguing him. He’s definitely wearing the same clothes he supposedly ran off in. Well, except he's pantsless now. The covers he’s under are certainly Chester’s. Mike would never choose rainbow stripes.

Which means either last night was not a dream or Mike got blackout drunk and Chester hauled his
ass home.

Which also wouldn’t make sense because why would Chester put him in different clothes? Unless he thought Mike would be uncomfortable in—

Mike groans loudly, sinking lower under the covers. God, it’s obvious it wasn’t a dream. They did have sex. Mike did run out and came back spilling his heart out. Or tried to anyway.

Before he could whack his head against the nearest wall, he hears a laugh, one he’ll recognize anywhere.

He's in love with Chester’s laugh. It's full of happiness and sincerity. It's boisterous, loud, and open. Whenever Chester laughs, it warms Mike's heart.

His gaze drifts upwards, resting on the ceiling fan whizzing above his head.

That's not the only thing he's fallen in love with. He’s fallen in love with him too. He’s fallen in love with Chester Bennington.

If anybody had told him this the very week Mike met Chester, he'd would've laughed in their face. Full-body and all.

But god, how the tables have turned. What has his life come to?

And now, he has to deal with the aftermath, the consequences of spilling his heart out, for kissing Chester.

The more he thinks about it, the less confident he feels.

Because what if—

"No," Mike mutters under his breath as he rolls onto his stomach. His face comes into contact with a pillow that smells awfully like Chester.

Of home.

He can do this. He won't run away again, not after what they've been through.

In the distance, the sound of a turning doorknob fills his ears.

This is it. Here goes nothing.

He flops back onto his back, just in time for Chester to poke his head inside his room.

"Hi," Mike says because that's the only thing he could think of.

“Hey,” Chester greets back, a soft smile crossing his lips. He’s topless, only dressed in his pajama pants, which surprises Mike. Chester’s always made a beeline for the shower as soon as he wakes.

But not today. Today's his hair is still a mess and his lips are a little puffy and god Mike’s in love with him.

Mike’s in love with him and Chester knows this. He loves him too.

God, what kind of simulation is he living in?
“Morning.”

“Morning.” Mike replies, managing a smile of his own. His voice sounds hoarse to his ears. He shouldn’t be surprised, given everything that has transpired in the last twelve hours. “You’re up early.”

Chester’s grin widens as he saunters over, plonking himself back onto the bed. Mike's heart skips a beat as he lands right next to him, their knees brushing.

God, Chester looks so good up close. There's something different about him today. It takes a long second for Mike to figure out what.

He's glowing.

Not to say he never is. After all, he's full of sunshine and rainbows. But today, there's an extra radiance to him that Mike surprisingly isn't ticked off by. He blames it on love.

“Aren’t I always?” Chester's expression instantly morphs into one of regret, which befuddles Mike.

So much for radiance.

“What?”

“Nothing,” Chester replies, his tone betraying him.

Mike frowns, skeptical.

Chester inhales deeply. “Just wish I could’ve woken up next to you.”

Mike arches an eyebrow in confusion. “You're upset you couldn't wake up next to me?”

Chester chuckles sheepishly. "I know that sounds weird but I just… I would’ve like waking up next to you, is all. But you know, got a couple of calls. Had to deal with that. "He pauses, giving him a once-over. "I mean, unless you didn’t feel comfortable—”

“No!” Mike exclaims so suddenly that Chester jerks backwards. Mike almost rolls himself out of bed out of embarrassment.

Why is he such a mess? Jesus, he can’t get his shit together and his day has barely begun.

“I mean...” Mike amends. “There’s always next time, you know? That we can wake up together and uh…”

Just the mere thought of waking up to another body makes him nervous. He remembers waking up next to Chester the first time after his drunken binge. Even though his head was pounding and his stomach was lurching, his heart was still. Like he belonged. Like for once in his life, he's found peace.

It scares him, how one person could invoke such a strong feeling in him. He'd be lying if he said he didn't like it though.

"Well, you know— I was just— Why’re you looking at me like that?”

Chester shakes his head. “Nothing,” he says quietly, his gaze gentle. “Just remembered why I fell in love with you.”
Mike’s lips part at that, racking his brain for an appropriate response. He’s not used to somebody looking at him like that, speaking such words in that kind of tone. It’s just...odd.

Does he like it? Well, it’s different. It leaves him feeling funny. A good funny.

Yeah, he could get used to this, to being told words like this. It'll be a welcoming change.

“I—”

“You don’t need to answer that,” Chester says. “You don’t need to have an answer to everything I say.”

He draws himself nearer, draping a tentative arm around Mike’s shoulder. He lets Chester pull him close, even allowing himself to lay his head on his shoulder. Even this is odd, odd that Mike would allow himself to be touched and pull towards. Considering that well, he’s him.

But Chester’s different. He’s warm like a hearth, beckoning him to fall into him like gravity. And just like gravity, he can't stop himself from moving towards him.

Maybe this is inevitable — him allowing Chester to love him. Maybe no matter how much he resisted and if he had continued to resist, he might've caved in eventually.

“That was Dave on the phone.” Chester is saying, interrupting Mike's thoughts. “Just a heads-up, never annoy Dave unless you’re curious. Though honestly, it’s not worth it.”

Just the mention of Chester's friend stops Mike’s train of thought in its tracks.

Right. Chester ran out in the middle of his shift. He ran out in the middle of his shift because Mike freaked out and he was being a nice friend and Mike was being an asshole. And even after sorta calming him down, he didn’t go back to work. Instead, he slept with him, which is definitely a bad move.

Mike doesn’t blame Dave for being upset. If he was in his shoes, he’d be pissed too. It wouldn’t matter if that person was a friend or a family member or some random acquaintance. Nobody should run out in the middle of work just to fuck.

Wait, does Dave even know that they sort of had sex? Did Chester tell him? He probably did, which would be shit because Chester would definitely have his salary docked. Hell, he might be fired too.

All because of—

He catches himself before his thoughts float towards negativity. He chooses to speak instead. “Did you tell him about...?”

Chester shakes his head. “I just told him you were upset and I lost track of time. That calmed him down.”

Mike sighs, lifting his head up. Even if he's trying hard not to fall back into bad habits, he can't deny that Chester wouldn't be in this position.

“Fuck, I messed up, didn’t I?”

Chester's eyebrows knit together. “No, you didn’t. Nobody messed up.” He leans over to peck his cheek, the light touch making Mike's stomach flip. “Dave’s not mad at you.”

Mike shifts his head, pulling away from Chester's lips to meet his gaze.
"He's not like that," Chester continues. "When I was in a bad place, he used to take off to check on me too. Friends do that for each other. It's no biggie. He's an understanding guy. So understanding that he doesn't even want me working tonight." He rolls his eyes fondly. "Like I get last night was my final shift and I know that he's being nice but that's not fair to him. I've been bailing on him and—"

At this point, Chester has completely lost Mike, whose brain is stuck on a particular part.

_Last night was my final shift._

“Wait,” Mike interrupts, his curiosity getting the better of him. “What’d you mean by “last night was my final shift”? You’re not working at Dave’s anymore?”

He expects Chester to correct his words, tell him he didn’t mean what Mike’s thinking, that he said the wrong thing.

Instead he gets Chester burying his face in his hands and a, “Ah, fuck. Guess the cat’s out of the bag.”

The cat’s out of the bag? What in the world has he been hiding from him?

There's countless of possible ideas swimming around in Mike's brain. Most of them not positive. But they've come this far, hadn't they? It can't be something really horrible, right?

“What have you been hiding for me?”

Chester parts his index fingers, his dark eyes peeking through. “Oh nothing,” he says, innocently. “Just a little...something.”

Mike nods slowly, skeptical. “Right…”

"It's true."

"Mm hmm." He lifts his body to sit upwards, towering over Chester. "So, what is it? You won the lottery or something? I swear if you won the lottery and you didn’t tell me, I'll kick your ass.”

Chester reaches over to push Mike back down onto the bed. “Nah,” he says as he inches closer. "You love me too much to kick my ass."

“You underestimate me,” Mike breathes as Chester rests his hand on his shoulder. His heartbeat quickens.

“Well, if there’s any consolation, Shinoda. You’re close enough.” He leans forward, his lips brushing against the curve of Mike’s ear. Mike couldn’t suppress the tingle running down his spine, blood slowly drifting south. He would've pushed him flat onto his back and plant a kiss on his neck had Chester not said the next sentence.

“I got the job.”

Mike's heart stills. "Job? What job?"

Chester’s grin widens. Even without moving a limb, he’s thrumming with energy and excitement. It must be a job of a lifetime, judging by his poorly contained anticipation. There's even a twinkle behind his eye.
"The teaching job," he answers enthusiastically. "I start this coming semester."

Mike’s eyebrows arch, his jaw falling open.

Fuck, he forgot all about that, with all the drama and inner turmoil going on. It’s been like what, a week? Two weeks since he told him?

Wait, when did Chester even apply? When did this even happened?

What is going on? What has his life come to, Jesus Christ.

“Holy fuck,” Mike says because his brain is short-circuiting and he can’t say the right thing on the spot. Holy shit. Congrats, man.” A coherent thought finally crossing his mind. “Wait, you never…”

He scowls, jabbing Chester in the side.

"Hey!"

“You asshole,” Mike starts. "Why didn’t you tell me you were applying? And when did you—? What the—? This isn’t a joke, is it?”

Chester breaks into boisterous laughter. “Sorry to burst your bubble but it’s not a joke. It was supposed to be a surprise. Hence, "the cat's out of the bag"." 

“I know my idioms, Mr Literature and English. When did you plan on telling me about this?”

“Hm, who knows? Maybe on the first day of the semester?” He ducks to avoid Mike’s playful slap. “Okay, okay, I’m sorry! I just thought it’ll make a great surprise.”

Mike couldn't help but roll his eyes affectionally. “I’m not mad. I just didn’t expect that. It was just out of the blue.” He shoots him a knowing look. “And considering how chatty you could be.”

“Hey, I can keep a secret,” Chester says as he drapes his arm around Mike’s shoulder again.

Mike nestles his head against Chester's bare chest. An amused chuckle bubbles out of him. Chester could be such a kid sometimes.

But in all seriousness, he's happy and proud. He’s glad, really glad that Chester decided to pursue what he loves, that he finally decided to return to his calling.

Not that being a bartender is a bad thing. It's just that isn't what Chester longs for.

“Seriously though,” Mike says sincerely as he begins to trace the tattoos displayed across Chester’s collarbone.

Finally, he gets to devour the masterpiece etched into Chester's skin. It's his to touch and savour.

Maybe now he could muster the courage to sketch him shirtless, to translate his beauty into graphite and paper.

A tremor courses under his finger. It's amazing how Mike could elicit a response from him just like that.

“I’m really happy for you,” he continues. "I really am. I know how passionate you are about teaching. And I’m glad you’re able to get back into it."

Chester’s gaze softens as their eyes meet. Brown on brown. Adoration on sincerity.
“You know,” he begins. “You’re the one who help me back into this.”

Mike huffs, his cheeks heating up. “Right.”

“I’m not kidding,” Chester stresses. “If I hadn’t went to the art show, I’d still think I didn’t like teaching. I just needed to get out of Arizona. New beginnings and shit.” He pauses. “Not to mention, I’ll be able to sleep like a normal person again. And I’ll get to see you more often.”

“We share an apartment,” Mike points out, pausing his tracing.

“Yeah, but I hardly see you,” Chester says. “Summer doesn’t count, okay? A couple of months doesn’t outweigh a year.”

Mike cracks a smile. “That's creepy.”

Chester cocks an eyebrow. “Creepy? Dude, parents pull this shit too. Some people become stay-at-home parents because they miss their kids.”

“I’m not five, Bennington and you’re not my dad. Which means you’d be creepy.”

“Mm hmm. But something tells me you don’t mind.” Chester dips to capture Mike's lips with his.

It starts off gentle at first, igniting a flame in Mike's chest. But then somehow their kisses take a more passionate and hurried. Before Mike could comprehend it, he's lying on top of him, their clothed erections brushing against one another.

Are they moving too fast? Should they be making out at this instance? They haven't even talked about their relationship, if they're going to making things official.

“Somebody’s excited right now,” Chester murmurs against Mike’s skin, grazing his neck with his teeth. Mike wonders if that’s what Chester’s into. He’s been using his teeth pretty often during sex.

Not that they’ve had sex for long. Maybe he should make that judgment when they’ve had ample sex. God knows how many times that'll be but well, whatever. This is a good start.

Mike arches his back in response, tightening his grip on Chester’s shoulders. “Apparently I’m not the only one,” he gasps.

“Mm hmm.” Chester’s arms slink lower to grasp the hem of Mike’s hoodie, pulling it over his head.

The rest of their clothes follow after, leaving them bare. It's different in the day. This time, all five of Mike’s senses are heightened, his sight especially. Just having Chester naked underneath him, his tattoos on full display driving Mike wild.

"Fuck," Chester exhales as Mike traces the ink with his tongue. "Jesus... Shit."

Fuck, just listening to him moan. Just inhaling his musk. Tasting him...

Mike doesn't think he could get enough of him.

Fingers bury themselves in his hair, holding him in place. Mike nibbles at the soft area, laving it with his tongue afterwards. He could feel Chester arch underneath him.

"Please," he whimpers. "Please, Mike..."

Mike lifts his head up, Chester's hands falling away. The want and anticipation behind Chester's eyes
is unmistakable.

God, he wants him. Even in the daylight where his flaws are easily seen, he still wants him.

"What'd you want?" Mike murmurs huskily. He dips lower to caress the curve of Chester's jaw with his lips, coaxing another shiver. "How'd you want this?"

"Just move," Chester breathes, his eyelids fluttering shut. "Just fucking move."

"Like this?"

"Just like this."

Mike curves his body, planting his palms on the space on either side of Chester's shoulders. There's something about this position that elicits a different sensation from Mike. Their dicks have touched before. He knows the pleasure that comes with it.

But god, this time it's different. That little brush gives him more pleasure than most of the sex he's had before.

Their grinding start off languid but immediately speeds up. Mike tilts his head forward and crashes his lips back onto Chester's. Their mouths frantically swallowing each other, their tongues intertwining. Every time the tip of their arousal brush one another, their balls grazing, a whimper tumbles out of his lips.

"Are you gonna come?" Chester breathes into Mike, bucking his hips. His back arches as their thrusts escalate.

"Yeah," Mike gasps, writhing.

He wants to say more, to tell him that he longs for the taste of cigarette smoke from Chester’s mouth, that Mike wishes to etch a mark into Chester’s inked skin, that he’s so close, so goddamn fucking close.

But he can't because he's going to come soon. His brain can't string a proper thought and fuck, he's going to come soon.

"How is it?" Chester asks, his grip on Mike's sides tightening. "Tell me how it feels?"

"Fuck, just..." He gulps, trying to breath properly but he can’t, god he fucking can’t. "You feel amazing. Jesus fuck. I..." He closes his eyes as he gulps in air. "Are you?"

"Yeah," Chester groans, his voice tight. "C’mon, tell me how much you want this. Tell me how much you want to come."

Dirty talk is one of Mike's kinks, hands-down. It's not something he is conscious about. But from his experience, dirty talk is a sure-fire way to get Mike off.

So when Chester of all people is coaxing him into orgasm, he’s automatically fighting a losing battle.

He almost jumps when he feels a hand wrap itself around both of their erections.

"So badly," Mike cries. He’s babbling again, goddamnit, but he’s close, so goddamn close to losing his mind. "Fuck, you feel so good. So fucking good."

"Tell me how close you are. Tell me how close you are to coming."
“So close. Fuck, fuck—”

“Mike, come for me,” Chester whines. “Please, Mike, fuck. Come. Come all over me. I want to feel you lose your mind.”

Coupled by Chester's words and lust behind his eyes, it sends Mike over the edge.

With a loud cry, he intensely spills all over their bodies. Chester follows a second after, climaxing with a loud cry. A soft whimper tumbles out of Mike as he feels himself coated further in a combination of sweat and come. He grips Chester’s shoulders tightly, sinking his nails into Chester’s skin as he releases his essence onto him.

It’s too much, just too much.

Fatigue hits Mike like a freight train and he tumbles onto his back to catch his breath.

They did it again. They had sex again and it's as intense as the night before.

Jesus fucking Christ.

“Well?” he hears Chester murmur next to him, his tone playful.

Mike feigns a thought. “Hmm,” he tsks after a deep breath. “I think I need a bit more convincing.”

Chester chuckles as he wraps an arm around Mike’s waist, pulling him closer. A strong whiff of nicotine and sex fills his nostrils.

“I think I can manage that,” he murmurs against his lips.

The rest of the day leading up to Chester's final shift is uneventful. They spend their time lounging around their couch, talking about everything and nothing, playing video games and exchanging light jabs.

Basically like any normal day.

The rest of the day leading up to Chester's final shift is uneventful, except the shy pecks they share between each other.

Which is nice, that there isn't any sudden expectations. With Mark, he treated Mike like dirt. With Anna, she wanted blatant displays of affection.

But Chester's Chester and he knows how Mike is and his ever-shifting boundaries. It's really nice.

"You don't have to be here, y'know," Chester says as they approach Dave's bar.
Mike shrugs his shoulders. "Nah, it's your last night. I don't mind hanging around. Not like I have anything better to do."

"Not like there's anything fun to do at the bar."

Chester's right at that. All Mike could do is sip on cider, people-watch and scroll through the text messages and calls he has ignored all day.

Joe's messages consist of winking faces and innuendos. The most recent one dates back around eleven ("I don't need to hear you guys moaning, thank you very much."). Mike's cheeks redden at that, having forgotten at how thin the walls are.

Brad's initial ones are of concern and affection, coming off the talk he and Mike had. Even today's ones is frantic, pleading for him to not have done anything stupid. Apparently, they were to meet up and play video games that very afternoon, which slipped Mike's brain.

Mike loves him. He really does. But god, he needs to stop being overbearing, jeez.

And then there's Talinda, which well... He's not sure how to reply to.

He's about to type a letter out when a finger taps him on the shoulder.

Speak of the devil. It's a miracle she could even recognize him from the Friday crowd.

Then again, he usually sits in the same place.

"Shinoda," she begins with arms crossed, pulling off the intimidating look effortlessly. "I swear if you hurt him one more time, I’m shutting down the Art Club. I’m gonna grab every single one of your kids and get them to join the Spanish Club."

Mike raises an eyebrow. That's tame for her standards. Even the jabs they throw during work hours are much worse. "Seriously? That’s your best threat?"

Talinda holds her hands out. "Hey, I could hang you by your ankles and castrate your dick if you want me to. Just say the word." She breaks into snickers at Mike's mortified expression. "Anyway, Chester told me you guys made up so it’s all good. For now."

Chester saving his ass again. Thank god.

Which makes him wonder if Talinda knows about it.

"Do you know?"

"Know about what?" Talinda asks but the shit-eating grin she’s pinning him with says otherwise. He doesn't have to elaborate because she follows up with a, "That you guys slept together last night?"

Heat spreads over his face. He could imagine the expression he has right now. It definitely isn't flattering.

"I don’t want to say that I called it—"

"T."

"¿Qué?" Talinda asks, her smug smile still playing on her lips. That’s a fact! And anyway—"

"That’s not what I meant," he cuts in. "And you know it."
“I would if you’d stop being so vague—”

Mike glares at her as he picks up his glass of cider. Tonight’s flavour is pomegranate and strawberry, which makes him look like he’s a vampire who thinks drinking out of skin isn’t classy.

“Chester taking the teaching job. Hell, even applying for it. Did you—?”

Talinda nods as she slips into the seat next to him. “Mm hmm,” she hums as she cranes her neck above the busy crowd. “Maléitos viernes,” she mutters as she waves a hand above her head. “Always full of people. This is why I never go to bars on Fridays.”

“Then why’re you here?”

“Because it’s Chester last shift,” Talinda says as she turns back to him, her hair lightly swatting Mike in the face. “Plus, Heidi wants to come by here. And obviously I can’t say no to her.”

Mike raises his eyebrow at the mention of her girlfriend. He’s never met the woman before. Hell, he doesn’t even know what she looks like.

“Where’s she anyway?” he asks as he cranes his neck, scanning the crowd.

“She’ll be by soon. Not to worry. You’ll meet her eventually.” Talinda smirks. “And anyway, back to the subject at hand. Yes, I did know he wanted to apply. Who’d you think drove him to and fro from school?”

“You lied to me!”

“Because Chester told me to,” Talinda answers like it’s the most obvious thing in the world.

Mike shakes his head as he takes a long sip. He lets the combination of sweet and sour roll around his tongue before answering. “Can’t believe all those days being stuck in that shitty classroom listening to Shawn drone on about crap and you never told me.” His eyebrows knit together. “Wait, that also means that Shawn…”

God, if only he could Shawn isn’t his boss. He would’ve liked to kick his ass too.

"Onore."

Talinda grins. “What can I say? I’m a Chester loyalist first and a snitch second.”

“I’m your coworker and friend!”

“And I’m his ex and best friend,” she retorts sweetly. “Now tell me, who wins here?”

Before Mike could come up with a perfect reply to that, a feminine voice rings clear behind him.

“Are you harassing people again?”

An unfamiliar woman stands behind them, her arms crossed over her striped blouse. She doesn’t seem to have acknowledged Mike’s presence, her gaze aimed at Talinda.

“Honestly, is there not a day that goes by without you trying to one-up somebody?”

“I’m not one-upping somebody,” Talinda protests. “I’m just messing with him. And he’s a friend. Not everybody is Mr Homophobia, babe.”
There’s something in her tone that makes Mike wonder of the story behind Mr Homophobia. He doesn’t ask though, choosing to quietly observe the quick peck the woman plants of Talinda’s lips.

Oh. He definitely knows who this is. If the faint hint of antiseptic or term of endearment hadn’t given her identity away.

“Heidi,” Talinda proudly proclaims. “Meet Asshole. Asshole, meet my stunning and beautiful girlfriend who deserves the universe.”

A blush creeps up onto Heidi’s tanned cheeks. “Seriously?”

At the same time, Mike asks, “When are you gonna stop busting my chops?”

“Sí, en serio,” Talinda replies to Heidi. To Mike, she answers, “Never because you bust mine too.”

“Hey,” Mike says. “I don’t bust them all the time. Unlike you.”

Heidi lets out a giggle. “Don’t worry. I’ll try to rein her in.” She takes the seat next to Talinda. “So you’re Mike?” she asks, tilting her head forward to meet his gaze. She flashes him a polite smile. “Talinda told me all about you.”

Mike shoots Talinda a look of suspicion. “Out with it. What kind of lies are you spreading about me?”

Talinda rolls her eyes. “I can assure you, cariño. They’re nothing but the truth.”

“Why do I doubt that?”

She shakes her head. “See Shinoda? This is why Chester’s my best friend, not you. He trusts me.”


Before Talinda could utter a reply, a familiar voice cuts through the air.

“Now, now,” Chester cautions as he crosses his arms over the counter. His gaze darts from Mike to Talinda. “Play nice.” He reaches over to plant a kiss on the back of her palm.

Mike expects to feel the rush of annoyance that hit him when Chester did the same thing to Anna not long ago. Oddly, he doesn’t.

Which is good, right? He’s not being a stupid, insecure ass. He’s not freaking out about little gestures.

This is good. Really good. This is progress.

Talinda’s the one who displays her annoyance, which is understandable. “Okay, Romeo. Get your own girlfriend. She’s mine.”

Chester’s grin broadens. “Gladly.”

And before Mike could comprehend it, Chester pulls him into a tender kiss.

He smells of vodka and lime and tastes of nicotine and the Chinese takeout they had for dinner.

Just like home.
Their surroundings fall silent around them as Mike presses Chester’s neck forward, drawing him closer.

Chester’s on shift and Mike isn’t the kind for public displays of affection. But fuck, Mike doesn’t mind people staring if he gets to have Chester’s lips on his.

God, this is such uncharted territory. But he likes it. He likes it a lot.

“Chester, you fucking asshole,” somebody interjects. Their voice sounds distant. Mike could barely make out whose it is. “You didn’t tell me you guys are dating.”

Finally, Chester disentangles his grasp from Mike’s. “I told you we made up,” he says as he licks his chapped lips. Mike swallows the sudden urge to groan. This is not the time to get turned on.

And wait, did Chester just tell Talinda they’re dating?

Yeah, sure they said “I love yous” to each other and all but they never agreed to be in a relationship together. No “Will you be my boyfriend?” being thrown into conversation. No “Wanna date?” or any other sentence that implies them being boyfriends.

But should it matter? Confessing their love for each other should solidify this, right?

“I thought you meant as friends!” Talinda accuses, sounding wounded. But she has a toothy grin on, which she displays to both of them in turn. “But now you guys are making out and traumatizing everybody in this room, Jesus.”

“You didn’t tell me about you and Heidi,” Chester counters. “So that even things out.”

“Hey, you helped me—”

As they continue to bicker, Heidi lowers her voice in a whisper. “Are they always like this?” she asks Mike.

He chuckles. “Better get used to it,” he says as he takes another sip from his drink.

Mike could worry about the boyfriends thing later. Right now, he’ll just bask in the petty fight.

The next hour or so passes by like a breeze. It’s amazing how much time could pass with wonderful company.

Heidi’s awfully nice, bubbly and sweet. It’s a contrast to Talinda’s sassy and careless attitude. They both balance and complement each other well.
Eventually, the couple disappears into the crowd, citing the urge to throw darts, leaving him alone with Chester.

Well, sort of anyway. Chester often breaks away to take incoming orders, which Mike doesn’t mind. They always could speak later. They have a lot of time to do that.

But when Chester finds himself back to him, it’s nice. Unnecessary, which Mike brings up several times, but appreciated. Spending time with Chester is always nice, even if they’re surrounded by sweat and alcohol.

Mike’s laughing at one of Chester’s old adventures at his old high school (involving a sophomore, a trout, and a shuttlecock) when Ryan appears.

All laughter dies in Mike’s throat as he watches Knockoff Edward Cullen strolls over, dressed for a funeral.

Why is he here? Why is he here ruining everything and—

“No, don’t think about that, Mike vows to himself. Just politely say hi, pray he’s not being a dickhead, and move on with your life.

You alright?” Ryan starts, sounding worried. Mike would’ve thought the question’s directed for him had he not have his attention zeroed on Chester. “You took off last night suddenly and you didn’t answer any of my texts. I was pretty worried about you.”

Chester shakes his head. “Nah, I’m good. Was just checking on Mike.”

Mike swears an irritated expression forms on Ryan’s face but it disappears in a blink of an eye.

“Ah,” Ryan utters, flashing Mike a sideways glance. “I see.”

Unfortunately for Mike, Ryan’s still a hostile asshole. Hell, he doesn’t even bother hiding it anymore.

Even Chester seems to pick up the sudden tension in the room, his frown switching from Ryan to Mike. “The usual?” he asks cautiously.

“Nah,” Ryan says as he seats himself next to Mike. Just his luck. “Get me a Manhattan, would you?”

He waggles his eyebrows. “Feeling like trying something different tonight.”

Chester purses his lips as if considering a thought. “Huh,” he says after a long second. “Okay. Be right back.” He leans over the counter to plant a peck on Mike’s cheek before whispering a, “Let me know if you need anything,” before disappearing.

Mike’s eyebrows knit together in confusion as he watches him walk off. Why’d he say such a thing? Like something might—

“Wait. Did he just kiss you?”

Oh, right. Ryan Shuck, Chester’s old friends-with-benefits who somehow holds a grudge against Mike, is sitting next to him. Just great.

While he’s sure that half of his anger towards the man is due to jealousy, Mike’s adamant the other is justifiable. Ryan doesn’t like him for some reason he can’t comprehend.

That’s not important now though. What’s important is that Ryan just saw Chester kiss Mike, even if it’s on the cheek. The last time he met Ryan, Mike told him Chester and him weren’t sleeping
together, let alone dating.

That was last night.

But it shouldn’t matter anyway. Chester and Ryan aren’t fucking anymore. And Chester’s in love with Mike so it wouldn’t matter what Ryan thinks.

Even if Mike does feel a little intimidated by the look Ryan’s giving him. It’s a mix between condescension and nonchalance and Mike doesn’t like it one bit.

“How…” he begins because he’s the epitome of smooth. His gaze sticks to Chester, who’s being intercepted by Dave. “Yeah. He did. On the cheek. Yeah.”

“I can tell,” Ryan deadpans. “I have eyes, you know.”

...Yeah, Mike thinks. And you have a mouth that you can shut.

He returns his focus back on his drink, silently praying for Chester to hurry the fuck up and save him from this jackass.

Seriously, if Ryan doesn’t like him, why bother hanging around him? Why can’t he just mind his own fucking business?

"Thought you guys aren’t fucking or dating or whatever.”

Mike almost snaps before regaining control.

He’s better than this. He shouldn’t retaliate. He shouldn’t lose control. Losing control over a cosplaying vampire won’t make things better. It’ll only add fuel to the fire. It’ll just put Chester in a position, that he’d have to choose between either of them.

Maybe.

“Uh yeah,” Mike says through the rim of his glass. “We aren’t. Sorta. Uh…”

Spit it out, Shinoda. Spit it out...

“It’s complicated.”

Mike almost slaps his palm over his face.

God, why can’t I just spit it out. Just say you guys are in love with each other. Jesus fucking Christ.

As if Ryan read his mind, his frown deepens. “How complicated can it be? Fucking’s fucking.”

Mike would’ve admitted to that right there and then just to get Ryan off his back when it hits him.

No, he doesn’t have to answer him. Mike isn’t obligated to tell him the truth. It’s none of Ryan’s business whether Chester and him are dating or fucking or whatever.

It’s nobody’s business at all.

“Is that why you guys ran off last night? To fuck?” Mike’s grip tightens around his glass, his rage swirling inside him. “It’s not that you were having a mental breakdown, is it?”

It takes all of Mike’s willpower to not blow up immediately. Instead, he counts the number of bottles
lined up in front of him as a distraction.

One, two, three—

“Damn. Who knew me suggesting you guys made you fake a—?”

Mike’s shit at defending himself. He knows that much. Sure, there was his speech at Anna’s wedding but it could’ve been a fluke, a fluke he’ll never be able to replicate.

But goddamn is he not going to try.

Defending himself isn’t losing control over his emotions, right? If he play his cards right, Ryan would get the hint and Mike won’t end up starting a bar fight.

This is about protecting himself from assholes like Ryan.

“Look,” he starts. It’s a wonder that he could even look Ryan in the eye without exploding. Maybe he’s in more control than he thought he has. “It’s none of your business what Chester and I do or what our relationship is like. That’s private. And I’ll appreciate it stays private.”

Ryan’s eyebrows arch. “Woah,” he says, sounding blatantly defensive. “Chill man. No need to get all hostile. I was curious. That’s all.”

_Uh huh. And putting words in my mouth. And being a passive-aggressive douche._

Mike would’ve swiped his drink up and marched over to where Talinda and Heidi are at had Ryan dropped the whole thing right there and kept his mouth shut.

But _no_, he had to say something.

“Though I’ll be honest, I didn’t expect the both of you together.” “I mean, you know. Just didn’t figure Chester would go with somebody like—” He catches himself. His gaze drifts down to the floor. Ryan purses his lips, as if he’s considering an idea.

“Then again,” he says, like he’s voicing his thoughts out loud. “He did date Talinda. Guess he does have an eye for people like you.”

Just that last statement alone ignites the fire stewing at the pits of his stomach.

That’s it. That's fucking it.

Fuck control. If control means listening to all this bullshit, fuck that. No fucking way is he going to let this guy talk shit about Chester’s choice of partners. No fucking way is he going to let this asshole get away with racism.

And no fucking way is Mike going to let this douchebag talk down to him.

He deserves better than being talked down at. He's spent years dealing with that and it's about time he shuts that shit down.

“Look,” Mike begins, whirling around to meet Ryan’s ugly mug. His voice is dangerously low to his ears, similar to the time he defended Chester at the wedding. “What is your problem with me? Does it fucking matter if I'm dating Chester? Does it matter if he dated Talinda? Does it fucking matter that we're not white?”

Unsurprisingly, Ryan continues to play the victim, even so kindly to throw his hands up in surrender
and shake his head. “Woah, dude. I didn’t say shit. You’re the one getting heated over nothing. And how the hell am I being racist?”

“You don’t need to say racial slurs to be racist,” Mike answers.

Ryan barks out an incredulous laugh. “The fuck is up with you? You on something?” He shakes his head in disgust. “God, that brain of yours. Making up stupid shit.”

“Or I’m not assuming that you’re being immature and can’t stop making shitty comments for no logical reason.”

At this, Ryan rises to his feet noisily, stepping closer into Mike’s personal space. The whole thing is strange to him, mostly because he’s sitting and Ryan’s towering over him with a furious scowl. Miraculously, he doesn’t feel like bolting or turning away.

“You really wanna do this, Shinoda?” Ryan murmurs threateningly. “Right here, in front of all these people?”

Mike doubts anybody noticed them, saved for the other people at the bar. They hadn’t made enough noise to fight the ones around them.

Which means he can throw out the one thing that’s he’s sure would shut him down.

“You think you’re in love with him.”

Ryan jerks back as if he has been stung. “Wh—?”

“You’re mad,” Mike says simply. “You’re mad because you fucked up all those years ago by ghosting him. You could’ve had him running after you. Maybe even now. And that pisses you so much.”

Sliding off the bar stool, Mike steps closer until there’s little space between them. “You don’t love Chester,” he breathes. “You don’t love him for his personality. His heart. You love the attention Chester gives you.”

The glare Mike receives in response to that could’ve set the whole world ablaze. It’s a wonder that Mike hasn’t been punched yet.

That’ll change in a couple of seconds, probably.

“And you think you’re enough for him?” Ryan growls, his nicotine-laced breath tickling Mike’s lips. “You think—”

“You love the chase,” Mike interrupts. “You love him that he'd crawl after you, follow you around. But you ran off because you couldn't handle the thought of being in a relationship. And now that you guys met again, you think you can do it all over again, have him hanging onto you.”

His lips quirk to the side. "But it's different now. He moved on with his life. He's not as naive as you think he is. And you hate that. You hate that he's in love with somebody that isn't you.”

At that moment, two things happen.

One, Ryan’s arm pulls back, his fingers curled in a fist.

Two, a fist coming from behind Mike nails Ryan square on the cheek, sending him spiraling to the ground.
The bustle around them quietens for the moment. Mike could feel the countless pairs of eyes on them, which unsettles him.

The whole thing is reminiscent of Anna’s wedding night, a time that Mike hates to think about. Except the punch, that is.

“Well,” Talinda says as she stalks over towards Ryan’s crumpled figure, wringing her wrist. “About damn time I did that.”

A hand lays itself on Mike’s shoulder. He would’ve whirled around and snapped at the person if he hadn’t realized it belongs to Heidi. Still, his body stiffens at the touch. The palm falls away, with a quiet apology following after.

“You fucking bitch!” Ryan moans as he clutches his nose, the blood staining his palm. The contrast of crimson and his ivory skin is stark. “You broke my fucking nose!”

Talinda exhales exasperatedly. “That’s the whole point, you racist pendejo.”

Ryan turns his head to the side, spitting. Mike couldn’t help but make a disgusted noise. “I see you’re still defending Chester’s honour.” He juts his chin out at Mike. “And now I see that you have somebody else too,” he sneers. “Why should I be surprised? Typical of you lot to stick together.”

Talinda rolls her eyes. “Vete a la mierda, Shuck. Fuera de aquí.”

“I don’t speak Mexican, bitch,” Ryan says scornfully as he motions to stand. He smears the blood over his upper lip. The apparent bloodstain doesn’t help him look any less like a vampire than in this moment.

“I told you get the fuck out of here.”

“You can’t kick me out,” Ryan scoffs. “You don’t work here.”

“I can.”

Mike's heart leaps in his rib cage.

Fuck, he doesn't want him to see this, to have his world crash down on him. Not again, never again.

Chester strides over, with Dave in tow. There’s a mix of emotions etched onto his face, ranging from anger, pain, confusion, and determination.

Ryan blanches, his already pale cheeks turning ghostly white. “Ches—”

“Guess I was wrong,” Chester says. Mike’s heart aches at how crushed he sounds. He shouldn’t be here to witness this. “You haven’t changed one bit.”

“But—”

Chester heaves a sigh. For a split second, he looks weary. “I have nothing to say to you. Just go and don’t come back. Don’t contact me if you know what’s good for you.”

“Ches—”

Dave’s expression hardens, his voice turning into ice. It’s weird to see such a genial guy turn cold. “Get the fuck out of my bar.” Just that sentence alone sends shivers down Mike's spine.
At first, Ryan seems reluctant to leave, shooting Chester a wounded look. Chester quickly averts his gaze, shrinking behind Mike. Gingerly, he reaches over, pulling Chester into a side embrace. Chester doesn’t respond to the gesture, wordlessly laying his head on his shoulder.

Ryan’s gaze shifts from between the both of them, pain written over his face. For a moment, Mike thought he’ll put up a fight. But Ryan slinks away, with Dave hot at his heels.

The door shuts behind them with a resounding boom. Chester recoils, snaking a tight grip around Mike’s waist. A lump forms in his throat.

“Okay!” Talinda calls from behind him. “Show’s over, folks. Get back to whatever the hell you guys were up to.”

As the chatter around them slowly builds up, Chester lifts his head to meet Mike’s gaze. The crack in Mike’s heart deepens.

“You okay?”

Even after such a moment, Chester’s first action is to check on Mike. Typical Chester.

“Fuck, I shouldn’t have left you alone. Dave had to take a call outside and he needed me to—”

“Don’t explain yourself,” Mike says quietly. “It’s okay. I’m fine. Don’t worry. What about you?”

He instantly regrets the last sentence as soon as it leaves his lips. Chester just found and lost one of the most important people in his life, even if he was such an asshole. Of course Chester wouldn’t be fine. There’s nothing he can say that could make anything fine right now and Mike hates that.

“Yeah,” Chester answers quietly, not meeting his gaze. He twists his head towards his best friend’s direction. “What about you, Tal?”

She smirks, placing her hands on her tips. “Never better,” she declares triumphantly. “At least I finally get to cross something out of my bucket list.”

Heidi rolls her eyes. “My girlfriend, you guys,” she declares before pressing her lips against Talinda’s cheek.

Chapter End Notes

Spanish translations:
¿Qué?: What?
Malditos viernes.: Fucking Fridays.
Sí, en serio.: Yes, seriously.
Cariño.: Honey.
Pendejo.: Dumbass.
Vete a la mierda, Shuck. Fuera de aquí.: Fuck you, Shuck. Get out of here.

Japanese translations:
Onore.: Motherfucker.
They don’t stay long, thanks to Dave, who made Chester finish his final shift early. Chester had put up a good fight, brushing off any concern for him. Even when Mike filled in on what transpired before (which was a really bad move since Chester’s anguish worsen), he refused to leave. It took Talinda’s well-meaning threats and Mike’s puppy dog eyes (god knows how he pulled that off) to make him cave in.

“If I knew you were the secret to making Chester do my bidding,” Talinda told Mike as he waited for Chester to finish up. “I would’ve gotten the both of you to meet first.”

Mike rolled his eyes at that. “Right.”

Talinda flashed him a toothy grin before it melded away, replaced with a troubled frown.

“What?”

“I know it’s probably a stupid question,” Talinda began as she swirled her glass of vodka. “But are you okay?”

Mike had shrugged his shoulders. “Honestly? I’m a little shaken but mostly relieved that the dickhead is gone. And I guess a little jumpy from all the adrenaline.”

“Congrats on standing your ground, by the way. You really held your own. And...I know how you feel.”

Mike didn’t doubt her, judging by the punch she gave Ryan. She didn’t need to tell him their history for him to understand.

Like always, Talinda didn’t press him, choosing to drink in silence. The concerned expression written over her face was still present though.
“You sense it?” Mike asked.

She threw him a knowing look. “Of course I do. I’ve known him for decades.” Her gaze shifted to the back of the room, landing on Heidi who was competing with other patrons in darts. She seemed to be winning, judging by the crowd’s chanting.

“I know it’s been years since all that shit went down. But I’m just afraid that...”

“He’ll be torn up?”

“Oh, he’ll definitely be upset,” Talinda agreed. “I mean, who wouldn’t? And as much as I hate that asshole, I know how much he meant to Chester. They grew up together after all.”

She had drained her glass, setting it on the counter behind her. "The thing about Chester is he feels a lot. He feels intensely. I mean, that's not a bad thing. At least he's willing to talk about it so I don't need to worry about his bursting but..." She sighed. “But when shit was going down, with Sam and then Ryan? He was a wreck. Like he really shut everybody out. I mean, it’s been years since and I know he’s done much better. He's more aware but I just…” Her tooth gnawed at the bottom of her rosy lips.

“You’re afraid it’ll happen again,” Mike finished, his thoughts drifting to his own past.

Neither of them spoke for a long moment, silently observing the dart game. Out of the corner of his eye, Talinda nodded.

“Don’t worry,” Mike said over the roar of the crowd. He took one last sip from his cider. “I’ll check in on him.”

"Okay," Talinda said reluctantly. "Just let me you know if you need anything.”

It’s been around ten minutes since that conversation and Mike hasn’t breathed a word to Chester. Neither has Chester to him.

Silence is usually comfortable around Chester. Mike never feels like he needs to explain himself to him, even if he wishes he could. He could just be... Well, be.

Not at the moment though.

Right now, Chester’s unusually quiet, gaze glued to his feet. It’s not unusual for Chester to act like that when they’re not in conversation. A lot of people that don’t speak walk like this. Hell, Mike does too.

But what’s unusual is his slumped shoulders and dragging footsteps. Even the gap between their shoulders is larger than usual. If Mike hadn’t been at the receiving end of Ryan’s wrath not too long ago, he would’ve thought Chester’s mood is because of him.

This is not the Chester he knows. The Chester he knows is vibrant and light, not colourless and sullen. It’s jarring and bizarre and Mike needs to rectify this immediately.

Oh how, he’d love to get his hands on that fucking weasel. Even if deckimg Ryan wouldn’t make things better, he deserved that and worse for breaking Chester’s heart again.

How could anybody be so heartless?

Well, it doesn’t matter anymore. The less thought he gives to that asshat, the better. After all, Chester
is more important here.

Which leads to the problem at hand — how the hell is he going to check in on him?

This is what happens when Mike hardly socializes with people.

He could just go straight to the point. That would get the job done right?

Or maybe, it could scare him away or he’ll throw walls up or something.

Would Chester even do such a thing? He’s nothing like Mike.

Then again, you never know.

He could make a stupid joke, try to make him laugh. If anything could amuse Chester at the moment.

Or he could start by making random conversation and then, lead into checking on him. But what should Mike start with?

Maybe...

“So...” he begins, his mouth moving before he could stop himself. “About that night at the hotel...”

Mike almost slaps himself across the face at that.

Fuck. Of all the things to start with, to talk about, he picked that? Seriously?

Talking about baby pandas or the current disastrous state of politics would’ve been much better topics. At least Mike’s aware of where they stand in both of those.

But this?

God, he’s such a walking disaster.

It’s no surprise that Chester’s taken aback, arching his eyebrow at him. It’s the first time he’s looked at him since they left the bar. There isn’t an ounce of cheer behind his dark eyes. Mike’s heart cracks at that.

“The hotel?” Chester asks, his voice barely audible. “You mean about...”

Mike pauses. Should he continue? It’s probably too late to back out now that he has Chester’s attention. Definitely not a wise move, all things considered. Sure, Mike does think that whatever that transpired that night is long overdue. But after all that has happened just now, would he even be in the mood to discuss about things like that?

“I mean,” Mike says nervously. “If you want to. Right now. Or maybe later. Or—”

“No, it’s fine,” Chester cuts in, giving him a weak smile. “I’m cool with that.”

“Okay,” Mike replies, uncertain and hoping the world would end. “Cool.”

“Cool.”

Their conversation dies down for the next several seconds, the surrounding bustle and footsteps filing in for them.

“Um,” Mike starts as they make their final turn back home. His hand reaches behind his neck,
rubbing it nervously. “How do we… Uh… How do we even start talking about it?”

A quiet chuckle pipes out of Chester. Mike’s heart skips a beat. “Well, I mean… I guess… Well, it was pretty weird. What went down.”

Chester pauses, running his fingers through his hair. He lifts his head up, their gaze meeting. Some of the sadness behind his eyes has dissipated.

This could work. At the very least, it’s distracting Chester for the moment.

“—really should’ve said something to you,” he continues. “It was wrong of me to keep all that from you. You deserved to know. I’m sorry.”

Mike shoves his other hand in his pants’ pocket, fiddling with his keys. “I mean, I should’ve brought it up first. I mean, I was the one who tried to...uh...” He cringes as the memories of the past flood back in his head. “Tried to... Uh...”

Thankfully, Chester saves him from finishing his sentence.

“Yes, but you were drunk. You weren’t in control with your actions. Hell considering how drunk you were, you probably couldn’t remember shit. Which by the way, the reason why I didn’t tell you in the first place. But that doesn’t mean I shouldn’t have said something.”

“I mean,” Mike says. “It’ll be a pretty weird thing to say out of the blue. Can you imagine going up to me after I barfed and be like—” He clears his throat, continuing in a higher-pitch voice. “Hey, Mike. Just to let you know last night, we made out and you were manhandling me and you almost fucked me. And after I got you calm down, you started freaking out and you wouldn’t shut up until I promised we’d have sex in the morning. And by the way, I jerked off to you in the bathroom. So nah, nothing new.”

A loud and sheepish laugh escapes Chester’s lips, making Mike forget his troubles for the moment.

“I don’t sound like that, Jesus. You make me sound like I swallowed helium.”

“Yes, you do.”

“No, I don’t.” Chester jabs a thumb at his chest proudly. “I’d know. I love listening to myself all the time.”

Mike snorts. “Nice of you to admit that. But you know our voices sound different to us than other people, right?”

Chester cocks an eyebrow. “Says who?”

“Says scientists.”

“Well—” Chester cuts himself off to avoid a middle-aged man and his Golden Retriever. Mike and Chester’s shoulders brush against one another. Mike expects him to pull away when the man and his dog passes them by. He doesn’t.

The mix of alcohol, nicotine, and sweat strongly radiates off Chester. It’s comforting.

“They haven’t science properly,” Chester resumes. “They gotta need more evidence. Solid evidence to convince me.”

“Right,” Mike says wryly. “And I’m the reincarnation of Jesus.”
“Hey,” Chester says, grinning widely. “I wouldn’t be surprised if you were. You’re way too perfect to be a descendant of some nobody.”

Mike shakes his head, fighting off a blush. “That’s not— Stop flirting with me!”

“I can’t help it,” Chester says innocently. “You’re too irresistible. I can't not flirt with you.”

God, this man is going to be the death of him. He’ll survive though. After all, he hasn’t pulled out his trump card yet.

“By the way,” Mike starts, smirking. “You were calling out my name.”

Chester’s eyebrows knit together. “What?”

“When you were jerking off in the bathroom? You were saying my name.”

Chester halts in his tracks, his face immediately colouring and his jaw falls open. It’s a hilarious sight, watching the whole transformation occur. He hardly ever reacts in such a way.

“I— Wh—?” He pauses, clearing his throat. “I did— I did not.”

“Yes, you did,” Mike insists, his grin broadening. “You were probably too busy getting off to notice.”

“No way. You were drunk.”

“I may be drunk but my ears don’t deceive me.”

“Seriously?” Chester exclaims. In response to Mike’s nod, he buries his face in his hands, groaning. “Oh my god, I can’t believe I did that. Fuck me. Fuck me.”

Mike couldn’t help but snicker. “Been there, done that.”

“Oh haha,” Chester says between his fingers. He lifts his head, shooting Mike a timid look. Even his voice reflects his sudden shyness. “Was I loud?”

Mike pretends to mull it over. “Well... If I can hear you, you probably were.”

“Fuck…” Chester scowls at him, lightly shoving Mike with his shoulder. “Don’t say a thing.”

A snicker escapes Mike’s lips. “I wasn’t.”

“You were. Don’t deny it.” Chester heaves another heavy sigh as they turn into the compound of their apartment building. “Goddamn, that must’ve been awkward. Jesus. Holy fuck. You must’ve been grossed out. And confused.” He shakes his head. “Why did I do that? Why did I do that? Holy fuck...”

Mike laughs. Watching Chester squirm at his expense is odd. Odd but not unwelcoming. But he isn’t the only one harbouring a weird secret too.

Which is really, really weird. Even weirder than Chester’s... Well...

“Frankly, I was confused,” Mike admits. “But mostly turned on. So like... Uh…”

He winces again. He’s going to regret saying this but well, they’ve gone pretty far now.
Why not? It’s not like Chester could judge him...right?

“I might’ve... Uh...” He ducks his head, lowering his voice to barely a whisper. “Sorta...came...to...you. Saying my name...”

At first, Mike figured Chester didn’t catch what he said given the puzzlement written over his face. But then Chester’s flushed cheeks reddened further before a choked laugh forces itself out from his lips.

They must be a sight to behold to the strangers passing them by — two guys with tomato red cheeks wishing for the world to swallow them up.

Goddammit, why did he bring this up? Why, why, why?

Mike barely recognizes Chester clear his throat. “Well then... Uh... Glad to know... Glad to know I could make you come... Uh, come like that.”

Listening to Chester sort of echo his words makes Mike want somebody to smack him upside the head. It sounds so stupid now that it's been said out loud.

“Oh my god,” he groans, his turn to cover his face in embarrassment. “Kill me.”

“That makes the two of us.”

“God,” Mike moans. “Never let me get drunk again. Ever.”

“Noted,” Chester affirms. “Unless I end up drunk first.”

Mike returns his hands to his side, mentally willing his blush to fade. “Now you got me thinking. How are you like when you’re drunk?”

Chester shrugs his shoulders as they reach the bottom of the staircase. “From what people tell me, not that different. Just my personality cranked out to a thousand.”

Mike stops in his tracks. “So what, you start yelling?”

“Yeah,” Chester confirms. “Lots of yelling and singing. I could be pretty touchy and affectionate too so if you hate being touched, better stay clear of me.” He pauses as they start ascending the first flight of stairs. “Though most of the time I start sprouting a bunch of facts. Like why Freud is a incestuous, unethical dumbass and random alien conspiracy theories.”

Mike quirks an eyebrow at the last part. “Alien conspiracy theories?”

“Hey, blame Sam. She loved watching documentaries about that shit. Every time I came home, she’d be glued to the TV, watching reruns about them.” Chester starts at Mike’s skeptical glance. “I’m not kidding! She’d tell me stuff about it and well, somehow it got stuck in my head.”

“I wouldn’t doubt it getting stuck in your head,” Mike says, amused. “Now, I’m curious about the conspiracies about aliens. Is it anything close to stuff from the X-Files?”

“You’re always curious,” Chester replies airily. “And no, way more weird than the X-Files. Trust me, the less you know about the aliens, the better.”

“Uh huh.”

They continue upwards in silence for a short moment until a random thought pops up in Mike’s
“Did you try picking up somebody with them?” he asks. “Sprinkling some of your alien knowledge over your words?”

Chester shakes his head as they reach the final landing. “Nah. I tried alien pick up lines though.”

Mike’s facial features contort in disgust. “Oh god, I both want and don’t want to know.”

“Your curiosity will win out,” Chester says, shooting him a knowing look. “It always does.”

As much Mike hates to admit it, Chester’s right. He always is.

He hates it when he’s right.

“Fine,” Mike relents. “Shoot. I’m already regretting this but whatever.”

Chester wiggles his eyebrows, a twinkle of mischief in his eyes. “Alright. Brace yourself.”

Mike rolls his eyes as his roommate clears his throat dramatically. “You’re acting like you’re going to recite a speech in front of the UN instead of making dumb passes at me.”

Chester ignores his comment, choosing to flash him a flirtatious smile instead. “Are you an alien?” he begins coyly, fluttering his lashes. “Because you just abducted my heart.”

Mike blinks.

Oh god.

Oh fucking god.

What the hell?

Mike expects Chester to shut up afterwards. Unfortunately for his sanity, he doesn’t. Like a little shit, he continues to bombard him with cheesy and mind-numbing lines, one after the other.

“Hey babe, wanna take a ride on my saucer?”

“Is your dad an astronaut? Because he stole the stars from the sky and put them in your eyes.”

“You look familiar, have I probed—?”

“Okay, okay, that’s enough,” Mike says, shuddering in horror. Despite how horrible they were, he has to fight off the urge to smile. He’s not going to tell him he found it a little charming. It’ll just feed Chester’s ego and Mike doesn’t want that. “Jesus Christ, please tell me you read a book about shitty pick up lines.”

Chester grins as he intertwines their fingers together, surprising Mike.

It’s so strange how things has progressed since yesterday. Yesterday Mike would laugh in anybody’s face if they had told him he’d be in a sort of sexual/romantic relationship with Chester. Hell, he would’ve been howling if he found out he’d be fine holding hands with him.

And yet here they are.

“Why?” Chester asks, feigning offense. “You don’t think I’m capable of picking people up?”
“Not with shitty stuff like that.”

Chester barks out a laugh. “Yeah, well. My brand humour is pretty special. Something you wouldn’t understand, Mr Sarcasm.”

“At least I’m not lame, Mr Lame.”

Chester snorts as they come to a stop in front of their front door. “That’s lame.”

“You’re lame,” Mike replies pathetically. Pulling reluctantly away from Chester’s grasp, he fishes his keys out of his pocket. “Did those lines ever work though?”

“Honestly? Only with Ryan. When we were—”

Mike glances over his shoulder, watching the smile fade from Chester’s lips, sadness seeping in.

Oh fuck.

Oh fucking god. He forgot about that. He was too caught up in their conversation that he forgot all about the matter at hand.

Which is good, right? That’s the point of Mike choosing to talk about random shit.

But watching Chester go from joyful to crestfallen in a matter of seconds tells his otherwise.

No more beating around the bush. He’s going to do this. It’s his turn to lend his shoulder to Chester to cry on, to be comforted and reassured. It’s been long overdue.

“Hey, um…” Mike clears his throat as he unlocks the door. “I was thinking of grabbing a snack. Could use the company.”

“Sure.”

“I mean… If you want to.”

Mike receives a shrug and a dull gaze as a response.

The snacks come in the form of Pop-Tarts. Weirdly, it snaps Chester out of his misery.

He twists his face in disgust as he catches the packet Mike tossed in his direction. “You uncivilized Neanderthal. You didn’t even heat it up.”

“It’s late,” Mike says, tearing open his own packet. “Nobody has time to heat Pop-Tarts up at this time of the night.”
“Nobody meaning you,” Chester points out as he saunters into the kitchen. He plants himself opposite of the kitchen island. “But you made coffee so you definitely could’ve heated these abominations up.”

Mike gasps in mock offense. “Hey, they’re chocolate chip. You love chocolate.”

Chester picks his mug up, taking a short sip of tea. “ Doesn’t take away the fact that they’re fucking Pop-Tarts,” he says before sinking his teeth into the treat.

“You’ll live.”

They lapse into silence for the next couple of minutes, polishing off their respective Pop-Tarts. It gives Mike time to figure out what to say.

What can he say?

Hey, about just now... You okay?

Fuck Ryan, he deserves to rot in hell.

You know you can talk to me and... and...

Ugh, fuck my life.

Mike shouldn’t be worried about all this. After all unlike him, Chester’s pretty open about talking about feelings and deep shit. He shouldn't be worried about—

“There’s something on your mind.”

Mike whips his head up in surprise, meeting Chester’s worried gaze.

God, he needs to work on his poker face. Then again, whatever he comes up with would never fool Chester. Hasn’t been for a while now.

“There’s something on yours too.”

Chester opens his mouth to speak but no words flow out. Closing it, he trains his gaze onto his mug. Mike wonders if this is how Chester felt when he shut him out every time — lost, confused, and upset for him.

This really is unlike Chester. Really unlike him.

“You can talk to me, you know,” Mike starts, setting his Pop-Tart down. The urge to comfort him with his touch is barely bearable, though he’s not sure if he should make a move. He could make things with one wrong move. “I know I’m not the best at comforting people and I’m shit at assuring and making sense of feelings and stuff. But I’m always here for you too. Just like you’re here for me. But if you’re not ready to talk, I’m fine with that too. Just...keep it in mind, would you?”

There’s a sad smile crossing Chester’s lips for a short moment before disappearing. “Thank you. I appreciate it.” He leans forward, gingerly taking Mike’s palm in his. Chester’s hand is clammy but comforting. “I do want to talk to you. I really do. I just feel...” He heaves a sigh. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be keeping to myself. I should know better. After all, I was the one coaxing you out of your shell and here I am—”

“Hey, there’s nothing to be ashamed of,” Mike says softly. “It’s not easy being vulnerable, especially when it comes to past stuff. No amount of knowledge could prepare you from feelings. You don’t
have to tell me if you’re not ready. I understand.”

“I know you do.” Chester pauses for a long moment, his eyes glued to their laced fingers. “Tal must’ve told you about Ryan and I back in the day, didn’t she? I mean, basing on what you said to Ryan.”

Mike chews his lip. “Please don’t be mad at her. I was the one that asked.”

“I’m not mad at either of you. I know how she feels about him. I don’t blame her. I would feel the same way if I were in her shoes.” Chester exhales. “She actually talked me about him a couple days ago. About how weird he was acting, that he’s still the same old Ryan. I brushed her off, told her that she’s overreacting. That he’s changed. That he’s not like that anymore. I mean, she wasn’t there. She didn’t meet him. She was just listening to me talk about him and assuming the worst.”

Mike almost blurts out a, “Was she wrong?” but manages to keep his mouth shut. It’s a stupid question. Of course she’s not wrong.

He really sucks at this, doesn’t he?

Chester worries Mike’s skin with his thumb. “She was right. I mean, she’s always right, since tonight, you know…” He pauses, halting his movements. “You know, when we met again, he sorta implied that we should sleep together.”

Mike stiffens.

Sex. Chester and Ryan almost had sex. Almost had sex days ago.

Jesus fucking Christ.

He shouldn’t worry about it. After all, they didn’t do the deed. And it’s none of Mike’s business.

They weren’t together then.

Not that they are together now. Officially. Maybe.

That’s not the point anyway.

“I didn’t think much about it at first,” Chester continues. “I mean, I thought he just wanted a quick fuck. I turned him down, told him that I wasn’t into that anymore. I didn’t tell you I stopped because I’m in love with you.”

Mike’s heart skips a beat.

“But I didn’t tell him that. Probably for the best anyway. Might’ve made things worse. And I thought that was the end of it. But he kept asking me every day. I kept telling him no but I guess…” Chester heaves another weary sigh. Suddenly, he looks drained, as if he aged several years in a couple of seconds. “And last night, he was more flirtatious than usual and I didn’t think much about it. And then you were out of sorts. I fucking noticed, you know and I should’ve checked on you earlier. I shouldn’t have brushed it off and—”

At this point, the guilt he’s feeling is eating him alive. Chester shouldn’t be guilty. It’s not his fault any of that happened.

“Hey,” Mike begins. “It’s not your fault. None of that is your fault.”

“I know it isn’t,” Chester interrupts fiercely, wiping his eyes. “I know I didn’t make Ryan say and
act like that. It’s just that because I gave him the benefit of the doubt, you got hurt. Like Tal did years ago. I excused his shitty behavior, thinking that he’s my best friend, that I’ve known him for so long, that he has changed. We went through so much together, stood up for each other. And I just...

Watching Chester fall apart is a shock to Mike. Mike has always admired him. Chester could both keep his cool and be emotional. He always has the right things to say and knows what to do. He’s perfect in any sense of the word.

But right now, he’s human, furious and miserable, and on the brink of tears.

God, how could Mike make him feel better? Mike’s a mess and messes aren’t the best at comfort.

_I could still try, right? He’s done so much for me. At the very least, I could do something for him too._

“Do you…?” Mike starts quietly, trailing away when Chester’s redden gaze finds his. “Uh… Do you…? Can I…? Can I hug you?”

A choked laugh erupts from Chester, a gentle smile gracing his lips. “Sure. Yeah.”

Without another prompt, Mike rises from his seat and crosses over to pull Chester into his embrace. Just like that, he falls apart.

They remain like that for a while, arms wrapped around each other’s bodies and Mike taking in Chester’s sobs and musk.

Ryan must’ve truly meant a lot to Chester, been a impressionable figure in his life. Their parting must’ve been more painful than what he went through with Sam that he’d rather talk about his toxic marriage than Ryan.

Oh god, how could anybody string somebody like that for so long and use them to the very end? And they were fucking childhood friends.

“What happened just now wasn’t your fault.” Mike murmurs when Chester finally calms down, trying to sound as soothing as he can. “You didn’t invite Ryan to LA. He came on his own. You didn’t reach out to him. You guys met on accident. You were being friendly and he was being a persistent dickhead. It’s not your fault.”

He could feel the vibration of Chester’s sniffle as he nestles his nose against Mike’s pulse. “I’m so naive.”

“You’re not naive.”

“How can I not be?” Chester asks as he lifts his head to face one another. Despite his flushed face, sore eyes, and faint snot circling his nostrils, he’s still the most beautiful person Mike has ever laid eyes on.

“I took back the douchebag that caused pain to the people around me. Cause so much pain to me. And I— I hurt you. I shouldn’t have left you alone with him. I had a feeling he was acting weird and fuck, I really thought…”

“What happened isn’t your fault,” Mike repeats, more firmly. “I wouldn’t even call you naive. You see the good in people. You see that people are capable of change. Of being better. And that’s never a bad thing. It’s not your fault that people take advantage of you and your kindness. They’re the assholes. They deserve to be blamed, not you. It’s their fault. Remember what you told me about Anna?”
“Yeah, I know,” Chester says. “I just feel like I’m at fault too. You’ve had a tough life, Mike. I don’t want to be the cause of your pain.”

Be the cause of his pain? God, he has it all wrong. Shouldn’t it be the other way around?

Besides, whatever has happened is bigger than Mike. It hardly has anything to do with him.

“You didn’t cause me any pain,” he replies. “Don’t worry about me. You had a tough life too, with your past.”

Chester grimaces. “Yeah, I did. I guess I’m mad that I was stupid to let this happen to me again. I guess I haven’t learnt my lesson.”

“It’s okay,” Mike says. “What matters is that you were able to let go of him. I’m proud you could cut him out of your life again. I can’t imagine how difficult it must’ve been.”

“It wasn’t,” Chester admits. “Was getting Vietnam flashbacks and shit.” He disentangles himself from Mike’s embrace, wiping his eyelids. “Thank you for talking to me. I don’t think I’ll be okay for a while. But I’ll get through this. I’ve done it before and I can do it again.”

A swell of pride crosses through Mike. That’s the Chester he knows, always ready to push forward and leave the past behind. Even after all the shit he’s been through, he can still pull himself together and run ahead. That’s one of the reasons why Mike fell in love with him.

A bashful smile creeps up on Mike’s lips, his face warming. “You don’t have to thank me. It’s all you.” He steps forward, cupping Chester’s face in his palms. “You always talk about me being strong. But so are you. I don’t tell you this often but you’re an amazing human being and I’m glad to have the privilege to know you.”

“Thank you. I’m glad to have met you too.” Chester chuckles, planting a soft kiss on the inside of Mike’s palm. “I’m proud of you too. I know I can’t change who you are. But seeing you being more affectionate, more open… I’m just glad, you know. You’ve come far.”

“Well, it helps that I’ve been dating an expert in— Oh fuck.”

Oh.

Well.

Why did he say that?

Why, why, why, why did he say that? This is not the time. And fuck, they’re not even dating. Why the hell did he—?

Mike’s hands pull away to cup his face, covering his obvious embarrassment. “I mean— Uh… What I meant was— Uh— I didn’t— Oh, fuck me. I’m sorry I’m ruining the moment. Let’s forget I said anything and—”

“Hey,” Chester begins, prying Mike’s fingers away. He’s smiling the same smile that blew Mike’s mind once upon a time, the same smile that puts the sun to shame. It’s blinding and heartwarming and Mike feels whole for a moment. “It isn’t the wrong time. I mean, it’s kinda weird but not unwelcome.”

Mike laughs sheepishly. “I doubt that.”
“Don’t doubt that. But I have to ask...” Chester pulls him closer until their foreheads meet and the tips of their noses ghost one another. “Is Brad putting you up to this? Or Joe or Dave or T or—”

“No. Not at all,” Mike says, his pulse racing in anticipation. “It’s all me. All me.”

Chester hums. “Well... I mean, I did sorta lied to T and said we were dating so...”

“Well?”

“Well what?”

“You know what. Don’t keep me in suspense.”

Chester rolls his eyes. “Patience, my young padawan. I’m thinking.”

“You’re actually thinking about something like—”

Mike’s silenced by a pair of lips and arms snaking themselves around his neck. It’s soft and unhurried and his hands are shaking and his heart is pounding against his chest and his head is reeling and fuck. It’s been so long since he felt so out of his depth. That a person could make him feel like this.

But god, he wants this. He wants the soft touches and the shaking limbs and racing pulses and frazzled mind.

He could get used to this, being loved like this.

“Sure,” Chester says after a long moment, simple like he’s breathing for the first time. “I’ll be your boyfriend.”
He’s in the midst of reciting Robert Frost to the class when he notices it.

Students usually have their gazes pointed at him, nodding along and asking questions as he teaches. Mike say it's bullshit. Chester thinks he’s being jealous. Talinda just laughs at the both of them, calling them idiots.

But today isn’t like typical days. Thanks to two of his students anyway.

“Aidan, Addison,” Chester begins as he shuts his book with a loud thud. The sound echoes throughout the quiet classroom. “Hand it over.”

“Damn it,” he hears Aidan curse his twin sister. “This is all your fault.”

“My fault?” Addison hisses. “You’re the one who thought throwing the ball around was a great idea.”

“Yeah but you’re—”

“Guys,” Chester interrupts pointedly amidst the snickers from the rest of the class. “The note?”

Aidan glances between the knowing look of his sister’s to Chester’s cocked eyebrow. He finally caves in, tossing the crumpled ball over to Chester. To his credit, he catches it with ease.

“Thank you,” Chester says, smoothing the ball out.

“What’s it say?” hollers Bryce Ramirez after several seconds.

“None of your business, Ramirez,” Addison shoots.

Chester chooses to ignore the both of them, scanning the note soundlessly.

Oh. Of course.

Of course.
Chester exhales dramatically, shaking his head in disappointment. He continues to digest the written conversation while speaking. “Seriously? You guys too?”

“But—”

“Never would I have thought—”

“I—”

“—my two star students—”

“Mr—”

Addison sighs, elbowing her brother in the ribs. “He calls everybody his star students, dingus.”

Aidan shoots her a glare. “That’s not what I was tryna say.”

Frankly, Chester does find the whole thing annoying because goddamn this rumour has been going on since second week of being on the job. Though he'll say, the lax part of him finds the whole thing funny. It's like he's the resident celebrity, with people speculating and arguing over who he's dating. The fact that people even care about the whole thing is even more hilarious.

It's not that Chester's afraid of people finding out about him and Mike. He doesn't give two shits about what people think. But Mike has always been a private person, wishing to keep the whole thing quiet. Chester respects his decision.

“You know,” Chester begins, lifting his head from the crumpled paper. “You could come up and ask me this, right?”

“Wouldn’t that be weird?” Aidan asks, his cheeks pink.

“It would,” Chester agrees. “But it’ll save you from embarrassing yourself in front of the class.”

Lydia Cohen snickers. “Oooh. I think I have a pretty good idea on what this is about.”

Chester shakes his head, pocketing the note. He could show it to Mike later. He'd definitely be mortified but it isn't anything they haven’t heard before. He'll live. They always end up laughing and dismissing it anyway.

“Well whatever it is you’re thinking, you’re on the money.”

Unsurprisingly, the class erupts in quiet chatter. Mike and Chester’s relationship have been one of the main sources of gossip among the students. Hell, even the school paper mentioned it occasionally.

The problems of having a gossip column at a high school.

“So,” Lydia drawls, grinning. “Are you and Mr Shinoda actually in a relationship?”

Also, the problems of having the editor of the school paper in his class.

Joy.

Chester scans the anticipatory faces glancing back at him, the lesson long forgotten.

Well, it's not like he's in the mood to teach anymore. Might as well just get it over and done with.
“As much as I like to make your hopes, dreams, and fantasies come true,” Chester starts, grinning. “I hate to say this but no, I’m not in a relationship with Mr Shinoda. We’re just roommates. Nothing more than that.” He holds his hands up in apology. “Sorry, folks.”

As expected, his students don’t seem satisfied with his reply. Chester would’ve definitely be pelted with more questions had it not been for the school bell.

Thank fucking god.

“Okay, guys,” Chester begins as students begin rising from their seats. “No homework today so—Yes, pipe down. I know you guys love not receiving additional reading but I need you guys to catch up on your current ones. As always, I’ll check in with your progress so don’t spend your Friday nights getting drunk and nursing your hangover during the weekend. Don’t laugh, guys. I know what you people get up to. I was once seventeen, ya know.”

“Sounds like you had a wild high school year, Mr Bennington,” Bryce says as he shoulders his backpack. “Did you ever do keg stands?”

Funny enough Chester did once, which won him temporary fame among the popular kids. Unfortunately on Monday, it was like it never happened. Chester was still thrown homophobic slurs and shoved into cramped lockers.

But he’s not going to tell them that. Maybe after they graduate.

“I’m not gonna answer that.” Several students groan in response. “God, you people seriously are a nosy bunch. If you guys bribe me with a year’s supply of Cocoa Puffs, I might reconsider. Emphasis on the might, by the way.”

Addison makes a face. “Cocoa Puffs are gross. Frosted Flakes are where it’s at, Mr Bennington.”

For the next ten minutes, Chester's sucked into a debate with several of his students about cereal preferences. He pauses to throw out a quick “Have a good weekend” to the rest who take their leave every now and then.

It’s nice, something he wistfully missed ever since he quit his previous teaching job. There’s nothing better than having mindless and stimulating conversations about everything and nothing with his students, from the merits of Charles Dickens to whether the chicken or the egg comes first. Good shit like that.

Except Cocoa Puffs. And his boyfriend. Definitely his boyfriend.

The conversation soon dies down and the remaining students bid their farewells, eager to face the weekend.

He's in the midst of packing up when his ears pick up the conversation between the final two students in the room.

Unfortunately for the both of them, they're not as quiet and discreet as they think they're being.

“You believe him?” Addison whispers.

“Course not,” Aidan replies. “There’s no way they aren’t dating. Have you seen the way they look at each other?”

“True,” Addison agrees, her voice fading into the distance along with their footsteps. “Maybe they're
pinning for each other? Like they like each other but they don’t think the other likes them back?”

As soon as he’s sure they’re out of earshot, Chester lets out a loud snicker. “Oh, you guys don’t know the half of it,” he says to nobody in particular.

Chester had figured he’ll poke his head into Mike's room to check in on him and then leave him to rest immediately after.

That goes out the window as soon as he lay eyes on his boyfriend.

Boyfriend. If present him went back in time to tell past Chester who just met Mike that they’d date, he’d laugh at his face. Laugh, make some stupid ass joke, and ask him the winning number for the lottery.

But well here he is, in love and in a relationship with Mike. Funny how life turns out in such a short span of time.

“I woke you up, didn’t I?” Chester asks, watching Mike fling the covers off his body. Mike seems to be dressed differently than the last time Chester saw him — grey T-shirt and matching boxer shorts.

Mike stretches his arms towards the sky, groaning. Like a magnet, Chester’s gaze zeroes in on the exposed skin from Mike’s T-shirt riding up his body.

God, he loves the sleepy look on Mike. The tousled hair and the hooded eyelids and the dopey expression make him more attractive and fuckable than he should be.

Or maybe Chester's just being a horny bastard.

“Nah,” Mike says, failing to stifle a yawn. Chester giggles at that. “Okay, you kinda did. But it’s fine. I was sleeping since like twelve? ‘Bout time I should be awake.”

“Aw.” Chester throws himself onto to the empty space on the bed. He snakes an arm around his boyfriend’s shoulder, pulling him closer to brush his lips against Mike’s temple. He’s a little more warmer than usual but better than he was hours ago. “Well, you don’t feel as hot as before so that’s good. How’re you feeling now?”

Yesterday morning, Mike had woken up to a low fever. Chester had taken the day off to try to nurse him back to health. He would’ve taken today off too if Mike hadn’t given him those puppy dog eyes, convincing him not to.

Damn Mike and his puppy dog eyes. They're the death of him.

“Good,” Mike replies, rubbing an eye. “All I did was eat and sleep so I guess that’s why I feel better.
Doesn’t mean I’m a hundred percent better though. You shouldn’t be in bed with me. I don’t want you getting sick.”

Despite Mike’s protests, he doesn’t make a move to pull away. Instead, he hooks his left leg over Chester’s, closing more distance between the both of them.

“I don’t mind.” Chester says. “If I get sick, that means we can take the day off. We could play video games or watch a movie or have sex or—”

Mike scoffs. “Dude, we’d be too tired to wanna do all that. Especially sex.” He jabs Chester's ribs with his finger. "For all you know, I’ll be better tomorrow and I’d have to take care of your sick ass.”

Chester purses his lips, pretending to consider the thought. “Hm, true... Fine. I’ll go.”

He’s about to detach himself and roll off the bed had Mike not reeled back in.

“Nooooo,” Mike moans, wrapping an arm around Chester, forcing him to lie on his side. Mike nuzzling his nose against Chester’s chest. Even in his dress shirt, Chester could feel the prickliness of Mike’s beard. “Not yet. Stay. You’re so warm.”

Even though Mike has become less guarded and more affectionate in his physical displays, it’s unusual of him to be this... clingy.

Chester’s brow furrows, concerned. “What’s wrong? You feel cold?” He lifts a palm up to Mike’s forehead. Still warm.

A faded blush spreads across Mike's cheeks. “I... Well... I miss you, is all.”

Chester blinks in surprise. Yup, definitely out of character of Mike Shinoda. It’s not unwelcoming, just odd.

“It’s only been like eight hours.”

“Eight hours is too long.”

He rolls his eyes. “Jesus, you’re needy when you’re sick.”

“Says the person who’s needy all the damn time.”

“Asshole.”

Mike smirks. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

Chester barks out a laugh, swatting him playfully. “You fucker.”

They lapse into comfortable silence. Chester hums quietly, basking in the warmth of Mike’s body against his. Just like how home should feel like.

“How was your day?” Mike asks.

“It was good,” Chester replies, thinking of last period. “The kids were talking about us again.”

Mike sighs in disbelief. “Seriously?”

“Mm hmm. The Carsons were trading notes ‘bout it. I have it in my pocket.”
“Show it to me later. I wanna see.” A snort sounds from Mike. “Teenagers, I swear. They don’t know when to quit.”

“Non-quitters are good. It means we’ll be in good hands in the future.” Chester plants another kiss, this time in Mike’s hair. “Oh yeah, I told T we can’t do the double date tonight.”

Mike frowns. “Did you guys reschedule?”

Chester shakes his head. “She asked ‘bout tomorrow,” he answers, detaching his arm from Mike’s waist to rest his palm against Mike’s neck. “But I just told her you might not be well on time.”

“Hmm… But I’m sorta well now so like we could go tomorrow—”

“You have therapy,” Chester reminds him.

When Mike had approached him and told him of his desire to see a therapist several months ago, Chester was definitely taken by surprise. It was out of the blue and at first, Chester thought he was distracting him to lose his fighting match against Mike.

Which he did because well, he was too focused in beating Mike’s character to a pulp and nobody said anything since the game started. And you don’t spring serious decisions when you’re in the midst of playing Mortal Kombat.

As shocking as the reveal was, it was welcoming. In fact Chester’s glad Mike was interested in a therapist. Chester could only do so much and Mike would definitely benefit from therapy. He’s been doing much better since he started his sessions. Chester’s can’t express how proud he is of his progress.

He’s come so far since they first met and it’s all him. It’s all Mike.

“That’s, at like ten.”

“I mean, I have driving lessons in the afternoon,” Chester points out, trying to suppress memories of his last driving lesson. His instructor being disappointed in his driving is an understatement.

But Chester is nothing but determined to get his license. The last thing he wants is to depend on people. He shouldn’t need Mike or Talinda to chauffeur him around all the time. He could get an Uber but his bank account wouldn’t like that in the long run.

“Night?”

Chester shrugs his shoulders. “Didn’t say anything ‘bout that. Why? Do you not want to go?”

“Honestly?” Mike replies. “Not really. Kinda not in the mood to meet with people. I don’t if it’s me getting sick or me being—” He cuts himself off abruptly as if he’s trying to make sure he doesn’t discount himself. He does that a lot nowadays, a step in the right direction. “Yeah, I’m not in the mood for socializing. I mean if you wanna, I can—”

“Nah,” Chester dismisses. “I’ll just tell T to do it some other time. She’ll understand. We can stay home. We could play video games, watch a movie, have—”

Mike pulls away, pinning Chester with a scandalized look. “You horny ass. It’s only been three days.”

“What can I say?” Chester says, mustering the sleaziest tone he could do. “I have needs.”
Mike wrinkles his nose. “Just use your hand, man. Or buy a dildo. I won’t hold it against you if you do.”

“But I’d rather have your—”

Unfortunately for Chester, he doesn’t get to finish this sentence. Mike clamps a hand over Chester’s mouth to shut him up, a surefire way to get Chester sick.

“Fucking hell, Ches. I don’t wanna know.”

“Oh huh, sure,” Chester says, positive all that’s coming out of his mouth is incomprehensible noise. “I’m not the one with a fetish for dirty talk. You’d get off to what’ll I was about to say.”

Mike sighs, pulling away. “I’m serious.”

“I don’t doubt that.”

“You don’t sound like y— Mmph!”

Chester almost laughs into the kiss. He cups Mike's jaw, stroking it softly. It's one of his favourites things to do — shutting Mike up with a kiss. He'd make the cutest noises and the face he has on? Priceless.

And of course, there's Mike’s smile. He’s always smiling when Chester catches him off-guard, like he’s in light and content. Just having him smile while they kiss softens Chester's heart.

“Asshole,” Mike mutters after they pull away. His features are scrunched up, trying his best to mask his grin. He’s failing miserably at hiding his true feelings. His cheeks are rosy and even his ears are a little pink. “Now you’re gonna get sick.”

“I'll be fine.”

Mike rolls his eyes. “Yeah, say that when you’re burning up tomorrow.”

“I'll be fine. Stop worrying 'bout me. You’re the sick one here.”

Mike tilts his head to the side, shaking his head fondly. “I’m okay, man. Don't worry 'bout me.”

Somehow those two words alone shift everything. Gone is the lightheartedness and teasing, replaced with a more sobering atmosphere.

Two words that both hold weight for the both of them. All the storms they’ve weathered separately and together to get to where they are now. It amazes Chester. Sometimes when Mike’s sound asleep next to him, he has to slap himself silly to assure himself that this isn’t a dream or a simulation.

He's not sure why he's suddenly feeling this way but it's nice. It's nice that they could go from being lighthearted and silly to being candid and serious in a span of seconds. Not a lot of people could do that.

“Really?” Chester asks softly, wondering if Mike understand where he's coming from.

Mike smiles gently. It reminds Chester of a sunset, warm and strong.

“Really.”

Their eyes meet again. Brown on brown. Both content and in love.
Chapter End Notes

So, we've come to the end of this story. Thank you guys so much for giving this a chance. I never thought I would be able to write such a multichapter story as long as this is in such a short span of time.

Thank you every single one of you guys who read this and left kudos and comments. Especially the comments. You guys don't know how much I love it when you guys leave comments. They really help me through tough patches. Shoutout to those frequent commenters. You guys know who you are. ;)

Anyway, I would really love to hear your overall thoughts on this story. :D

I have another story in the works which I'm very excited to start on. I hope to write it when I'm finally free from school so we'll see how things goes.

So until next time! :D

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!