the years go by like days

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Summary

It’s Eddie he wants to get a hold of, though, and he does, tucking him under his arm, and ruffling his hair, making him laugh. He’s startled when Eddie looks at him with such happy, shining eyes. And, for a split-second, he’s tempted to kiss him right then, right there in front of everyone.

He wants to. Badly. He doesn’t.

He leans in, instead, and he smacks a loud, wet kiss to Eddie’s cheek, punctuating it with a “mwah!” He does it again and again. “I’m so proud of my little Eds Spagheds!”

“Get off me!” Eddie says, laughing and shoving him away, swatting at his hands.

AU. in the 27 years in-between, Richie and Eddie forget a lot, but they don't forget each other.

Notes

I'm way too old to be writing for this fandom, but, hey, what are you going to do. A few things to note:

1. This isn't edited, so beware of typos.

2. This is based mostly off the characterizations in the 2017 movie. I haven't read the book in YEARS.
3. This is very much a reddie fic. The other characters are featured in small, important doses in chapter 1, but, with a single exception, they are NOT in the rest of the story, because, you know, evil magical clown memory loss (although, admittedly, I make the memory loss start happening later in this). If you're here for the whole gang, you will be disappointed after chapter 1.

4. There's a fair amount of internalized homophobia in chapter 1. I don't want to make anyone uncomfortable; I just can't see 1989, emotionally abused Eddie Kaspbrak being a-okay with his sexuality from the start.

5. There are sexual situations. If you've gotten this far, I assume you're game with that. Nothing too untoward happens before they're of age, and I don't think it's earned an Explicit rating, but I'm happy to change that if you think I should.

6. Title and lyrics from "Forever, Always" by Judah & The Lion. :)
This is more than some chemical reaction,
This is more than some young adult attraction,
I know, I know.
This is more than some blind infatuation,
This is more than a strong inclination,
I know, I know.

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He is high on the sofa with a gaggle of strangers when Eddie finds him. "Time to go, asshole," Eddie says. Richie is surprised. He hasn't seen Eddie since he wandered away from his friends to find where the smell of weed was coming from. Eddie's cheeks are flushed a pretty, pleasant pink, and Richie doesn't realize he's staring at the soft, pretty edges of Eddie's blush until Eddie snaps his fingers in Richie's face.

He blinks. "What?"

"I have a curfew, remember?" Eddie says.

He looks at the girl to his left. She's got blonde bangs falling into her eyes, lipstick on her teeth, and a glossy, unfocused sheen in her gaze. He pats her affectionately on the thigh. "He has a curfew," he says. Her answer is merely a smile. He lurches to his feet.

It's lucky that Eddie is there, that Eddie can push his way through the crowds of people, and Richie can follow.

He doesn't really love these kinds of parties, but this one wasn't too bad.

He's happy to go if Eddie's ready to go, though.

He's startled by the cut of cool, crisp air when they escape onto the porch. It's quieter, too. He hadn't even realized how loud the inside of the house was. He pauses. The sky above is a black velvety blanket that's littered with pinpricks of bright white light.

"Seriously?" Eddie says. "Can you be high as a kite some other fucking time? My mom will kill me."

Richie's old, beat up 1978 Volvo station wagon is parked several blocks down the street. It's kind of nice, though, to walk in the cool, dark emptiness. Once they reach the car, it takes a minute of fumbling for Richie to find his keys, but he does, and he starts the car, and they get on the road at last.

"How high are you right now?" Eddie asks.

"I'm high," Richie says. "But you, Spaghetti man, are drunk." He grins.

"I had a drink." He can hear the scowl on Eddie's drunk, flushed face. "It was foul. That whole fucking party was foul. I just spent two hours in a petri dish of drunk, sweaty bodies. Why were we even there? Bill was invited. The rest of us were just tagging along to . . . what? Drink gross beer? Stand awkwardly around the kitchen of some random junior?"
"You're cute when you're drunk, Eds."

"Shut up, fuckface."

He glances at Eddie in delight. "Your mom likes fucking this face," he says.

Eddie leans over to punch him right in the kidneys.

"Fuck!"

He is driving at a crawl, so it shouldn't be a problem when he has to swerve for a cat. He thinks it's a cat. It could also be a leaf. Or it might have been a shadow. The point is that on a dark, empty road, Richie swerves suddenly, and the car ends up driving into the woods while Eddie screams until it bumps a tree, jerking to a stop.

There's a pause.

"What the fuck?" Eddie cries, clutching at the dashboard.

Richie bursts into laughter.

"You—I—" Eddie's face pales. "I'm going to be sick," he says, and he lurches for the door, shoving it open and leaning into the night, making a gross gagging noise.

"You doing okay over there, cutie?"

In reply, he gets a gasping, wheezing noise that's blended with half a cry, half a gag.

Richie is alarmed. "Eds?" He pats Eddie on the back, but Eddie flinches away. "Eds, can you breathe? Do you need your inhaler? Eds, are you dying?" Richie is completely, irrationally certain that Eddie is dying, and he scrambles to get an old, spare inhaler out of the console, and he has a fight with his seatbelt but manages at last to clamber out of the car, and around to Eddie, only to burst into laughter again.

Eddie is just dry heaving.

"Aw, Eds," he says, grinning.

"Shut up!"

"Eds, Eds, Eds," Richie says, falling to his knees in front of his friend, "my man!" He grabs at Eddie's knees.

"Don't call me that."

He'll think later that it was because he was high.

He was high, and, in that moment, it made him stare into Eddie's face, stare at the sweep of his eyelashes and the slant of his nose and the shape of his lips. He kisses him. He just pushes right into Eddie's face, and he kisses him.

Eddie shoves him away instantly. "What the fuck?" His eyes are almost comically owlish.

"Sorry," Richie says, lifting up his hands in apology. "Sorry, I—"

"I'm not gay!"
"I know!" He swallows. "I know. I'm sorry." He pauses. "You just—you look so cute." He grins like this is a joke. "Come on." His heart is beating way too fast, but he's pretty sure that's because the kids at the party had shared really good shit with him, and he's really, really high.

"You can't just go around kissing people," Eddie says, cross.

"I know."

"It isn't funny, Rich."

"Right." He makes his face as serious as possible. "It's fun, though. Right? Kissing, I mean." His gaze flickers down to Eddie's lips, and up again. Quickly. He hopes it was quickly.

Eddie is starting at him with glassy, confusing eyes. He's drunk. And, fuck, Richie knows Eddie, and he knows that Eddie probably thinks kissing is disgusting, because it's an exchange of gross bodily fluids, and spit is probably a carrier for millions of diseases, and if there's anyone Eddie wants to kiss, it isn't the guy who's literally called Trashmouth.

"I don't think kissing is disgusting," Eddie says.

"What?"

Eddie just stares at him.

"I should go back to my seat," Richie says. "Can't forget about that curfew. Right-o, chappie!"

But just when he's starting to push to his feet, Eddie grabs Richie by the t-shirt, yanks him forward, and slams his lips to Richie's in an angry, uncoordinated kiss. Richie flails awkwardly for a second, but he gets it together, and he gets a grip on Eddie's face, tilting his chin, and pulling away slightly to slow the kiss, to focus it.

"I'm not gay," Eddie says, gasping the words, and the heat of his breath is intoxicating.

"I know."

By seventeen, Richie has made out with a handful of girls.

It's never, ever been like this.

This is a fierce, opened-mouth mess from the start, is full of spit and teeth and harsh, ragged breaths. Eds, Richie thinks. He slips his tongue into Eddie's mouth, sliding it along Eddie's tongue, and tasting the dozens of mints that Eddie must have chewed after drinking a beer. Eddie. Eddie grips fistsfuls of Richie's shirt, and he grips at his arm, at his sides, at his back. Richie is intoxicated. He brushes his thumb against Eddie's pretty pink cheek, and he shifts up slightly out of the ditch, into the car, and Eddie is shifting, too, hugging Richie closer.

He's never, ever wanted a kiss as much as he's wanted kissing Eddie.

He wants to push his hand into Eddie's hair. He wants to climb on top of Eddie, wants to kiss his throat and tug off his shirt and bite his collarbone. He wants to rub his dick against Eddie's thigh until he's coming in his pants.

He's already as hard as a rock. He's seventeen, okay? He gets a stiffy when there's a nice, strong breeze.

He doesn't know how long has passed when they break apart, panting. Eddie's lips are too red, too
plump. Richie watches Eddie wipe the spit off his face with the back of his hand.

It's quiet.

*Make a joke, Richie thinks. Use a voice. Make him laugh.*

"If I'm late, my mom will call the police," Eddie says.

"Right." He nodded. "Can't have Ms. K worrying!" He plasters a grin to his feet and surges to his feet. He forgets, though, that he's halfway into the car, and he slams his head into the roof of the car. *"Fuck!"* He stumbles backwards unsteadily.

"Shit," Eddie says.

"I'm fine!" He winces. "I'm fine!" He circles the car, tripping on something only twice, and gets in again. "O—*kay.*" He blows out a breath. "Let's blow this pop stand!"

"Hold on." Eddie leans over to inspect Richie's head. "I'm not letting you drive with severe brain damage."

Richie is silent. Eddie's fingers comb in his hair. He winces at the press of soft, cold fingers to the bump in his head.

"How many fingers am I holding up?" Eddie asks.

"Eleven." He grins. "Get it? Eleven? 'Cause you're holding up two, and it looks like—"

"Just take me home, asshole," Eddie says, slumping back against his seat again.

It takes a minute for Richie to reverse his way back onto the road, but he manages, and he starts slowly down the road again to Eddie's.

They don't really talk on the drive.

Mrs. Kaspbrak is waiting on the porch for them in the warm yellow glow of the single porch light. The door is open at her back, allowing the chord of the phone to follow her, and she's got the phone to the ear. She lowers it, though, when Richie pulls to a stop outside the house, and Eddie sighs loudly at the sight of her, closing his eyes for a moment, and swallowing visibly.

"You want me to revv it?" He hits the gas with the car in park. "Get the hell out of here?"

Eddie just shakes his head. "If she doesn't kill me, I'll see you at school." He opens the door of the car.

Before Richie can think of something to say in reply, Eddie has slammed the door of the car and is gone, crossing the yard to his mother and disappearing into the house.

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Richie doesn't actually know when he started to hang out alone with Eddie. They had been friends for years. But for a lot of those years, they only hung out together with the rest of their friends.

Stanley the manly was always Richie's number one. Eddie, though. Eddie could give it as good as he got it, and that made him worth keeping around. He didn't just roll his eyes like Stan, or laugh softly like Bill. He fired right back.
Richie got Eddie a box of fishing bait worms for his birthday when they were twelve because "exposure to germs helps build up immunity, Eds!" and, in response, Eddie got Richie a bar of soap for his birthday to use on his hands, his face, or his filthy fucking mouth.

He could always count on Eddie for a laugh.

And when they were made lab partners in biology their freshmen year, they started to hang out more.

("If our frog's a dude, where's the dick?" Richie asks, prodding at the insides of the frog.

Eddie has a hand over his eyes. "It should be easy for you to find," he says. "You have to find the super tiny dick in your pants every time you want to take a piss."

"Yowza!" Richie says, laughing.)

At first, they were hanging out because they needed to work on assignments for lab.

They started doing other things, too until suddenly it was normal for them to hang out alone. They read comics together, watched TV together, went to the arcade together, and Richie took some hand sanitizer from Eddie when he offered it, because, sure, he could believe controllers at the arcade were fucking nasty.

They were fourteen, and they were friends.

Richie got a lot of nightmares at fourteen.

(He's taken by It, but nobody comes looking for him. They don't know, or they don't care. He manages to escape, and he sees Stan, but Stan doesn't even know him, has forgotten him, and It is back, is dragging him down into the sewers again, and he screams and screams and screams, but nobody is listening to him, and Eddie sees Richie, but he stares blankly while Richie is dragged off.

Nobody cares about the weird, uncoordinated boy who makes dumb voices.)

He told Eddie about the nightmares. He had to. Eddie would listen, and Eddie would make Richie look at him, and Eddie would reassure him. It would never get you. We would never forget you. I would never abandon you. Richie didn't know why, but, of everyone, talking to Eddie was always the easiest.

By sixteen, the nightmares were starting to fade.

And, still, Eddie was his friend. Eddie was pretty fucking great, okay? They were friends. Just. Always. Best. Friends.

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At seventeen, they kiss, and he has no idea what it means.

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It isn't something they really talk about. But now that they've started, they can't seem to stop. It becomes a thing: if they're alone, they're making out.

At Richie's, they're watching a movie, and it's easy, normal. They're friends. But then the credits are rolling, and it's dark, and they're sitting right beside each other on the sofa, and, in a blink,
they're kissing. Eddie straddles Richie. Richie gets his hands under Eddie's shirt, and they're kind of humping each other, swearing under their breath.

("What are we doing?" Eddie asks, breathless.

"Kissing."

"We shouldn't be."

"Relax, Eds. It's fun. Can't we just have fun without you policing it?" He tilts his head, and he starts a line of hot, open-mouthed kisses down Eddie's neck.

"Don't call me that," Eddie says, fisting a hand in Richie's hair, and pressing in closer.)

They kiss in the Richie's after an evening at Bill's until Richie actually comes in his pants, which makes Eddie groan in disgust.

At Mike's, Stan has to look at a bird, and Mike has to show him where the bird is, and Ben likes birds, too. Or something. The point is that Richie finds himself alone with Eddie, and, sure, Eddie is glaring at him because Richie got hay in Eddie's hair, and Eddie swats Richie's hand away when Richie tries to rectify the situation, and he swears at him, and he ends up pulling him closer, and they make out against the side of the barn like the randy, desperate fuckers they are.

("Your breath smells like fucking death," Eddie says.

"Thanks," Richie says, breathing a hot, stinky breath into Eddie's face, and making Eddie shove him away in disgust.)

They are meant to study for exams at Eddie's, but Richie gets Eddie under him on the bed, and they kiss and kiss and kiss.

Richie's feels Eddie grow hard.

He isn't high or drunk or hiding in the dark when he reaches down between their bodies, palming Eddie through his trousers. "You want a hand with that?" he murmurs. He keeps a grin on his face, and he's ready to let the rejection roll right off his shoulders if Eddie tells him to fuck off.

" Depends," Eddie says, breathless. "When was the last time you washed your hands?"

Richie's grin widens, because he's going to take that for a yes, and he gets his hand down Eddie's pants, gets Eddie's dick in his dirty, unwashed hand, and he jerks him off.

He blows his wad, too, pretty soon after, humping Eddie shamelessly while Eddie pants against his neck.

Mrs. Kaspbrak is ready to glare at Richie as soon as he comes down the stairs. "Hey, Mrs. K!" he says, cheerful. She can hate him as much as she likes, but it won't change the fact that Richie's grubby hands just had their way with her precious, perfect son, and he plans to do it again and again and again.

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They don't ever talk about it, but Richie thinks about it. He's into girls, he knows. Until he started getting Eddie on the regular, the time he got to squeeze Carry Wilder's tits over her sweater while they were swapping spit at a party on the Fourth of July was probably the highlight of his life.
But he's into Eddie, too. He's really, really into Eddie. He can't get enough of Eddie.

He stares at his parents at dinner, and he wishes he could just bring the subject up with them. Hey, Mom, I like girls, so I think I'm straight. Right? But, also, I like boys, so I think I'm gay. Is that possible? Can I be a both, Dad? Is that a thing that can happen? Of course, he'd rather stab himself with a fork than actually say anything to either of them.

He thinks about it, though.

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Outside of the kisses they share in secret, Richie can safely say they remain what they have always been. Friends.

It's a regular Friday thing for the Losers to go to Blockbuster for movies they'll stay up watching for hours. Even after school has started up again, they continue to do it. On a Friday in September, Richie buys candy at the counter, wastes a couple of minutes arguing about movies with Stan, and goes looking for Eddie at last, finding him looking at the horror movie selection

He throws an arm around Eddie's shoulders. "What's your pick?"

"If I knew my pick," Eddie says, testy, "I would have brought it up to the counter."

Richie grins and grabs a movie for him. "There." He laughs when Eddie elbows him in the chest. "Come on! You know you're going to pick it anyway!" Eddie is predictable about movies.

He has some weird obsession with Nightbreed. It isn't a slasher, or a proper horror movie in any possible way. But, admittedly, it's fun to watch it for the sake of mockery.

"Are you going to kill him or not?" Richie asks, using the high, nasally voice of Narcisse in the movie, and flaring his nostrils in imitation of him, tilting his head. "Only I want his balls! And his eyes! Unless you want them?"

"I will punch you in the face," Eddie says flatly.

"Look!" There's laughter from down the aisle. "The fairies are picking a movie for their date!"

Richie just makes a face at the jocks, and turns away pointedly. "Come on." He touches Eddie's shoulder.

"Don't," Eddie says, jerking his shoulder away with a kind of violence.

There's another bout of laughter at his back when Richie watches Eddie stalk away from him.

They don't really talk on the drive to Bill's.

At the house, everyone has to pile in tightly to see the screen. Richie assumes Eddie is going to avoid being squashed in next to Richie. He may have wanted to. But they tend to sit the same way every single week: Bill always gets the recliner, and Ben always makes a mountain of pillows for himself on the floor, Mike always gets the big poufy chair, and Stan, Eddie, and Richie always share the sofa. To put it plainly, Eddie is forced to sit with Richie.

Richie is careful to keep his hands to himself. It's impossible to resist the temptation of talking, though. He keeps up a running, whispered commentary on the movies that's just for Eddie's ears, making a lot of jokes in a lot of new, terrible voices. It works. After a while, Eddie is smiling, and
laughing, and joining in.

He dozes off in the middle of movie number three. In sleep, he's softer, somehow, and he's a warm, trusting weight against Richie's side. It's nice.

In the morning, they have to get up at the crack of dawn to pile into cars again. Richie isn't big on getting up early, but he has to show his support. Ben joined track when they were freshmen, and he convinced Eddie to join when they were sophomores, and the Losers are always in the stands when the meets are at home. Ben's still get some heft on him, but he's tall now, too, big and strong and fast. And, of course, Eddie's always been a speedy little spitfire.

Before the events have even started, Richie is hollering at the top of his lungs. "Work it, Eds!" He cups his hands around his mouth. "WORK THOSE SHORTS!" He strikes a pose to demonstrate. See? Supportive.

In reply, Eddie flips Richie off with both hands.

Mrs. Kaspbrak is there to support her son, too, of course.

She's made it clear that she does not approve of his decision to join the team, but he refused to listen to her opinion. He still has asthma attacks occasionally, born of panic. He isn't asthmatic, though, and he knows that now, and he can run without fucking keeling over. And, actually, he can run really, really fast. Richie was there when Eddie told his mother that if she really loved him, she would just support his interest in track, and it seemed to have struck a nerve with her, because she buys him what he needs for it and she comes to his meets and she supports him.

On that particular, rainy morning, she's got an eye on Richie from the start.

He waves. She purses her lips at him. He ignores her happily for the rest of the meet.

Eddie wins the 300-meter hurdle. He wins! Richie almost falls off the bleaches in his excitement, screaming and cheering and jumping around wildly. He won! He smoked the rest of those slow motherfuckers! He looks at the bleachers after, panting, and clutching at his knees, and when he makes eye contact with Richie, Richie goes berserk, and Eddie fucking beams at him.

To make it the best fucking day ever, Ben wins the 800-meter dash right after.

The moment the meet is over, they jump the boys.

They hug them, and slap their backs, passing them around to give them hug after hug after hug. Richie spanks Ben in celebration.

It's Eddie he wants to get a hold of, though, and he does, tucking him under his arm, and ruffling his hair, making him laugh. He's startled when Eddie looks at him with such happy, shining eyes. And, for a split-second, he's tempted to kiss him right then, right there in front of everyone.

He wants to. Badly. He doesn't.

He leans in, instead, and he smacks a loud, wet kiss to Eddie's cheek, punctuating it with a "mwah!" He does it again and again. "I'm so proud of my little Eds Spagheds!" he exclaims.

"Get off me!" Eddie says, laughing and shoving him away, swatting at his hands. "You're such a piece of shit! Get off!"
If Eddie was mad at him earlier, he's very clearly over it now.

"Eddie!" calls Mrs. Kaspbrak.

"I'm going to breakfast with my friends, Ma!" Eddie says, quick. "I'll see you later!" He starts almost herding the group towards the cars, and they know why, that he wants to escape Mrs. K before she can insist that he needs to rest after that exertion, and they are happy to help.

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He finds Ben working in the back of the library. "Haystack, my man!" He drops into a seat across from him.

"Don't you have calculus right now?" Ben asks.

"I got kicked out. I can't remember what precisely Mrs. Patrowski said, but something like this isn't comedy hour, Mr. Tozier, or some such thing. I think the word impertinent might have been thrown in there. Whatever. No wuckin' furries, mate! What are you up to in here? Some nerd shit?"

Bens holds up a book to show the cover.


"It's good."

"You have weird tastes, man."

He shrugs. "It's kind of depressing, but it makes you think. I think Bev would really like it."

"Bev?" Richie can't help his surprise.

"Yeah. I keep a list of books I think she'd like. Just, you know. We used to exchange book recommendations a lot. It's habit."

"Shit," Richie says, "I haven't thought about Bev in, like, years."

(The thought of Bev makes him think of the sewers, of the bodies that floated, of a clown. It. He suppresses a shiver. Fuck. He hasn't thought about It in a long, long time.)

"She never did come to visit, did she?"

"We were keeping up with each other for a while," Ben says. "But we both got busy, and—stuff. It's hard to keep in touch when you're just writing letters." He drops his gaze to his book, and Richie's struck suddenly with sympathy for Ben.

"You really had it bad for her, didn't you? I mean, I know everybody kind of had a thing for Bev. But you really, really had a thing."

"She was cool."

He nods. "She was."

"I thought we might be able to meet up once," Ben says. "In Chicago. My uncles live nearby, and when I went to visit them over the summer, I thought I could maybe take the train into the city to see her, and we could go to the Chicago Pride Parade, and maybe see some of the museums, or something. I wrote her about it. It didn't work out, though."
"Sorry."

"It's okay. Chicago was cool."

"Fuck, yes," Richie says. "That's where my fucking awesome keychain is from." He pulls his keys from his pocket to display that keychain that reads my friend went to Chicago, and all I got was this lousy keychain.

"I'm glad you like your totally original, obviously expensive gift," Ben says.

"I appreciate high quality, Benjamin." He tips his chair back until it tips, spinning the keys on his finger. "You didn't really go to a museum, though, right?"

"I went to three."

"Haystack."

"The Art Institute was actually really great. My uncles loved it, too. And I just went to the Pride Parade with them, so the trip really was a lot of fun."

"I take it I'm supposed to know what the Pride Parade is?"

"You know." Ben tilts his head like that's supposed to make it clear. "The Pride Parade. Chicago's Gay Pride Parade. It's the huge deal. You've really never even heard of it? Happens every year. People get dressed up, there's music, and it's just, you know, to celebrate.

"Right." He stares. "To celebrate . . . gay people?"

"It's fun."

"Are you . . .?" He raises his eyebrows.

"Gay?" Ben says. "No. My uncles are gay, though, and I support them."

Richie is kind of floored.

"Is that okay with you?" Ben asks.

He blinks. "Yeah. Sure, yeah. I mean, I haven't been to any parades lately, but I'm cool with—everybody." He shrugs. He kind of wishes he hadn't gotten them into this conversation.

"Good."

"Mr. Hanscom." It's the librarian. "Mr. Tozier." She puts a hand on her hip. "Are we studying over here, or are we talking?"

"We're actually just leaving now," Ben says, smiling, and standing, starting to pack up.

She leaves, and Ben watches her leave, glances at Richie, and, covertly, unzips the front of his backpack just slightly for Richie to see the pack of cigarettes hiding inside. "I could go for some fresh air right about now." He smiles. "What about you?"


They spend the rest of the period smoking behind the school.
"If you were gay, I would be okay with it," Richie says. "For the record." He blows the smoke from his mouth.

"For the record?" Ben says.

Richie turns his head lazily to look at him.

"If you were gay, I would be okay with it." He smiles.

"Cool," Richie says.

This is the part where he should say that isn't, where he should make a joke about how many ladies at school have enjoyed his wang, or how the defense calls Eddie's mom to the stand to testify on behalf of his dick.

"Do you want to hear a voice I'm working on?" he says.

"Hit me."

"Awesome." He stubs his cigarette on the ground. "Ready? It's French. I hope you like wee wee jokes."

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Richie smiles when Mrs. K opens the door to him. "It's Sunday," she says, a hand on her hip. She fills the whole fucking door, blocking his entrance.

"The day of rest, I know," Richie says. "Try telling that to our teachers, though." He shakes his head.

"What do you want?"

"Oh." He blinks. "I'm here to work with Eddie on a project for physics. He didn't tell you about it? He's expecting me. You can check with him. I can just come in quickly, and grab the stuff for it, do it for both of us."

She narrows her eyes. "Wait." She closes the door in her face.

The door opens again pretty quickly. "—going to make him do it by himself!" Eddie says. He turns to Richie with a look of exasperation. "Come on, Rich. We can work on it in my room."

Richie follows Eddie up the stairs.

"You know," Eddie says, closing the door of his bedroom, "one of these days my mom is going to call the school to complain about the amount of projects I'm assigned, and the jig is going to be up, because she's going to realize I haven't been assigned any projects in physics." He sits at his desk.

Richie toes off his shoes before climbing onto the bed. "I had to get out of my house. I think I've filled out an application to every fucking school in America, and my dad has more for me."

"Seriously? You've already applied to, like, twenty different schools."

"I know!"

"Have you picked which you'll actually go to?"
He scoffs. "I have to get in somewhere first," he says.

"Is that a joke?"

"What?"

"You're going to get in everywhere, dumbass," Eddie says. "You don't even have to try, and you ace every single class. What's your GPA? 5.0? And your handwriting is shit, but I've read your papers before, and you can write, like, surprisingly well, so I bet all of your essays are awesome, too."

"Well, I declare," Richie says, slapping a hand to his chest, "you are making me blush. Keep it up, and I'll be fixin' to give you a kiss, cutie." He bats his eyes at Eddie.

"Something in your eye, Rich?" Eddie says, unimpressed.

Richie grins. "What about you?" he asks. "You never talk about where you're applying."

Eddie's face changes with that. "I'm not really applying anywhere right now," he says, busying himself rummaging in his desk for something.

"What?" Richie is surprised. "You aren't even going to apply to anywhere?"

"What's the point?" He looks at Richie. "I'm going to end up at Eastern Maine. My mom's already started talking about how she is saving to buy me a car for the commute." He shrugs.

"Eddie, no," Richie says.

"Richie."

"You can't just go to the closest community college, and commute!" He's incredulous. "Come on! Don't you want to get out of here?! Get away from your mother?"

"Obviously," Eddie scoffs, "but—"

"But?!"

"It isn't that easy! You know how my mom is. And I have been thinking about trying to apply to a couple of schools in New York."

"You should!" Richie says. "I'm applying to NYU."

"Really?"

"I'm applying basically everywhere, remember? You should apply to some in New York. We could go to New York together! Or, wait, you have to apply to some schools in California, too. You want me to bring over some of the brochures from UCLA? It's probably my number one choice right now."

"California?" Eddie says, doubtful.

"Cowabunga!"

Eddie just shakes his head. "My mother would never let me go to California."

But the more that Richie thinks about it, the better the whole idea seems. He hadn't really wanted to admit to himself how much he wanted to go to UCLA in case he was rejected, but he really 

want to, and if Eddie was going, too? It would be the most fucking awesome thing ever.

"If she even hears you talking about me going to California, she'll handcuff me to my bed."

"Kinky."

"Beep, beep, Richie."

"You have to apply at least," Richie says. "You don't have to tell her about it. Just think about it. The both of us in California? It would be the bomb, Spaghetti man!

"I'll—" Eddie sighs. "I'll think about it."

"Good."

"Now can we stop talking about fucking college applications, and talk about this?" He holds up the X-Men Vol. 2, #37 comic.

"Shit!" Richie's eyes widen. "Is that Generation Next? Fuck, yes! FINALLY! Have you started it yet?"

"I just got it." Eddie joins Richie on the bed. "I was waiting for you."

They read it side by side, lying on their stomachs, and they have a way of reading it: reading a page in silence, exclaiming at the twists, and arguing over characterizations, tossing around predictions, and flipping the page to read the next in silence.

They finish this comic pretty quickly.

"Fuck," Richie says. "That's it?! I need more now!"

"It was good," Eddie says.

Richie just flops onto his back in frustration. At the quiet that follows, he looks at Eddie, and sees that Eddie is looking at him. He opens his mouth, only to forget what he was going to say when Eddie pushes onto his elbow, and reaches to remove Richie's glasses.

Richie goes still.

There is something weirdly intimate to Eddie taking his glasses off his face so easily, so casually. It makes Richie's heard beat stupidly faster. Eddie has demanded that Richie hand over his glasses for Eddie to clean plenty of times in the past, but he's never just taken them right off Richie's face. And, today, he doesn't start wiping off the smudges.

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And, today, he doesn't start wiping off the smudges.

He turns, stretches, and places them carefully on the stand by his bed. "They always get in the way," he explains. He scoots back close to Richie, and he touches his face, leaning in.

It's a slow, gentle kiss.

Richie's hand shakes slightly when he reaches up to touch Eddie's side, to slip his hand under Eddie's t-shirt, and run his hand up the soft, smooth skin of Eddie's back.

Eddie's got fucking soft skin, okay?

The slow, gentle kiss turns dirty. Eddie presses closer. Richie slides his hand down again, into
Eddie's pants, and squeezes his ass. Eddie's breath hitches slightly against Richie's mouth. Richie isn't going to ignore the stiffy that's poking his thigh, though, and he shifts, because he's right-handed, and he isn't about to give Eddie some half-assed, left-y handjob.

"Wait, wait, wait." Eddie's hand grabs Richie's wrist. "Sit up."

"I've got my hand on your dong, and you're telling me to wait?" He raises his eyebrows.

"Did you just call my dick a dong? Seriously? How the fuck old are you?"

In reply, Richie just squeezes Eddie's dick.

"Fuck. Here. Wait." He unbuttons Richie's trousers to reach in, to take Richie's dick in his hand.
"Now—" He meets Richie's gaze, starts to smile, and gives him a hot, messy kiss.

They jerk each other off together.

It's the best fucking that thing that's ever happened to Richie.

They pant into each other's mouths on Eddie's small, neatly made bed with soft, yellow morning sunshine coming in through the window, grunting, and swearing, hands down each other's pants.

Richie knows when he's about to come, but he'll be damned if he comes without Eddie. He surges in closer to kiss Eddie sloppily, and he tilts his head, presses his mouth to Eddie's neck, and bites. It works: Eddie makes the hottest fucking noise before he's coming, and Richie is coming, too.

Eddie has baby wet wipes for them to clean up with after.

He changes into fresh, clean shorts, too. Richie gets an eyeful of his pale little ass. Even as blind as he is without his glasses, the sight is enough to make him half hard again.

"How the fuck do you get these so dirty?" Eddie asks.

He blinks. "What?"

Eddie is cleaning his glasses. "Doesn't it bother you having to look through dirty finger print smudges to see?" He's smiling, though, when he hands them back to Richie.

And when Richie looks at him, he thinks, I'm taking you to California with me. It's decided. There's no way he's leaving this perfect human being to rot in Derry, Maine, with his crazy, overbearing mother.

---

He ends up applying to UCLA for Eddie. He has to. The deadline is earlier than most, and whenever he brings up the subject, Eddie just brushes him off. "I don't have the money for the application," he says. "I don't think I'd even get in, Rich," he says. "My mom cried when she found the application for CUNY York College," he says. It's really just easier for Richie to do it himself.

He spends more time writing the essay than he spent on any of the essays for his own, twenty-something applications.

He forges Eddie's signature, and he mails it.

---
Eddie is holed up with his mother for most of the gray, snowy break from school.

Richie is left to have a quiet, boring Christmas with his parents, to bother Stan when he can, and to keep a list in his head of jokes he's going to regale Eddie with when they return to school.

He sees Eddie down the hallway at school, cups his hand to his mouth, and screams his name.

Eddie just flips him the bird.

He's in a mood.

At lunch, Bill asks Eddie how his break was.

"Depressing," Eddie says, unwrapping his sandwich. "My mom couldn't stop talking about AIDS coming to Derry. She was relentless. How the fuck is AIDS going to come to Derry?" He shakes his head.

"Remember that time you got a splinter at the lake," Richie says, "and your mother had you tested for STDs?"

"For a splinter?" Ben says.

"Let's talk about something else," Eddie says, sour. "Please."

---

They're at Richie's when it happens. It's a Sunday. Rainy. Richie is making a mixtape for Mike. Eddie is sprawled on his bed, doing his reading for English, and offering occasional commentary on the music.

"How did you manage to finish this book in an afternoon?" Eddie asks. "I can't read more than a page without falling asleep."

"Fortitude," Richie says, breezy.

Eddie huffs softly in reply.

It makes Richie look at him, and once he's looking at him, it's hard to look away again. He's twisted every which way on the bed in the hour that he's been trying to read, and he's wound up lying on his back with his feet on the backboard. His shirt has ridden up slightly, and his hair is curling from when he was caught in the rain on his way over earlier, and his shorts are way too short.

Richie's eyes travel along the lines of Eddie's small, pale thighs.

Eddie's a runner, and it shows.

Richie wants suddenly to touch Eddie's thighs, to feel the muscles flexing under his hands.

He's been having these kinds of thoughts a lot lately. He doesn't just want to kiss Eddie, or get him off. He wants to touch him. He wants to play with his hair, wants to run his hands along the smooth, taught skin of his stomach, wants to kiss the freckles on the tops of his shoulders.

He wants to fuck him, too. He has that dream a lot, actually. He just wants more, and he wants it with Eddie. If that makes him gay, fine. He's gay.
"Fine." Richie sighs dramatically. "I'll save you."

"Save me?"

Richie pushes back from his desk, and starts to head for the bed. "The things I do for you, honestly," he says. He climbs onto the bed, throwing a leg over Eddie's hip to straddle him.

"No," Eddie says, shaking his head. "Nope. I have to finish this book.

"I'll tell you how it ends." He leans in for a kiss.

Eddie shoves his hand in Richie's face. Richie has to lick it, okay? Eddie makes a cute little noise of disgust, pulling a face, and yanking his hand away to wipe it on Eddie's shirt. Richie is inspired. His grin starts slow, and Eddie sees it, understands it. His eyes widen with the start of a protest, but Richie is already lunging forward to lick a wet, messy stripe up the side of Eddie's face.

"You disgusting, fat-tongued—!

Richie just laughs, and blows a loud, spit-slick raspberry into Eddie's cheek while Eddie struggles under him. "What's the matter, Eds?" He sticks his tongue in Eddie's ear.

"Get that THING out of my EAR!"

"I can stick my tongue down your throat, but I can't put it in your ear?"

Eddie gets wise, and jabs a hand in Richie's armpit, making him jump, and loosening his hold, and Eddie's able to flip them over, swatting at Richie's grabby, eager hands.

"Aw, cutie," Richie says. "If you wanted to be on top, you could've just asked!

"You are the bane of my existence," Eddie says, matter-of-fact.

Richie grins. It's been weeks since they've done this, since they've been alone, and able to touch. Ever since they got back from winter break, Eddie's been busy. Now, though? He brushes his hand up Eddie's thigh. "Want me to make it up to you?" he asks. His fingers sneak easily under the edge of Eddie's little sporty shorts.

"I want to read my book."

"You don't want me to lick your hand or your face or you ear," he continues. "What about your dick?" He grins.

Eddie's face freezes. "What? You—you aren't serious right now."

"Am, too," Richie says. "I want to."

"You want to—"

"Blow your pretty little dick? Yup. Don't look at me like that, Eds. I'll do it. I'll blow you."

"Stop." Eddie says the word so sharply it cuts. "That's—" Eddie isn't reacting like Richie had though he would. He is shaking his head, is scrambling off Richie. He can't even look at Richie. "That's so fucking gay, Richie."
"Eds—"

"Don't call me that!" His chest is rising too quickly. "Don't—"

"I'm sorry."

Eddie tears across the room, and searching desperately through the drawers of Richie's desk, and he finds it. An inhaler. He shoves it into his mouth, closing his eyes, and breathing in desperately.

Richie doesn't know what to do, what to say. "Did I miss something?" he asks.

"You missed the part where I'm not fucking gay!"

"Right," Richie says. "Eddie, what the fuck is the matter with you? Why are you acting like this? I thought—"

"You were wrong," Eddie says. "Okay? You were wrong. Just because we've made out before, doesn't mean—" He clenches his jaw, unclenches it. "That was just us being fucking horny and desperate and stupid, and it's over," Eddie says. "It's over. I'm not some dirty queer. Got it?"

Richie is stunned. "Got it." His chest is burning with a cocktail of feelings he can't even begin to process. "Here." He tosses Eddie's book at him. "You should probably finish at home. I don't want to distract you." He doesn't wait for Eddie to spit something else awful at him. "I have to—" he starts, and doesn't bother finishing, opening the door of his bedroom, and leaving, making a beeline for the bathroom, and slamming the door shut behind him.

He catches his gaze in the reflection.

What the fuck?

He runs the faucet for a moment, staring at the rush of water. He splashes his face with some. The cold is biting, and he grabs for a towel, drying off quickly, and breathing into the towel.

After a couple of minutes, he emerges from the bathroom. Eddie is gone. He left in such a hurry, he forgot his Walkman.

---

He smokes a lot that afternoon. If his parents notice that he's super fucking high at dinner, they don't say anything. He kind of wishes they would.

---

He goes to Eddie's to talk to him. He needs to tell him that he's sorry he came on way too strong, that he thought they were kind of going down that road, but he can put the brakes on if Eddie isn't comfortable. He rehearses the speech in his head.

Mrs. K won't let him into the house.

He sees past her to where Eddie sits on the living room floor, watching the TV, and his back is to Richie, but there's no way he can't hear Richie. Something in Richie's insides flips unpleasantly. He leaves without trying to push his way past Mrs. K, though he's done it before, and he knows he can. If Eddie doesn't want him there, he's not going to push his way in. The whole drive home, he can't stop seeing Eddie's rigid back. Eddie might like messing around with him, but he doesn't want more than that. And, eventually, he's going to get bored of even that, and decide he doesn't want
anything with Richie.

Richie wonders if that time has already come, and Eddie is done with him.

---

He decides he'll cut ties first. He's tired of having to pretend he isn't actually into Eddie, of having to pretend he believes there's something wrong with him for wanting to be with Eddie, for wanting to kiss him and blow him and love him. If Eddie doesn't want Richie, then Richie doesn't want Eddie.

He can't avoid Eddie entirely, of course.

Instead, he ignores him.

He doesn't sit beside him in class, or stop by his locker to make a crack about his mother. He jokes with Stan and Bill and Ben at lunch, and is careful to keep his gaze from wandering to Eddie. He spends his afternoon at Ben's, and doesn't really acknowledge when Eddie shows up with Bill to watch a movie.

It takes about a week for Eddie to corner him at his locker.

"You're seriously just going to ignore me forever?" Eddie says, glaring.

"Sorry, Kaspbrak." His voice is steady, emotionless. "I thought I was doing you a favor." He can't look at Eddie, though. "I figured you didn't want to hang out with some dirty queer like me."


Richie just slams his locker shut again, and passes him. He hates that he wants to cry. He hears footsteps chase after him, and he's ready to jerk away from the hand that grabs at his arm, only it isn't Eddie who's grabbed him.

Stan pulls Richie to the side. "What the hell?" he breathes.

"What?"

"I heard you talking to Eddie." Stan's eyes are wide with disbelief. "Did he really say that to you?"

Richie can't meet his gaze. "Basically."

That starts a rollercoaster of shit, of course. Stan is pissed. He tells Bill about it right after English with Richie in tow, and Bill insists Eddie would never, ever say that, but Ben says that, well, Eddie is kind of like that sometimes.

At lunch, Stan confronts Eddie.

In that moment, Richie is unable to look at any of them.

"I didn't say that," Eddie says.

"Really? Then why has Richie been ignoring you for a week?"

"We got in a fight. Yes. But I never said Richie—"

"Richie isn't a liar," Stan hisses. "He said you said it. What's the matter with you?"
"I didn't say it!" His voice is hot with indignation. "Rich! Tell them—" He stops, and some of the fire leaves him. "Tell them I didn't say that to you," he says, swallowing.

Richie has to look at him. "Okay." He sniffs. "You're right." He looks at Stan. "He didn't say that to me. But I'm sure Eddie wouldn't want me tell you what actually happened, what he actually said. Or am I wrong, Kaspbrak? Do you want to tell them, or should I?"

Eddie is silent.

"S-someone tell us," Bill says.

"Forget it." Richie pushes up from the table, grabbing his lunch. "It's not worth it."

Stan follows him.

"I didn't mean to lie to you." Richie leans against his car, lighting a cigarette, and avoiding actually looking at Stan. "I just..." He shakes his head. "He didn't say it, but it's what he meant."

"Tell me what happened," Stan says.

He takes a drag. "He didn't say I was some dirty queer." He blows the smoke out again. "He said that he wasn't. This was right after I said I wanted to blow him, because I like kissing him and I like touching him and I like jerking him off, and I like him, and I thought he liked me, too, and I thought—" He cuts himself off, because he's said more than enough.

He realizes that he's completely fucking terrified.

What is Stan going to think?

Stan rocks on his heels for a second before leaning over suddenly to hug him.

Richie is startled. But. "Stan the man." He clears his throat. "Is that a pencil in your pocket, or are you just happy to see me?"

Stan laughs, and pulls away awkwardly, shoving at Richie.

He never asks Richie if he's gay.

Richie's glad.

He is what he is, and Stan? Stan gets it. He never should have worried it would be any different.

They spend the whole weekend just dicking around. They play Stan's boring ass games on his DS for hours, giving each other a lot of shit, and falling to sleep on the sofa in front of the TV to the tinny, repetitive tune of a game. They listen to records. They drive to the Barrens, and he lights up while Stan watches his birds. And, for the weekend, Richie is distracted.

(Your memories are your own, and nobody should be able to take them from you, to make you forget the people who made you who you are, who loved you when you didn't love yourself.

It really was a piece of shit.)

Bill calls Richie a couple of times on Sunday, but Maggie, thankfully, understands the wild, cutting gestures that Richie makes at her, and she tells Bill that Richie can't come to the phone right now.

If there's a line in the sand, Richie knows where Bill stands.
And since Bill isn't some dirty queer, Richie is sure that Eddie is happy to have him.

---

His parents ask him what he wants for his birthday that year. "It's a pretty big year!" says Maggie. He doesn't bother thinking twice about it before he requests the house to himself for the night on Saturday.

"If you had more than five friends, I'd worry you were going to throw a party," Went says.

He gets what he wants, though.

They agree to spend the night at a cousin's, warn him repeatedly against the follies of trying to throw a party, and leave at two in the afternoon on Saturday.

Half an hour, and Mike, Stan, and Ben are at the door with alcohol in tow.

Stan isn't interesting in drinking, of course, and Ben only sips at the vodka he's watered down significantly with Coke, but Mike is more than happy to drink with Richie on his birthday.

By five o'clock, Richie is wasted.

Stanley is DJ for the night, and Richie is dancing around already with Mike when Stan decides to play a record that includes Bob Seger's hit, so, of course, he tears off his pants, tries to pop his collar only to realize that he isn't wearing a collar, yells "Risky Business, bitch!" anyway, and slides dramatically across the room in his socks.

Mike isn't a buzzkill, so joins in, jumping on the sofa, and using a bottle of Jack for a microphone, belting the lyrics.

Richie is spinning in sloppy, drunk circles when Bill shows up.

Eddie is with him.

"H-happy Birthday," Bill says, smiling, and holding up a small, wrapped present for Richie to see.

"Why aren't you wearing pants?" Eddie asks.

Richie leans heavily on Mike, because he really can't fucking deal with this on his birthday. "Is my present some alcohol? That's what I requested. Is it the best whiskey bottle you could find?" He props his elbow on Mike's shoulder, leans his head in his hand.

"I—" Bill is slightly at a loss. "I d-d-didn't know that's what you w-wanted."

"Whatever," Richie says. "Time to party. Staniel! Turn it UP!" He shoves away from Mike.

The rest of the night is kind of a blur.

After getting loudly egged on, Mike proves that he can, in fact, pick up Richie, throw him over his shoulder, and spin in a circle while Richie screams hysterically in delight. Ben tries to teach Richie how to blow a circle of smoke. Stan turns off the music to make chicken noises for Richie when Richie starts performing a pretty fucking great chicken dance.

At some blurry point in the evening, Bill is drunk, too, and he wraps his arms around Richie's neck, and they half-dance, half-sway with their foreheads pressed together, belting out lyrics to a song.
"Billy," Richie says, panting.

"I l-ove you, Richie. D-d-do you know that? I l-ove you."

In reply, Richie smashes Bill's cheeks with his hands and leans up, smacking a loud, wet kiss to his forehead.

He remembers, in the morning, that at some point during the night, he tripped, and he stumbled into Eddie, but he thinks he managed to move away quickly.

---

He wakes up on the sofa with a crick in his neck, pantsless, and his head in Mike's lap. The curtains over the window are glowing at the edges with bright morning light. He takes in the fact that Mike snores with his mouth wide open, files it away for use in the future, and sits up, yawning and wincing and surveying the mess that's littered in front of him.

Stan is curled up in a ball on the recliner.

Bill is sprawled on the floor.

It looks like Eddie is gone. Ben, too. Ben must have given Eddie a ride.

He heads to the kitchen. He needs a glass of water. His mouth tastes disgusting, and his tongue is a dead, dry sandpaper-y thing, and, fuck, his brain fucking hurts.

In the kitchen, he sees his present from Bill.

His eyes move quickly past it, though, and stick on the bottle of mouthwash that's sitting right beside it. Eddie. Across the label, TRASHMOUTH is written in neat, block capital letters. It's what they always do. Richie gets Eddie some disgusting, germ-infested gift for his birthday while Eddie gets Richie some random, unnecessary personal hygiene product.

It's a thing.

Or it was. He's surprised Eddie bothered this year.

He picks up the bottle, stares at Eddie's perfect block writing, and dumps the whole stupid thing in the trash.

---

They are assigned a project in physics. It figures when Richie doesn't have any reason to use that excuse any more, it would actually become a thing. The teacher says she'll let them pick their partners, and she starts saying names, making the students choose partners right then, right there.

"Mr. Kaspbrak," she says. "Partner?"

"Richie," Eddie says.

Richie is actually shocked enough to turn in his seat, to look at Eddie.

Eddie is staring at his notebook. Richie can't believe this shit. The teacher is writing it down, though. It's done. They are going to have to work on this fucking project together.

They have to start planning their project in class that day, which means Richie has to move to sit
with Eddie. It's awkward. But it's been two months to the day that everything went straight to hell, which means awkward has become a kind of new, miserable normal.

"So." He taps his pencil rapidly against the table. "Could we just wrap the egg in a pillow?

"I don't think that would work," Eddie says.

"What's your idea?"

"I think we should be friends again."

"If a pillow isn't going to keep the egg from cracking, I doubt our love is going to do the trick."

"I'm serious."

Richie can feel Eddie's gaze.

"I hate fighting with you. I—can't things just go back to normal? I know I'm the reason everything's so fucked up. I know, and I'm sorry. I'm really fucking sorry, Richie. I swear. If I could take it back, I would. Can't things just go back to the way they used to be?"

"What is it you want to take back?"

"I—what I said."

"Why?" He meets Eddie's gaze at last. "It wasn't true?"

Eddie hesitates. "Richie, I—"

He shakes his head. "Forget it. It's okay. I get it. And I get that you want things to go back to normal, but they just can't. I can't." He pushes to his feet. "Ms. Griswald? I have to take a piss."

"Language, Mr. Tozier," says the teacher.

He is allowed to escape the classroom, though. He spends the rest of physics back behind the school, smoking by himself. Sometimes, he wishes he could make himself hate Eddie.

---

He goes to a party with a couple of guys he's kind of friends with. He hasn't been to a big, raucous house party in over a year. He doesn't get invited to this kind of party, because he isn't Bill, and he hasn't yet grown out of being a loser in the eyes of everyone at school, and he only ever goes to parties like this when he tags along with someone else.

"Hi, Richie," says a girl.

He blinks.

"Got a light?" She's got a cigarette in between her fingers.

"Sure."

He's surprised when she joins him on the sofa after she gets the light, when she offers him a drag. "You know, you'd look less like a dweeb if you got contacts," she says. She pushes a hand into his hair, and he can smell the scent of her flowery, cloying perfume.
He hears someone come into his bedroom, but he's listening to Soundgarden, and his eyes are closed, and he assumes it's his mother to drop off a load of laundry.

He sits up indignantly when she has the audacity to touch the volume.

It isn't his mother.

"I can't hear myself think when it's that loud," Eddie says.

"What the fuck do you want?"

"I got in a fight with my mom." He takes the chair by Richie's old, lopsided desk. "It was bad. It—this came in the mail." He holds up an envelope.

Richie is unimpressed. "Should I know what that is?"

"It's a letter of acceptance to UCLA. Ma had a lot to say about me applying to a school in California. Thing is, I didn't apply to a school in California."

"You got in?"

"I got in. Why didn't you tell me that you applied for me? It was you. Right? I know it was you."

He shrugs. "What's it matter?" He drops onto his back again, closing his eyes. "You aren't going to go when you could stay within half an hour of your mother. And, believe me, I'm no longer under the impression that I'm an incentive to go to California."

It takes a moment for Eddie to reply. "Did you get in, too?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry," Eddie says, quiet. "Rich, I'm really, really sorry. I shouldn't have said it."

"We've already had this conversation."

"Can you just . . . ?" Eddie makes a small, frustrated noise. "Fine," he says. "Here's something we haven't talked about. I heard you went to that party at Lucy Atkinson's last week."

"Seriously?"

"You went with those guys you like to smoke with? That's what people were saying. And you made out with Jen?"

Richie has to sit up again. "The fuck does that have to do with anything?"

"You made out with Jen."

"Seriously?" Richie is incredulous. "Yes, I made out with Jen. So? Is this you calling me a slut, or something?"

"No, I just—"

"For the record, I never made out with anyone else when we were . . ." He clenches his jaw. "I never even looked at anyone else when I thought I got to have you. That's over now, though. I got
the message. We aren't a thing. And, yes, I've figured out that I like making out with girls, and I like making out with boys, too, and I don't know why. It's just what I like. If you have a problem with that, just fuck off."

"I don't like making out with girls," Eddie says. "Just the thought of kissing a girl is . . ."

"Better keep that shit under wraps, Kaspbrak."

Eddie huffs. "Can you not be an asshole for, like, five fucking seconds?"

"Me?"

"Yes." Eddie has the gall to glare at him. "Shut the fuck up for a second. Let me talk. I need to say this." He breathes in, and out. "My mom—she lost it when this came in the mail. She was crying about how I wanted to leave her and how I didn't love her and how she needed me—"

"I get the picture," Richie says, terse.

"Would you let me fucking finish?" Eddie yells.

Richie makes a show of pursing his lips, of crossing his arms, and glaring at Eddie.

"Thank you," Eddie says. He sighs. "She was upset, and I told her I wasn't sure I was going to California, but I wanted to consider my options, and I said you were going to California, and—Richie, she called you—" He stops. "I—hearing it come from her, I . . ." He shakes his head.

There's a lot Richie wants to say.

"She was going on and on about how I should stay away from you, or you'd infect me, and she—I just—that's when I realized she'd done it to me again. She'd—she did it to me again, Rich. And I let her."

Richie frowns. "What are you talking about?"

"She made me think that I was sick. Again. She made me think there was something wrong with me for—for—" He isn't looking at Richie, is looking at anything but Richie. "She's been saying shit to me my whole life about dirty, diseased boys, and she's really been going on about it lately, because she must have known that I—that we—" He looks at Richie at last. "She made me think something was wrong with me, and I—" His eyes are glassy with tears.

"Eddie." Richie is scrambling to his feet before he even realizes what he's doing. "There's nothing wrong with you."

"I'm gay," he says. "I am. I know I am. I've always fucking known. But—fuck, I miss you. I miss you so, so much. And I hate that I hurt you, and I hate that I lost you, and I hate that I believed her, that I still can't get her out of my head—"

"You didn't lose me," Richie says, desperate.

"And when you said you wanted to blow me, I just had this gut reaction that I couldn't even explain. I was terrified."

"It's okay."

"I don't want to be this way," he gasps.
Richie doesn't know if he means that he doesn't want to be gay, or that he doesn't want to think it's wrong. He doesn't care. He stumbles to cross the distance between them, and he pulls Eddie out of the chair to hold him, to hug him.

"I'm sorry," Eddie says, crying.

"I'm sorry, too," Richie says. "Fuck, Eds. I'm sorry, too."

"I want to go to California with you." His face is pressed into Richie's neck, and his voice is thick with tears, but Richie hears him. "I want to be with you. I want—" He clings to Richie, curls his fingers in Richie's t-shirt, holds on like he's afraid of letting go for fear of losing him entirely.

Richie hugs him tightly right back.

And when Eddie tilts his head up at last, his eyes are wet with tears, and it nearly makes Richie cry, too.

He doesn't, though.

Eddie's eyes drop to his lips. And, after a beat, they surge in together. The kiss is desperate, frenzied.

Richie can taste the salt of Eddie's tears, and he holds Eddie's face in his hands, deepening the kiss, wanting everything Eddie is willing to give, and he loves that Eddie is desperate, too, that Eddie is clutching at him, is clutching at his arms, at his shoulders, at his back.

Their difference in height never makes kissing on even ground very easy, though.

They stumble their way back towards Richie's bed.

The back of Richie's legs hit the bed, and he sits, meaning to pull Eddie into his lap, wanting to grab Eddie and lay him out on the bed, to climb on top of him and cover him in kisses. But Eddie just stands between Richie's legs, kissing him desperately, and pulling at Richie's unbuttoned, long-sleeved flannel shirt. Richie is happy to shrug it off. And when Eddie starts tugging up Richie's t-shirt, Richie lifts his arms to make that easier, too, and he's quick to return the favor, to pull off Eddie's polo. The blood rushes straight to his dick when Eddie kisses his way slowly down Richie's neck, down his chest.

He starts to unzip Richie's jeans.

Richie thinks Eddie is going to jerk him off. He's wrong. Eddie tugs Richie's jeans down completely, and his briefs, too, and, suddenly, he's got Richie's dick in his hand, and he's dropped to his knees.

"Eddie, wait—"

Eddie looks at him. "You don't want me to?"

"No—I do! Of course I do. But you don't have to. I don't want you to if you don't—"

Eddie shifts up to kiss him again. "I want to," he breathes. "I get to." He swallows. "You're mine. Right?"

"Fuck, yes, I am."

"Good." He smiles. "I, um. I don't know what I'm doing."
"Me, neither."

Eddie is smiling at him with a tenderness that makes Richie feel almost full to bursting, and when Eddie reaches up to wipe at the tears that still cling to his lashes, Richie reaches up, too, and does it for him, swiping his thumbs gently under each of Eddie's eyes.

"We can figure this out," Richie says, softly, and he doesn't mean the blowjob.

"Yeah," Eddie says.

"C'mere." He pulls Eddie closer, wrapping his arms around this perfect, perfect boy, and hugging him. "I shouldn't have walked out on you so easily," he murmurs.

"I needed it. I needed the push."

He smells like soap and deodorant and clean, unscented lotion with SPF 25, and Richie can't bother to hide the way he turns his face into Eddie's neck, the way he breathes in deeply.

"Now I just need you," Eddie says.

"You've got me." He loosens his hold on Eddie at last. "So." He smiles. "What are you going to do with me?"

Eddie's blotchy, tear-stained face brightens slightly. He tucks Richie's hair behind his ear, smiles, and drops to his knees. The visual of that alone makes Richie hard. Eddie licks his palm before he takes Richie's dick in his hand again, stroking him roughly a couple of times, twisting his wrist, and drawing a groan out of Richie.

"You're sure about this?"

"Shut up, Rich."

He grabs at Eddie's hair when Eddie tentatively licks his dick, when he swirls his tongue around the tip.

Richie doesn't actually last long. Eddie takes Richie's dick into his mouth, sucking on the tip, and he bobs up and down a couple of times, and it's more than Richie can fucking handle, seeing Eddie's lips close around his dick, and feeling the heat of Eddie's wet, wet mouth, feeling the scrape of Eddie's teeth by accident, feeling his dick slide against the roof of Eddie's mouth. He comes in less than a minute.

Eddie pulls away quickly when Richie starts coming, stroking him through the rest of it.

He got some in his mouth, though, and on his face, and he wipes it with the back of his hand. "You couldn't give a guy some warning?" he says, but his eyes are bright, and he's smiling when Richie hauls him up to kiss him. He can taste himself when he kisses Eddie wetly, and Eddie's hand is sticky on Richie's cheek, and it's gross and intimate and really fucking great.

"Should we ask Mrs. K how many germs are in my swimmers?"

"Beep fucking beep, Richie," Eddie says, petting Richie's hair with a kind of affection that makes Richie's heart beat faster.

He starts to unbutton the top of Eddie's shorts. "My turn." He grins, and pecks another kiss to Eddie's mouth.
"Wait, um." Eddie stops him. "Can you just—can you just jerk me off?" He's tensed, and he meets Richie's gaze with a kind of trepidation. "I just—I have to get past some of the shit that's in my head first."

"Okay."

"It doesn't mean I don't—"

"I know." He smiles, and he's gratified to see Eddie relax again.

"Also, I don't really want—" Eddie looks apologetically at him. "I don't want anyone to know about us. Still. Even though we're together properly now, I'm not ready for anybody to know that I'm—" He seems to struggle with himself for a moment. "—gay."

"Honestly?" Richie says. "Me, neither."

"Really?"

"Stan knows now, and I don't think I can lie to him when he asks if we made up, but he won't tell anyone."

"I trust him," Eddie agrees.

"Can I kiss you now?"

They kiss, and, this time, when Richie starts undoing the top of Eddie's pants, Eddie doesn't stop him. He gets his hand in, and pulls Eddie's dick out. He loves Eddie's dick. He thinks it's the prettiest fucking thing, and he thinks about telling Eddie that now, but he decides to save it for some other time. He starts slowly the way that Eddie likes, building up speed, and waiting for Eddie to tell him to grip him harder, to tug him faster. He gets him off in record fucking time. And, for that, he earns another slow, dirty kiss.

They're kissing again when there's a knock on the door.

They freeze and whip their heads to the door in terror, because they're half naked, dicks out, and covered in cum, making out.

"Richie, dear," says his mother, muffled by the door, "is Eddie going to stay for dinner?"

"I—yes," Richie says.

The door isn't locked. Richie thinks he might be having an actual panic attack at the realization. Why the fuck isn't it locked?!

If they tried dressing quickly now, could they do it silently?

"Ten minutes," Maggie says, and they hear her footsteps quietly heading off.

"Shit," Eddie says, shoving his dick into his pants. "Shit, shit, shit. I think I just had a heart attack. Shit. Did you know I was sucking you off with the door unlocked? And with your mother right downstairs making a family fucking dinner?!"

Richie starts laughing.

"This isn't funny, numbnuts!"
"This is hilarious," Richie says, and when he reaches for Eddie to pull him in for another kiss, he's shoved away, and Eddie is pulling his shirt on backwards, and Richie starts tearing up from laughter, falling back onto the bed.

---

Now that they've made up, things go back to normal with the rest of the losers, too. It was super fucking awkward for a while, because nobody could ignore how Richie ignored Eddie, or how snappy, quiet, and unlike himself Eddie was. Richie had almost forgotten that he actually liked having the whole gang together.

But that's the way it's supposed to be.

And, finally, they're allowed to hang out together again, watching a movie or shooting the breeze at Mike's or lounging at the old, beloved diamond at eleven at night on a Saturday.

Tonight, the game is actually to settle an argument.

Stan is pitching, Mike is catching, and, with a bat in hand, Eddie is hitting, and, in his opinion, proving that Stan can't pitch worth a damn.

Richie prefers participating from the sidelines when sports are involved, because he finds his talents lie primarily in heckling.

"You're kidding," Eddie says, eyeing the battered baseball helmet. "I have no idea where that's been."

"You don't want to get hit in the head by a baseball," Stan says.

"How about you just don't throw the ball at my fucking head, Stanley?"

Richie's been to every varsity game that Stan has been in. He's seen Stan play baseball more times than he's beat his meat. He knows that Stan is going to whip Eddie's butt. That's Eddie's problem, though. Richie? He's having a great fucking time. He's got peanuts, he's got weed, and he's got the sight of Eddie wearing short blue shorts, a t-shirt, and a cute little scowl.

"You're in a g-good mood," Bill says.

"I am." He throws a peanut up, tilts his head, and catches it in his mouth.

"UCLA?"

"Yup."

"P-plus, there's the f-fact that you m-m-made up with Eddie."

He grins.

"You're really never going to tell us what happened with the two of you?" Ben asks. "You just had a huge fight, didn't talk for two months, and now you're great again, and both of you are going to UCLA, and we're never going to talk about it again?"

In reply, Richie shoves a handful of peanuts into his mouth.

"Seriously?"
"Mind ya own fookin' business, guv'nor!"

"That's strike two," Stan says.

"Bite me," Eddie says.

And when Ben reaches for the peanuts, Richie turns away, elbows him to keep him back, and throws a peanut at his face.

---

They spend Saturday night in bed with a box of pizza, a 2-liter of Fanta, and Nightbreed on VHS.

It's a date.

They sit side by side, slumped on the pillows, and close: shoulder to shoulder, hip to hip, and thigh to thigh, with Eddie's left ankle hooked easily over Richie's right ankle, and if Richie were to turn his head, he would be able to smell the soft, clean smell of Eddie's shampoo.

Richie isn't great at staying still during a movie, though.

His gaze gets stuck on Eddie's hand. He takes it. He traces his fingers down Eddie's fingers, and turns Eddie's hand, brushing a thumb along the lines of Eddie's palm. Eddie doesn't react, but he lets Richie play with his hand. Eddie's got small, unblemished hands with nails that are short and even and clean. He doesn't have any hangnails, or little, forgotten scars hidden in his knuckles. His palm is so soft it's smooth to touch.

After a while, Richie intertwines their fingers, settles their hands on his thigh, and returns his focus to the movie.

He's never actually been a real, legitimate date before.

This is his very first one.

In the glow of the blue TV light with Eddie tucked snugly into his side, he thinks this might be the best first date in history.

---

Mrs. K releases the lowest, longest sigh when she opens the door to Richie. "You look like a drowned sewer rat," she says. She's got curlers in her hair, smears of some green goop on the bags under her eyes, and her eyes are especially red, watery, and narrowed this afternoon.

How can this woman have birthed the most adorable human on Earth?

"It's raining," Richie says.

She glares.

Someday, she is going to murder him. It's how he's going to go. Richie is certain, and he's come to terms with it.

There are footsteps in the house. "—Richie?" Eddie asks. Before his mother can stop him, he's pushed his way into the picture, and he beckons Richie quickly into the house. "It's pouring!" he says. "Do you want to catch a cold?" He's already tugging Richie up the stairs.
"Eddie," says his mother.

"Richie is here to work on a report for physics, Ma."

In his room, Eddie starts toweling Richie down in a matter of seconds: he assaults Richie's head with a towel, saying he needs to remove his t-shirt, and when Richie does, he starts to dry his arms and hangs a towel around his neck and orders him sharply to remove his socks, too, while he searches for a pair that Richie can borrow.

"I can't believe she was going to leave you standing in the rain," Eddie says.

"I know!" Richie says, shaking his head. "Unbelievable. And here I thought she loved me."

"You should take your jeans off, too."

"Careful. If Mrs. K is listening at the door, she'll have heard that."

"I don't fucking care," Eddie says. "She might not know yet, but she's going to know soon. She's going to know I'm gay, and she's going to know I'm leaving her to go to UCLA, and she's——" He shakes his head. "She's going to have to live with it." He purses his lips.

Richie gathers Eddie into his arms. "I love it when you're an angry little cutie." He kisses Eddie's scowl.

---

The whole fucking school starts obsessing over prom at the start of April. Overnight, it's everywhere. There are fundraisers, and a vote on the theme, banners hung throughout the school that proclaim the sale of tickets, and there are stories, too: about this boy asking this girl, about who refused and who accepted, about who is renting hotel rooms, who is spiking the punch, who is throwing the best, biggest after prom party.

Bill is the first of the Losers to get a date. He isn't the only, though. Stan has a date by the week of prom, and Ben, too, gets a date. They're excited. And, honestly, Richie is happy they're happy.

He, however, could not possibly care less about prom.

He's told repeatedly by everyone that he'll regret not going, that it'll be a lot of fun, and that, really, Richie, it isn't too late to get a date.

"G-girls think you're g-good-l-l-looking," Bill says.

"I am good-looking. But, guys, come on. Why would I need a date when I've got this cutie here?" He tries to pinch Eddie's cheeks. "Cute, cute, cute," he sings.

Eddie bats Richie away before throwing a baby carrot stick at his face.

"Eddie should c-come, too," Bill says.

"Nope," Eddie says, shaking his head. "I have no interest in going to a dance with some random girl who just says yes because prom is this weekend, and she's desperate. No way. And I really, really have no interest in cramming into a gymnasium of sweaty, drunk people groping each other while bad pop music plays too loudly. I'll pass, thanks."

"Gee, Eddie," Stan says. "Tell us how you really feel."
On the bench, Eddie's thigh is lined up comfortably with Richie's.

Sometimes, Richie can't help but wonder what the others have figured out. They've never, ever talked about it. And, in front of his friends, he is careful to treat Eddie just like always. Eddie is, too. They are careful with their touches, with their words.

There's a part of him that desperately wants them to know.

They would be okay with it, wouldn't they?

But for that to happen, they would need to define precisely what there was to know. That they were dating? That they were a couple? That, to put it simply, they were together? He didn't know whether Eddie was technically his boyfriend.

And if he told them he was in love with Eddie, would they know what he meant?

(Here's what he means:

He's in love with the way Eddie's hair curls when it's damp. He's in love with the sound of profanity in Eddie's voice. He's in love with Eddie's neat, perfect little fingernails. He's in love with Eddie's enthusiasm for comics. He's in love with the lines of Eddie's back. He's in love with Eddie's flat, deadpan face after a joke. He's in love with the taste of Eddie's minty, dentist-recommended toothpaste. He's in love with the way Eddie actually listens to everything he says even after he's been talking on and on and on.

He's in love, and it's scary and familiar, it's wonderful and unreal and unbelievably, absolutely intoxicating.)

He is pretty sure Bill is clueless. Mike, too. He thinks Ben might have guessed that something is between them, because Ben is wise to shit like that.

And, of course, he told Stan when they made up, and Stan had smiled, had said he was glad, and hadn't asked any questions.

He must know they're together, though.

That's the best way to put it.

The night of prom, they are together.

They decide to watch horror movies at Mike's, actually. It's great. What more could he want than cheap, shitty beer, two of his absolute favorite fellows, and a night of gory, terrifying films?

He drops onto the sofa with a beer in hand, kicking up his legs, and putting his feet in Eddie's lap.

He knows that Eddie is going to shove his feet away immediately, but that's half the fun. Except. Eddie just shifts, and he rests his arm over Richie's calves, and he continues to explain to Mike why seeing a lot of blood on screen is easier to stomach than seeing a lot of vomit.

What the fuck?

It doesn't bother Eddie that Richie's surely dirty socks are touching him?

What about the fact that Mike is here?

Richie decides he'll have to keep his feet there, see what happens next. He ends up with his feet in
Eddie's lap for the whole first movie. But when Mike is putting on the second, he has to get up to get a drink.

And when he returns, that's when it happens.

"You guys really didn't want to go to prom?" Mike asks, conversational.

"I'm gay," Eddie says.

It's silent.

Mike is gaping at Eddie.

"I'm gay," Eddie says, breathing a little hard, a little fast. "I'm gay, and Richie is my boyfriend." His eyes dart over to Richie. "I—I hope it's okay that I said that. To Mike. I just—I wanted to have said it before we graduated. Once. To someone." He looks at Mike again.

Richie is stunned.

And, apparently, Mike is, too. "Okay." He clears his throat, and smiles. "I'm glad you told me." He starts the movie, grabs a bowl of popcorn, and returns to his seat.

Richie sits, too.

Eddie is rigid on his corner of the couch. If he got knocked over, he'd shatter. He is staring at the screen, too, like he can't look away. Richie wants to catch his gaze, but it's hopeless. He realizes that Eddie is probably internally freaking out right now.

If Mike knows they're together, is Richie allowed to pull Eddie into his side, and scratch at his scalp until he relaxes?

The movie's barely started when Mike stands up abruptly. "I, ah, I'll be right back." He leaves the room.

Eddie's gaze follows him before snapping suddenly to Richie in alarm. "Is he . . . ?"

"I have no idea, babe," Richie says, shaking his head.

"Fuck." He pats at his shorts with a kind of wide, faraway look in his eye, thinking. Richie is familiar with the gesture. Eddie is searching for an inhaler. "I shouldn't have said it."

"I'm glad you said it."

"Really?"

Mike is back. "Come on," he says, smiling, and nodding his head. "I have an idea."

They follow him into the hallway, and, to Richie's confusion, out of the house. "Is your plan to murder us?" Richie asks. "If so, I should tell you that people know we're here right now. Seriously. You won't get away with it." He realizes that Mike is carrying a boombox, and his confusion literally doubles.

They go around to the back of the barn.

"I don't know if you'll like my taste in music," Mike says, setting the boombox on the ground, and starting to play a CD. "It's the best I can do, though."
"I'm sorry, what's happening right now . . . ?" Eddie asks.

"You should get a prom."

"Mikey," Richie says, understanding.

"I don't have decorations, or anything. I figured the stars look better than whatever paper decorations they've got up at your school. And if you want, I can go make some punch." He grins. "I can even spike it for you, Rich."

"This isn't necessary," Eddie says. "Seriously, Mike—"

"If it would've been possible to go to the prom with Richie, would you have wanted to?"

"I . . ." Eddie glances at Richie with wide, uncertain eyes. "I guess. But—"

"Right-o!" Richie grins. "Come on, chap! This good old fellow has put on a mighty good song just for us." He offers his hand to Eddie with a flourish.

"Now's the time for the British guy? Really?"

"You know, I think the voices are improving," Mike says.

Eddie's glare cuts immediately to Mike. "Do not encourage him."

But it's too late. He said it. Richie grins and takes a breath and is going to regale Mike with the best fucking hoity-toity British voice he's ever fucking heard.

He falters, though, when Eddie takes his hand.

Where does he put his hands? How does this work? How the fuck do you dance when you're talking about real, actual dancing instead of, like, jumping around wildly? "I hope you're better at this than your mom," he says. He puts his hands on Eddie's hip, and steps in closer.

"Make another joke about my mother, and I will punch you in the dick."

"Have neither of you ever danced before?" Mike is amused, crossing his arms, and looking at them with a poorly disguised, smug little smile.

"I've danced with my dick," Richie says. "Does that count?"

"What does that even mean?" Eddie says.

"Here." Mike steps in between the pair of them. "I'll get you started, okay?" He wraps an around Eddie's waist, bringing him closer to his chest, and takes his hand. And, in soft, sure steps, he starts to dance with Eddie.

Eddie's arms come around him easily.

"I can do that," Richie says.

"I kind of like it with Mike. It's nice. He's strong." Eddie looks brightly at Mike. "Mike, will you be my date to prom?"

Richie makes a squawk of indignation.
Mike grins. "I'd love—"

"No way!" Richie strides up quickly, snaking an arm around Eddie from behind, and yanking him away from Mike. "Get your own!" He brandishes a finger at Mike.

Eddie laughs, and he leans into Richie, tilting his head up to grin at him.

"I think this is my cue to see if I can find something to spike the punch with," Mike says.

But after he leaves, there's a pause.

"Do you want to—?" Eddie jerks his head awkwardly, and there's the hint of a blush creeping softly into his cheeks.

Richie turns Eddie in his arms, and holds him the way that Mike had, takes his hand, and starts to shuffle his feet. "So." He tries to keep a straight face. "I heard you have a boyfriend." He can't keep a straight face, though, breaking into a grin Eddie when he meets Eddie's gaze.

Eddie stops dancing with him.

And, with Eddie's bright, tender gaze on his, Richie's heart jumps into his throat.

"Is that okay with you?" Eddie asks.

He nods. "Yes." He clears his throat. "Yes, that's okay with me."

"Kiss me."

Richie kisses Eddie.

It's a sweet, chaste kiss. It might be the best kiss they've ever shared. And when it's over, Eddie wraps both of his arms around Richie, and lays his head on Richie's chest, and Richie sways slightly, holding him, and thinking that, fuck, this might be his new favorite way to dance.

(He's in love with the feel of Eddie's head on his chest.)

Mike does return after a couple of minutes with what remains of the cheap, shitty six-pack of beer that Richie had brought for the night. "It's the best I could do," he says, shrugging. They open three beers, toast to Mike's great theme for prom of A Night Under the Stars, and clink their cans together with a laugh.

Eddie makes the most hilarious face when he takes a drink.

The rest of the night is fun, easy.

They dance to faster, louder songs, and they make Mike dance with them, because "this is your prom, too, Homeschool!" They even dance the Macarena after Mike admits that he's never, ever danced it before. Eddie teaches Mike the moves while Richie sings the song for them, screeching, "HEEEEEEEEY, MACARENA!" at the top of his lungs.

Who knew prom would be a night to remember?

(But, actually, what Richie remembers is that Eddie said he was Richie's boyfriend that night, and he remembers dancing slowly with him under the stars, falling in love with him. The rest just fades away. He forgets why it happened, and who made it happen, forgets how much he loved that strong, quiet boy, that wonderful, wonderful boy.)
He makes the mistake of thinking the future is set in stone. They are going to graduate in a couple of weeks, they are both of them going to UCLA, and they are going to do it together. He thinks that nothing is left to stand in the way of everything he wants.

He's a dumbass.

After everything that she's done, Richie should have fucking known that Mrs. K was going to put up one last mad, manipulative fight.

---

It starts when Eddie misses graduation. He misses it. Richie doesn't actually start panicking until the music is playing, and they are filing into the seats in front of the stage, and he realizes that Eddie really, truly isn't there.

What the fuck?

The moment the ceremony is over, he escapes his parents, and he drives to Eddie's.

But after he pounds on the door for a couple of minutes, he realizes that nobody is there. He shows up late to the party at Stan's, and he tells the rest of the losers in the privacy of the bathroom that Eddie wasn't there. "I think Mrs. K kidnapped him," he says. He knows that Eddie was working up toward finally telling her that he was, in fact, going to UCLA, and he might have done it yesterday, and she might have knocked him over the head, dragged his body to the car, and drove off with him in the dead of night.

"I doubt she's hurt him," Stan reasons.

"If a mother in Derry was going to murder her son, wrap his body in a curtain, and bury him in the backyard to keep him from leaving her, who would it be? Huh, Stan? Whose mother would it be?"

"It's o-okay, Richie," Bill says, reaching to rest a hand on Richie's shoulder.

"I still can't believe his mother made him miss his graduation," Ben says, frowning. "I can't believe she would miss it. And didn't he even say that all of his aunts were coming into town for it?"

"Yes!"

"He might be sick," Mike says.

"Or m-maybe his m-m-mother thinks he's sick, a-and—"

"Boys!" Mrs. Uris is carrying a camera, and looking at them with half-amusement, half-exasperation. "Is there a reason you're huddled in here by yourselves? This party is for you! People want to see you, congratulate you!"

"Mrs. Uris, we're kind of in the middle of a crisis," Richie says.

"I'm sure."

"Eddie is missing!"

"Eddie?" She blinks. "Dear, something just must have come up with his family. I wouldn't worry about it. Come on. I want to take some pictures!" She ushers the lot of them out of the bathroom,
ignoring Richie's protests, and patting his back in reassurance.

---

He doesn't really leave his house for the first two, miserable weeks of summer. He can't. He wants to be there if the phone rings, if Eddie finally calls.

"You can't waste the whole summer lying on your bed," Stan says.

"Watch me," Richie snipes.

But, after a couple of weeks, he agrees to go to the Barrens with Bill, Stan, and Ben on a bright, breezy Monday under the condition that they'll leave him alone for a while if he does. There's a part of him that appreciates how much they care. They have beer, and they brought Stan's transistor radio, and they're trying really, really hard to make it fun, to distract him.

He can't just pretend that everything is normal the way that they can, though.

Eddie was kidnapped.

He's lying in the tall, wavy grass with a pack of smokes when a shadow steps rudely into his sunshine.

He opens his eyes. "Bill."

"Hey, R-Rich." Bill drops down to sit beside him, and hold a hand out toward him, too, which Richie understands to mean that Bill wants a drag of his cigarette. He gives it easily. For a couple of minutes, it's quiet. "We're w-worried a-about him, t-t-too," Bill says, soft. "I kn-know you d-don't believe me, b-but—" He sighs. "There's n-nothing we c-c-can do."

Richie just takes a drag.

"You've b-been quiet a l-l-lot l-lately," Bill says. "It's w-weird."

"I'm in love with him," Richie says. He doesn't look at Bill when he says it. "I don't mean I love him. I mean I'm in love with him. And I'm pretty sure he's in love with me, too." He stares at the clouds moving slowly, slowly in the sky.

"A-are you g-g-gay?"

"I guess. Eddie is. That's what we were fighting about. He—" He stops. "We broke up. Sort of. But we made up again. Everything was great."

"Why d-didn't you t-t-tell me?"

"I don't really know." It's the truth. "It was hard to know what to tell you. For months, we were just . . . we didn't know what the fuck we were doing, what . . . It took us a while to figure our shit out."

"I g-get that." He pauses. "C-can I ask a q-question?"

"Shoot."

"D-d-does he makes you b-brush your teeth b-before you kiss?"

Richie smiles slightly despite himself. "Sometimes," he says. "He got pissed at me once because I'd smoked a cigarette before meeting up with him, and he tasted it when he kissed me, and he
immediately started lecturing me about how gross cigarettes were, how they have formaldehyde in them, and blah, blah, blah. He was sitting in my lap, and my balls were turning blue, Billy, and he wouldn't stop carrying on about why would I think he could possibly kiss me when I tasted like fucking corpse juice." He shakes his head.

"Oh, m-my God," Bill says.

"I know!"

"You are g-gay."

He grins. It fades, though. He's gay, and he wants to know where the fuck his boyfriend is.

"It's g-going to b-be okay. R-really. I'm w-w-worried, too. B-but Eddie is a f-force to be r-reckoned with when he w-wants to be. He w-won't let his m-mother k-k-keep him f-from you for long."

"Yeah."

Bill ends up lying with him in the grass for the rest of the afternoon.

At home, he finds his mother in the kitchen with bills spread in front of her on the table. "How was your day with your friends?" she asks, frowning at the paper in her hand.

"Fine. Did Eddie call?"

"Nope."

In his room, he lies on his bed, and stares at the ceiling. After a minute, he gets up, goes to the bathroom, and brushes his teeth three times until he's sure his breath is minty. He returns to his bed, and watches the fan circle slowly above him until he dozes off at ten p.m.

---

He wakes up with a start. Sunlight is pouring in, but the clock by his bed reads 8:34 in the morning. He frowns, and that's when he realizes that he isn't alone.

He twists.

Eddie is sitting on the bed. "Morning." He smiles.

Richie just lunges for him, pulling the stupid little fucker in and half on top of him, making him laugh. "Where the fuck have you been?" he exclaims. He rolls to trap his boyfriend under his weight, and lets his gaze rake over him. Richie doesn't have his glasses on, but Eddie's close enough that Richie doesn't really need his glasses to know.

It's real.

He's back.

"I told my mom about UCLA," Eddie says.

"I figured. Jesus, Eds. It's been two weeks! I thought—I thought she might have killed you! I thought—"

"I'm fine." He pushes a hand through Richie's messy hair. "I knew you'd be freaking out, though. I'm sorry I couldn't get away sooner. My mom sort of had a stroke."
Richie opens his mouth, and closes it. "Fuck, Eddie. I'm sorry."

"It's okay." Eddie sighs. "I think she faked it."

"She faked it?"

He nods. "I told her about UCLA, right?" He shifts, and Richie shifts obediently, too, until they're lying side by side, nose to nose. "She flipped, and she said there was no way she was paying for that. I told her, though, that I'd already paid for it. She wanted to know how, and I told her I used the account that my dad had set up before he died. It was specifically for my education, so my mom's never been able to touch it. Now that I'm eighteen, it's mine. Anyway, she didn't take it well. She was crying and screaming and saying I was killing her."

"And that's when she faked a stroke?"

"No, that wasn't until we got to my aunt's. She told me that if I had ever loved her, I would at least go with her to see her sisters, and I would help her understand my choice. And I—I agreed. I just didn't know how to..." He looks apologetically at Richie. "I didn't—I don't—want to hurt her."

"I know," Richie says, gentle. "She's your mom. I get it."

"Well, we get there, and my aunts start going in on me immediately. Why do I want to leave Maine? How could I go behind my mother's back like that? Don't I love my mother? Don't I appreciate everything she's done for me? Don't I think my dad would be ashamed of the way I was behaving? That got to me."

"They really tried to use your dad?"

"Right?" Eddie says. "I was pissed, and I... might have started to yell, and I might have maybe just screamed at them that I was gay. It just—happened."

"Shit."

"There was a lot of crying. I just went to bed. I said I was leaving in the morning. But when I woke up, there was a pastor there. Rich, they called a pastor." He drops Richie's gaze. "It was awful. It was seriously the worst thing that's ever happened to me."

"I kind of want to punch your mom," Richie says.

"Yeah, well. That's when I gave up trying to make her listen to me. I packed my stuff, and, what would you know, she has a stroke. I knew—I knew it was fake, but I just... couldn't leave her. She seemed so... pathetic."

"I—" Richie hesitates. "I hate that she's fucked with your head so much," he says.

"Me, too." He rests a hand on Richie's chest, traces a letter on his old, ill-fitting t-shirt with his finger. "I told myself when we were younger, and I found out how she'd lied about me being sick, that I was done putting up with her bullshit. But when she started making me feel bad about being gay, I let it happen, and after I got past it finally, I told myself again that I was done putting up with her bullshit. And, still, I ended up sitting on a couch between my aunts while a pastor told me I was going to hell unless I trusted God to fix me, and sitting by her bed in the hospital while she cried about how I'd done this to her because I didn't love her, and I..."

Richie is desperate to say something. But he has no idea what to say. It seems like he always has something to say until it matters. He clasps Eddie's hand in his. And when it makes Eddie look at
him, he lifts their hands, and presses a kiss to Eddie's fingers.

Eddie's eyes actually grow wet. "I hate that I'm like this."

"Like . . .?"

"Just—" He wipes at his cheek. "Weak."

"What?" Richie says, pushing up. "No. You're the toughest little asshole I know."

He snorts.

"I'm serious. You think I could handle everything your mother's done to you? I'm scared of the woman, and she isn't even my mother. You—the way you stand up to her, the way you're your own person despite her—" He shakes his head. "Eds, you're amazing."

"Do you want to know a secret?" Eddie asks.

"Obviously."

"I don't really hate when you call me that." Eddie smiles tearfully at him. "Eds. I kind of like it."

Richie cups Eddie's cheek in his head.

They lean in together.

It's a slow, lazy kiss, and he thinks for a moment that his breath is probably fucking terrible. Eddie doesn't seem to care. He presses in closer, curling a fist in Richie's t-shirt, and parting his lips, making a soft, wanting noise when Richie's tongue slides slowly into his mouth.

After, they just kind of look at each other.

Eddie's fingers trace circles around Richie's eyes. "She said it was your fault, you know," he murmurs. "She told me that everything was fine until I allowed you to touch me, and fill my head with sick, twisted ideas. He's fooled you into loving him more than you love your own mother, she said. And that's what did it." There is something so bright in his eyes, bright, and hopeful.

"Did it?"

"That's when I finally bought a bus ticket, and came home. She said that, and I realized she was right. I do—I do love you more than I love her, and I had no idea what the fuck I was doing at her bedside when you were waiting for me here."

Richie's heart starts beating faster.

"I love you, Rich," Eddie says, swallowing. "I'm in love with you."

"I'm—"

Eddie smiles.

It makes the words rush right out of Richie. "I'm in love with you, too."

They kiss again, and again. Richie pushes his fingers greedily into Eddie's hair. Eddie's lips are chapped, and Richie knows he must have gross, sleep sour breath, and it's a shaky, desperate kiss. It's perfect. Eddie's teeth sink into Richie's lip, and it makes Richie rock into Eddie. Eddie's hand
has snuck under the covers, has snuck under Richie's shirt, and he brushes his hand up Richie's back, pulling him closer.

"Fuck, I missed you," Richie pants.

Eddie's breath fans hotly over Richie's face. "I can't wait for California," he murmurs.

"Can't wait to catch a totally sick wave, dude?"

Eddie sighs loudly.

Richie grins, and kisses him again. It's a short, sweet kiss. And, impulsively, he starts to pepper Eddie's face in kisses: to his cheek, and the side of his nose, to his chin and the corner of his lip and his eyebrow.

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They've put down the backseats in the Volvo. The windows are starting to fog. Richie's glasses have been tossed aside somewhere, and everything is a dark, lusty blur for him, lying on top of Eddie, sucking on his neck, and rutting desperately against him.

He has a hazy, half-completed thought that this is what fucking will be like.

The way they're moving together against each other is the way they'd move if they were fucking right now.

Eddie's hand are everywhere at once: pulling on his hair, and pushing up his shirt to grasp at the damp, bare skin of Richie's back, dipping under his jeans, under his boxers, and grabbing his ass. "Rich," he pants. He starts tugging more insistently at Richie's shirt, and Richie rises up enough to pull it off, tossing it, and Eddie takes the opportunity to tug off his shirt, too, and to unzip his shorts, starting to shimmy his way out of them.

Richie presses a kiss to Eddie's collarbone, grazes his teeth over Eddie's nipple, and licks at the sheen of sweat that coats Eddie's stomach.

He gets his hand into Eddie's pants, and he's about to rise up again, to kiss Eddie while he jerks him off.

But before he can, Eddie pushes lightly on the top of his head.

He pauses.

"Can you—?" Eddie says, squirming.

"What?"

In answer, Eddie just curls his fingers in Richie's hair, and pushes on the top of his head again.

Richie puts it together. "Yeah? You sure?" He drops a kiss to Eddie's bellybutton, and looks up, wishing he could make his stupid, useless eyes focus, and see more than the shape of Eddie's face, than the gleam of his eyes in the dark. "You really want me to?" he asks, soft.

"Please?"

He grins. "Tell me to stop if you start feeling weird."
"Just fucking do it!"

He laughs at that, and feels a surge of affection for angry, mewling Eddie. But he does what he's told: he pulls Eddie's underwear down further, and he ducks his head, flattening his tongue to the tip of Eddie's hard, ready dick. Eddie's hips buck immediately. Richie has to put a hand on his stomach to pin him down, and he licks him, teasing him, and when Eddie is tugging on his hair hard enough to hurt, he gives in, and takes Eddie's dick in his mouth.

Eddie never does tell him to stop.

Afterward, Eddie wrinkles his nose when Richie tries to kiss him, but Richie just turns his face, and presses his smile into Eddie's cheek.

---

The last day that everyone is together is one of the first cool, breezy days of August.

In a lot of a ways, it's a day like every other day. They dick around doing nothing for most of the day, going for a swim at the quarry, and drying in the sunshine, having a bonfire at the Barrens, and spending the evening at Mike's, lying in a maze of bodies in the grass, and staring at the stars, drinking and smoking and joking. It doesn't feel like the end of something.

But, in the days to come, each of them will leave for school.

They'll spend their nights with new, different people who don't know what they know, who haven't grown up in Derry, Maine, and who won't ever know what it was like to be a loser.

The darker the sky above gets, the more aware Richie grows of that strange, sad truth.

It'll be months before everyone is back in Derry for the holidays.

"Do you guys want to know a secret?" Ben asks.

"No," Richie says.

Somebody throws an empty, crushed beer can at Richie, and he doesn't see who it is. He doesn't care. He laughs, and turns his head to look at Ben, to share a smile with him.

"I don't want to leave tomorrow," Ben says. "I don't want to start over again. I'm afraid that I won't ever make friends like you guys again."

"Y-you'll always have u-us, though, Bill says.

"I know."

"We should all say a secret," Eddie says.

It's quiet.

"Sometimes," Stan says, "I—" He stops. "Sometimes, I'm sad, and I don't know why. I wake up, and I . . . I just wish I could go back to sleep. It's not all the time. It's just . . ."

"I think that's normal." Ben's voice is soft, kind.

"Probably." Stan clears his throat. "Somebody else go."
"I forget," Mike says, abrupt. "For days at a time, I forget about It. It. Then, suddenly, I blink, and I remember, and I don't know how I forgot."

It.


"I forget, too," Richie says. He can't even remember when he last thought about It.

"Me, t-too," Bill says.

Eddie's hand finds Richie's hand. It's easier to forget, isn't it? They want to forget, and, most of the time, they do. There's something scary about that, though. They shouldn't be able to, should they?

"Anyway." Richie clears his throat loudly. "My turn?" He makes a drumroll noise. "I'm gay. For real. I like boys."

"This is a secret?" Stan says.

"I thought you were bisexual," Ben says.

"You thought I was what?"

"You know, you like girls, and you like boys. Bisexual. You're dating Eddie, but you've been with girls before, too, and liked it."

"There's a word?" He sits up. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Ben is amused. "Yeah. It's—if you're attracted to men as well as to women, you're bisexual. I mean, I know we've never talked about it, and I shouldn't just assume, but—"

"I'm bisexual!" Richie says.

There's laughter.

"Congratulations," Mike says.

"I can't believe you've been withholding this information from me, Haystack. Here I was, questioning my state of being, and what do you do? Nothing. Here I bestowed my friendship on you, and you betrayed me."

"I didn't know you didn't know!" Ben says, laughing.

"I'm sorry, I, a bisexual, can't hear you over the sound of your betrayal."

"W-what about E-Eddie?" Bill asks.

"What about Eddie?"

"I don't like girls," Eddie says. "I'm not like Richie. I'm just regular, old—gay. I guess you guys all already knew about us, so that isn't really a secret. But. Yeah. Gay."

"How did you—?" Stan stops.

"How did I bag a catch like Eddie Spaghetti?" Richie says. "Easy. Charisma, persistence, and, of course, pure animal magnetism. He couldn't resist this tight bod. The real question is, how did
Eddie Spaghetti bag a catch like me?"

"I think I just threw up a little in my mouth," Eddie says.

"Aw, Eds!" He rolls over, and throws a leg, an arm, and half of his body onto Eddie. "Don't be shy, my little sugar cookie!" He smacks a loud, wet kiss to Eddie's cheek. "Mwah!"

"Get off me!"

"Mwah, mwah, mwah!"

Three different crushed, empty beer cans are thrown at Richie.

He flops onto his side with a sigh.

"You're disgusting," Eddie says, pulling up his shirt to wipe at the spit on his face.

"I h-have so m-many questions about you t-t-two," Bill says.

"Please don't ask them here," Stan says. "I'd really rather not know. I'd rather know as little as possible, in fact."

"You don't want me to give you the details on how big Eddie's—"

"Beep, beep, Richie!" Eddie screeches.

There's a round of laughter, and Richie grins at the sky above him. He can't help it. All of his friends know the whole, forbidden truth about him now, and they don't care, hardly even batted an eye.

"What were you going to ask before, Stan?" Ben asks. "How did you . . . ?"

"Oh." Stan is quiet. "Just—how did you guys know that you were gay? Or bisexual. Or, no, wait. Stop. I revise my question. Eddie, how did you know you were gay?"

"I was just never . . . interested in girls. And I was interested in Richie. And when he kissed me, it—I don't know. It took me a while to admit it to myself. I knew, but I refused to know. Honestly, though? Now that I look back? I'm pretty sure I should have known years ago. I think I used to have a crush on Bill."

"Bill?" Richie says, outraged.

"R-really?" Bill says.

"Is that weird to say?" Eddie asks, something newly hesitant in his voice.

"H-he, Trashmouth," Bill says, grinning. "Remember that t-time your b-b-boyfriend had a c-crush on me?"

"Nope. That never happened. It's a lie. Eddie is known for lying! He's notorious. Moving on. It's your turn to share a secret, Big Bill. Let's hear it. Spill."

"O-okay." He pauses. "I . . ."

"You don't have to if you don't want to," Stan says, soft.
"I w-want to. I think s-sometimes, my p-parents wish i-it had b-been me. Instead of G-Georgie. And they s-say they don't b-b-blame me, b-but I know they d-do. S-sometimes, I d-do, t-too."

"It wasn't your fault," Ben says.

"Yeah, I—I know."

Richie's parents wish for another, different kid, too. And, sometimes, it feels like it's his fault they didn't get what they wanted. He can't say that, though. It isn't the same. Bill has it worse. Bill has it much, much worse. Richie will never really know what it was like for Bill to lose Georgie, what it's like for him to live every day with having lost the person who was most important to him.

"You know we love you, right?" Eddie says.

"I know y-you do." There's a smile in Bill's voice.

"Daggoneit!" Richie rolls over onto his stomach, and pushes up. "You wanna go, amigo?" he yells. "We can go! We can take this outside right now!"

"I'm sorry, is that a Spanish voice?" Stan says.

"I think it's a cowboy voice," Eddie says.

"I didn't know cowboys said amigo," Mike says.

"I'll take all y'll!" Richie shouts. "Pow, pow, pow!" He maims shooting guns at them. "I'll shoot all y'll dead! 'Cept you, cutie. I'm keepin' you." He clicks his tongue at Eddie.

"I'm touched."

Bill laughs. "Ben is r-right. I d-don't think I'll ever m-make f-friends like you g-guys a-again."

"To the losers!" Richie says, lifting a can of beer.

"To the losers!"

Richie could have lived in that night forever.

If he'd known what was going to happen, he might have wanted to. If he'd remembered whom he'd already lost, he might have wanted to reach for whatever he could have touched in that moment: Stan's arm, Mike's leg, Bill's head. If he'd known what It was already in the process of doing to them, he might have cried.

He didn't know any of that, though.

Lying in the grass with the people who were supposed to be his best friends forever, Richie was simply, irrepressibly happy.

---

Eddie is stressed in the airport. He's stressed when they're boarding, and he mutters about his inhaler while he's settling into a tiny ass seat, while he's using a bunch of wet Clorox wipes on everything in reach. And when the plan takes off, he's a mess.

He squeezes Richie's hand so tightly it hurts.
Richie's struck suddenly with the thought of what this would be like if Eddie hadn't decided to go to UCLA, too.

He can't even fucking imagine.

He squeezes Eddie's hand right back, and he leans in, starting to talk in a low, gravely pilot voice, cracking dick jokes about the power of the engine. It makes Eddie snort. He keeps on talking and talking and talking, and he doesn't stop until Eddie is laughing, is shaking his head, is opening his eyes to look at Richie, and telling him fondly to shut the fuck up.

---

There was a spot on the forms that asked you if you had a request for a roommate, and said that preferences would be given if the person you requested had requested you.

Richie put Eddie's name in big, block letters.

Maggie was unimpressed at the news that they planned to share a room. She warned Richie that it wasn't always a very good idea to live with friends, adding that, really, he should seriously consider the opportunity that a random roommate presents. Richie couldn't have cared less what she thought.

He did it anyway.

Why would he want to live with some random person when he could live with his fucking favorite person?

And that's how they wind up living together in a closet that's fifteen by fifteen feet.

("Do you know I never considered the fact that I would be sleeping on an actual used mattress?" Eddie says, standing in the doorway, and scanning the small, empty room, eying one of the thin, bare mattresses.

"You can always sleep in my bed," Richie says.

"You say that like you, too, won't be sleeping on a mattress that's seen God knows what."

"It's going to have seen a hell of a lot more when I'm done with it." He drops his duffle by one of the beds, and sits on the mattress. "Supple," he says. He pats the spot beside him. "Come on, lover."

"Gross," Eddie says, and, with a sigh, he rolls his suitcase into the room.)

It's great.

Everything about college is great.

After a week, Richie can safely say that he fucking loves college.

He loves doing stupid icebreaker games with the guys in his dorm. He loves that his R.A. tells the group of them to keep the door shut if they're doing something they shouldn't, and to buy Febreze to spray around if he knocks on the door, so he can honestly say to his superiors that he didn't smell anything weird.

"He's talking about weed," Richie says, gleeful.
"I got that," Eddie replies dryly.

He loves arguing with Eddie about how to arrange the furniture in the room. He loves the food in the giant, crowded dining hall. He loves how everyone is excited, how everyone is friendly, how everyone he meets didn't know him when he was five, and has no irreversible, preconceived notion about him, is happy to meet him.

He loves that at the end of the evening, he closes the door to where he lives, and Eddie is there to stay.

(You know what's a totally awesome thing?

He gets to see Eddie after he showers.

His skin is particularly pink, and his wet, messy hair is plastered down stupidly, and he looks adorable in his plastic shower shoes with a towel wrapped around his waist. Plus, he's got a routine. He combs his hair in the mirror they've put on the back of the door, and he checks his entire fucking person for new, suspicious moles, lumps, or other warning signs, and, oh, also, he rubs a lot of lotion on his arms, and his shoulders, on his legs.

"Do you have to watch me?" he demands.

"Eddie Spaghetti, my love, I could not look away from you right now if I tried.")

Nobody has made the leap that they're together.

It isn't something they talk about. Why would they? They're practiced at acting like friends in public, and there isn't really a reason to change it. They might have told the losers, but neither of them is ready to tell the world. They have plenty of time to themselves.

Truthfully, they fight a lot in those first few, new weeks over what a "slob" Richie is.

("Is it really that hard to respect the fact that we have a designated shoe bucket for putting your shoes, and it ISN'T the middle of the fucking room?!")

But.

Here's the thing about sharing a room.

Richie comes back to the dorm at the end of his very first week of classes, and he's in good fucking mood, because he likes a lot of his classes, and now it's the weekend, and he likes that even more than he likes his classes.

Eddie is sitting on his bed.

"You want to go see a movie?" he asks. "This guy from my sociology class invited me." He drops his backpack by his bed. "He's from New York, and his father is a baker, and I told him the joke about the muffin, and he thought it was fucking hilarious. You know the one I mean? Two muffins are in the oven. One muffin says to the other, whoa, it's hot in here! And the other muffin says, holy shit, a talking muffin!" He laughs. "He's cool. Kevin. That's his name."

"I bought some condoms," Eddie says.

Richie actually chokes on his own fucking spit.

"Lube, too."
"Fuck."

"That was generally the idea." His voice is steady, is mild, and relaxed, but there's a tinge of pink on his cheeks. "Do you want to?" he asks. "I did some reading about how to prepare, and get, like, clean—" His whole face starts growing red. "And I sort of already did that. Cleaned up. Earlier. Fuck, this is awkward. So . . . ?"

"Yes." Richie nods quickly. "Yes. I'm not sure what's on the table, but I'm in. Yes."

"Can you lock the door?"

He trips in his haste to lock the door.

That makes Eddie smile. He closes the textbook that was on his lap, shifting to put it on the desk by his bed, and Richie takes that as an invitation to sit on his bed with him. Eddie turns to face him on the bed. "I figured we didn't have to have, like, actual sex tonight. But. We could practice some of the stuff you do to get ready for it?" His face is nervous, but his eyes are shining.


Eddie must have liked that, because he leans up, and kisses Richie softly. "Do you—do you have a preference for . . . ?" He pulls back slightly to meet Richie's gaze.

It takes Richie a minute to catch up. "Oh, um. Do you?"

"Kind of."

He raises his eyebrows.

"I thought I might like to . . . take it." He flushes.

Richie grins slowly. "Is my little cutie Eddie Spaghetti saying he'd like me to stick my noodle up his—"

Eddie claps a hand over Richie's mouth. "No," he says. "Nobody is talking about noodles." He lowers his hand, and he shifts, crawling into Richie's lap, and straddling him. "I'm saying I want you to fuck me in the ass, Richie." He kisses him.

Richie is stunned.

"What do you think?" Eddie asks, and there's something smug in his voice.

Richie just grabs his face, and kisses him properly: a hot, opened-mouth kiss that makes Eddie him curl his fingers in Richie's t-shirt, that makes him press in closer.

They don't go to the movies that night.

But Richie makes Eddie come with a finger up his ass, so he isn't really disappointed about missing the movie.

They order pizza, because the dining hall closed while they were in bed.

And when Eddie is starting to nod off during the movie, they call it a night. They go down the hallway to the bathroom, and they brush their teeth side by side, and wash their faces, and Richie whines profusely while Eddie makes him floss.
Back in the room, Richie is going to get into his bed.

"We just ate pizza on your bed," Eddie says.

"If you'll recall, someone fucking refused to have any food on his bed."

"And now I have nice, clean, pizza grease-free sheets to sleep in. Come on. There's room." He is setting in under the covers, and he's scooting back against the wall, and Richie realizes that Eddie wants him to sleep in his bed with him. "Just don't breathe your gross morning breath in my face when we wake up tomorrow," he says.

"I can't promise that," Richie says, climbing into the bed, and pulling up the sheets.

It is, honestly, kind of uncomfortable to sleep in a tiny twin bed with another human being.

Half an hour, and Richie pulls Eddie half on top of him just to make better use of the space. Sleepy, Eddie doesn't protest beyond making a soft, snuffling noise. Richie still can't sleep very well, but he just doesn't fucking care.

His mother is an idiot if she thinks there would have been a better way for this to go.

Sharing a room with Eddie is the best.

Eddie is the best.

The next four years are going to be fucking great. He doesn't know what he wants to major in, and he couldn't answer any of last week's dumb icebreakers that asked what his dream was, but he'll figure it out, and Eddie will figure it out, too. They'll figure it out together.

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("Rich, you know it was just a nightmare," Eddie says. "You have to know. You think I'd just walk away if It had you? I'd fucking murder that clown the moment he looked at you."

"I—I know."

"It was just a nightmare."

"Yeah."

Eddie takes his hand. It startles Richie. It shouldn't, though. It's normal for Eddie to take his hand, a way to comfort him. Still. It makes Richie's heart skip a beat, and he looks up, and he meets Eddie's gaze, and, at fourteen, he thinks for the very first time that he really, really loves Eddie.

"You're pretty much my best friend, Richie," Eddie says. "I'd never abandon you."

"Me, neither," Richie says.

"I know." Eddie smiles softly. "I always know I can count on you. You've already proved it. And now you know that those nightmares are bullshit, because you know you can always count on me."

Richie is going to make a joke, going to use a voice. He doesn't, though. Before he has the chance, Eddie leans forward, and hugs him.)

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tbc.
This took a lot longer than I planned. It's also about 30,000 words longer than I planned. Ah, well. I gave up trying to keep my stories a reasonable length a long time ago. Sorry for the typos! I'm bad at editing.

He's playing Super Metroid on his Nintendo when Eddie gets back to the room. "Hey, babe," he says, absent. He's got his feet on his desk to the left of the screen, and his chair is tipped back slightly, and he's focused on the game, although, of course, he's eating, too, from a bag of Cheetos he got from the dormitory vending machine.

"Do you know what I hate?" Eddie says, dropping his backpack by his desk, and flopping onto his bed.

"Spray can cheese. Caterpillars. People with crud under their nails."

"The fact that we're forced to take a lab. Why the fuck should I have to take a lab? Do I look like a scientist to you? And how the fuck does it benefit me to dissect a rat? It's disgusting."

"I told you to take geology with me."

"I didn't want to learn about rocks," Eddie says, petulant.

After a beat of silence, Richie is willing to risk a glance from the game to look at Eddie. He's lying slanted across the bed with his legs hanging off, and he's got an arm thrown over his face, and he hasn't even bothered to take his shoes off. Richie puts the game on pause, getting to his feet, and wiping his hands on his jeans, remembering to spin up the volume on the radio.

"Are we doing anything tonight?" Eddie asks.

Richie makes certain the door is locked, too.

"We're supposed to hang out with the guys from down the hall." Richie joins Eddie on the bed, throwing a leg over his waist, and straddling him, careful to keep his weight on his knees. "Nothing too special."

Eddie just makes a humming, noncommittal noise. But he drags his arm off his face, keeping it open, and Richie is free to surge in, to press a kiss to his mouth. Eddie's nose wrinkles, though, and he turns his face.

"What's the matter?" Richie tilts his head to nuzzle Eddie's neck. "You don't like Cheetos?"

"Not if you've already eaten them." But if Eddie were really annoyed, he wouldn't be running a hand up Richie's back. "I'm glad it's Friday," he murmurs.

"Why don't we just blow off everybody this weekend?" Richie says.

"I was already planning to." Eddie pushes his fingers through Richie's hair. "I've got, like, ten
hours of assignments."

"Blow those off, too." He kisses that spot just below Eddie's ear. "And, instead, I'll blow you."

Eddie's hand skates down to hold the back of Richie's neck, to tug. Richie gets the message. He gives Eddie a slow, teasing kiss, sliding his tongue along Eddie's tongue, and he grasps Eddie's thighs, too, and starts to shift, wanting to settle properly against him.

"Shoes," Eddie says, breathless.

Richie makes himself pull away, rising to his knees and reaching for Eddie's shoes, tugging them off and tossing them. Eddie sits up slightly to pull off his shirt, and Richie pulls off his shirt, too. He should probably climb off the bed to shuck his jeans. But when Eddie starts undoing the button of his shorts, Richie has to help, and Eddie lifts his hips for Richie to tug down the shorts, to tug down Eddie's briefs, too, and he gets them all the way off. He drops a kiss to Eddie's calf, and higher, kisses the side of his knee, and starts to trail kisses along the inside of his thigh.


Richie likes to take his time, though, when he's got Eddie naked on the bed like this. Savor it. If that annoys Eddie, so be it.

"You're a piece of shit," Eddie says.

Richie takes Eddie's dick in his hand at last, stroking it, and brushing his thumb over the head. "I'm sorry, did you want something?" he asks. He leans up, littering kisses across Eddie's stomach, and flattens his tongue to Eddie's nipple, scraping his teeth over it, and soothing it again with his tongue, making Eddie swear under his breath.

"Rich." Eddie's fingers scrape against Richie's scalp.

Richie's lowers his head, letting his breath fan over Eddie's dick. "Want to hear a joke?" He grins.

"I want you to put my dick in your mouth."

He does.

Eddie makes a sharp, strangled noise.

He teases the slit with his tongue, and licks up his length, and down, and he sucks the head in between his lips, stroking the base with his hand, and finding a rhythm. He relishes in the way Eddie starts to mutter, to hum and swear and to say "yes fucking yes, fuck, fuck, fuck, Rich, fuck." He lowers his head, taking Eddie deeper in his mouth, and letting the tip of Eddie's dick brush the roof of his mouth.

His neck is starting to hurt, though. The angle is fucked up. He tries to shift, but it doesn't really work.

He pulls his mouth off Eddie's dick. "Sit up."

Eddie scoots backwards in a rush, scrambling to sit up, and he reaches for Richie. His face is flushed and his breathing is ragged and his dick is hard and red and slick with split, bobbing eagerly against his stomach. It's the hottest fucking thing Richie's ever seen.

He presses in, kissing Eddie roughly, and ducking his head again to scrape his teeth over Eddie's
nipple. He starts to kiss his way down Eddie's stomach, and lower. His legs are dangling off the bed, and his back is kind of twisted, but he can't be bothered to care right now.

"Let's push them together again," Eddie says.

"What?"

"The beds." Eddie is scooting his way off the bed now, forcing Richie to back up. "Let's push them together again."

He grins, and smacks a kiss to Eddie's arm, because it's the closest thing in reach.

They've only done it a couple of times, because, well, it's a bitch to move the beds. It's worth it, though. It's worth the work to have something like a real bed to sprawl across.

They kick away everything that's in between the beds, and start to drag Eddie's bed away from the wall. It's heavy for a tiny twin bed. But, after a couple of minutes, they get it pressed to Richie's bed across the room.

Richie starts immediately to hop his way out of his jeans, and Eddie is peeling off his socks, and they catch each other's gazes, sharing an eager, flushed grin.

Eddie's arms lift towards Richie.

He doesn't waste a fucking second before he rushes in, kissing him.

He's surprised when Eddie breaks off, though, and goes to his desk, only to turn around again with a condom in hand, with his bottle of lube.

"I thought I was blowing you," Richie says.

"I changed my mind," Eddie says, and he places a hand on Richie's chest, and shoves.

Richie falls back onto the bed with a gin, and Eddie climbs easily into his lap, pushing a hand into his hair, and kissing him, sliding his tongue into Richie's mouth.

Eddie's hand snakes between them, and his fingers brush lightly over Richie's dick, and fondling his balls, making Richie's mouth go slack.

And then he just drags his hand up Richie's chest again.

Unfair.

He knows Richie's balls like attention.

Richie holds Eddie against him, and rolls the both of them over, pinning Eddie against the bed. They wind up a tangle of limbs, kissing, and groping, and with Eddie's dick trapped right against Richie's stomach, with Richie's dick pressed right against Eddie's ass. He rocks his hips, grinding into Eddie's ass, and groaning, and turning his head to hide his face in Eddie's neck.

Eddie's hands stroke Richie's back. "You want to?" he breathes.

"Fuck, yes." He doesn't know exactly what he's agreeing to, but he doesn't care. If Eddie wants it, he wants it, too. He wants to, he wants, he wants to. "Fuck, you feel so good."

"You aren't even fucking me yet."
He groans, and lifts his head, pushing up on his elbows, and searching for the lube. Eddie grabs Richie's ass, squeezing. Richie gets the lube on his fingers, and he strokes Eddie's dick a couple of times.

They've done this before, too.

They know how to shift against each other, how to get into a position where Richie can circle his finger around Eddie's rim softly at first, slowly, and teasing.

Richie lets his teeth flash against Eddie's chest, biting, and sucking, leaving a mark, and Eddie starts stroking himself roughly, and Richie finally presses a finger into Eddie, making his breath hitch loudly.

"I never told you my joke," Richie says.

"Shut up."

"A priest, a rabbi, and a prostitute walk into a bar, and—"

Eddie grabs Richie by the hair, and yanks, pulling his head up, and thrusting his tongue into Richie's mouth, tilting his chin back with the force of the kiss.

Richie curls his finger. He's as hard as a brick, feeling Eddie's tight, tight heat around his finger, and imagining his dick. He hopes they really are doing it today. He grinds into Eddie's thigh, and bites Eddie's lip, and sinks two fingers into Eddie's ass, scissoring his fingers, and making Eddie swear loudly into Richie's mouth.

He waits until Eddie has started to rock his hips into Richie's hand to add a third.

Eddie's body arches off the bed when he crooks his fingers.

"Let's do it," he pants.

"Yeah?" The idea makes Richie's dick fucking throb. "You want—?"

"I want to."

He pulls his fingers out, growing so hard it hurts at the sound it makes, and he shifts onto his knees, moving to settle properly between Eddie's legs again while Eddie fumbles to open the little foil package.

"Glasses," Eddie says.

Richie literally tosses his glasses over his shoulder.

They kiss again, and again.

Richie starts rolling on the condom, but he fucks up somehow, and Eddie gets impatient, and slaps Richie's hand, taking the condom, and doing it himself.

"I don't have much experience with condoms," Richie says. "Your mom usually lets me—"

"If you want to fuck me, can it."

He grins. "Yes, sir." He smacks a kiss to Eddie's knee.
They're both shaking a little, and Richie keeps ducking his head to give Eddie quick, sloppy kisses while they're sliding a pillow under Eddie, and fixing the angle, while Richie's coating his dick in lube, and getting Eddie's legs bent just right, while Eddie grips eagerly at Richie's shoulders, and at his side, at the backs of his thighs.

Eddie's eyes are shining when they meet Richie's. "I love you."

Richie has to kiss him again, and Eddie brings him even closer this time, wrapping his arms around Richie's neck, and opening his mouth to the kiss.

"I can still taste the Cheetos, though."

He grins.

"Come on." Eddie tugs on his ass, pulling him closer, and the head of Riche's dick nudes against Eddie's hole. "Fuck."

He swipes a kiss to Eddie's jaw. "Yeah," he pants. "I'm trying." He starts to push into Eddie, and he's determined to go slowly, to go carefully. His arms are shaking with the effort to keep himself propped over Eddie, though. He drops his face into the crook of Eddie's neck, swearing, and trying to focus on the fact that he's pushing his dick into Eddie. Eds. Eddie Spaghetti. "I love you," he breathes. "I love you. I really fucking love you." He pauses.

The pads of Eddie's fingers press painfully into Richie's ass.

"Okay?" Richie says.

"Yeah." He can feel Eddie swallow. "I'm okay. You can. You can go in further." He brushes a hand up into Richie's hair.

Richie slowly pushes in deeper.

Oh, God.

This is it. This is the moment he was made for. He was born to end up balls deep in Eddie's ass.

"Move," Eddie says, strained.

He does. He pulls out slightly, and pushes in again. "I love you," he swears. "Fuck. My balls love you. My dick loves you. This is the happiest it's ever been. Fuck." He presses his nose into Eddie's neck.

"Your balls love me," Eddie says, panting. "Great. Now I can die a happy man."

He grins, and lifts his head, kissing at Eddie's jaw, at his cheek.

He wants to look at him.

Eddie's whole face is pinched a little, and covered in a sheen of swear, and when their gazes finally meet, Eddie smiles breathlessly, and Richie smiles, too.

And, after a beat, Eddie starts rocking back against him.

They're doing it. Fucking. It takes them a couple of tries to get the rhythm right, but, oh, God, it feels so good, and the sounds that Eddie are making are filthy, and Richie is going to come really, really soon.
He shifts, and reaches down between them, pumping Eddie roughly.

It's the shift in angle that does it, though. It drives him further into Eddie, and he hits *that* spot, and it makes a stream of words pour from Eddie's mouth, "yes, fuck, Richie, *Richie, yes."* Richie starts driving into him, trying to hit that spot again, and again, and again.

It's too much. Richie can't keep his eyes open. It's too good, it's too good, it's too good.

Eddie's ass *clenches*, and he starts to make a low, guttural "uh, uh, uh," noise, and he comes.

The moment he's coming, Richie is coming, too.

He can't move right after, trying to catch his breath, and feeling Eddie stroking his hair.

He kisses Eddie's neck, and rises up, pulling out of him kind of gingerly, and meeting his gaze. "How was that?" he asks. He thinks suddenly, wildly that he should make some hilarious joke.

"Really fucking great," Eddie says, giving a kind of lazy, sated smile.

He grins. "You're welcome."

They clean up slowly. Richie laughs when Eddie's wiping off both of their dicks with fucking baby wet wipes. It's silly, and it's weird, and it's Eddie. And he just can't stop *touching* Eddie, laying a hand on his back and combing his fingers through his hair and brushing a hand up his arm.

Eddie winces slightly when he pulls on his briefs. "I'm going to be *sore,*" he says.

"It's because my dick's so big."

Eddie just slings his arm around Richie's shoulders, and pulls him in, kissing his temple.

---

It only takes a few weeks for Richie to decide that they're really fucking great at college. Like. They are making a ton of friends, and they are going to classes, and they are fucking like bunnies in between.

See? Killing it.

Richie learns there's an improv comedy group, and he auditions, and he is asked to join, which is *fucktastic.*

He stays up into the early morning hours playing video games, and sleeps in until he's late for lunch with Eddie and has to go in his pajamas, has his classes in the afternoon, improv after that, and dinner with the guys from his dorm, and spends the rest of the night with Eddie.

Eddie is busy, too.

He decides he can't handle joining track team when he needs to focus on classes, but, thankfully, he's still got plenty of time for Richie.

They read comics just like always. They study together in the library between classes. They do laundry in the basement of the dorm, sitting on the dryers, and playing several rounds of old maid with Richie's old, novelty Mario themed deck of cards while they wait. They watch TV together. And, of course, they lock the door and turn on the radio and have a good fucking time.
They haven't told anyone they're together. Some people might have assumed, though. They haven't
told anyone they're not together.

Eddie has a pretty fair amount of money from his father, and now that he's eighteen, the money is
his to use the way he wants. It was meant for school, though, and that's what Eddie plans to use it
for. And since his mother isn't about to send him anything to live on, he needs a job.

He ends up applying to half a dozen different places.

He is thrilled to hear back from somewhere at last. It isn't the job of his dreams, but it's a job. For a
whole five bucks an hour, he is hired to scoop ice cream.

It's great.

Eddie is keen on the store, too: The Cow's Pajamas is a small, sweet-smelling place with walls that
are painted a soft lime green, with pastel orange booths, and pastel pink tables, and it's always just
a little too cool, a little too clean.

And, of course, he brings home dented ice cream cartons a lot, or cakes that were made with
mistakes.

Also.

His uniform is a bright pink shirt with a cow on it, crisp khaki shorts, and white tennis shoes, and,
yes, that means that he becomes more adorable than he was before he got himself a job.

Richie starts hanging out there a lot.

"I'd like to sample the banana fudge swirl, please."

"Richie," Eddie says dryly, "what a surprise. It's only been two hours since your last visit." But he
has to give Richie a sample if he asks for one. It's policy. There's a sign that says so.

Richie touches his sample with the tip of his tongue. "Hmm. I taste a hint of banana."

"In the banana fudge swirl? Weird."

"It has a nice, full body, too," he says, eating the rest of the sample. "Rich. I like it."

"This isn't wine."

"How about a sample of the cotton candy carnival?"

"You're lucky that it's three in the afternoon on a Tuesday in November, and nobody is here."

"Lush," Richie says, tasting the cotton candy carnival, and nodding. "Spicy, too. I want to say
there's a touch of . . . cinnamon?"

"No."

"I'll take a sample of the key lime pie, too."
"I hate you."

He smells the sample. "I'm getting—I'm getting—yes, a distinct citrus flavor."

"Do you think that's the lime?"

"Ooh. Yes. I like this one. Such a fresh, fruity flavor. Harmonious."

"Dammit, Richie," Eddie says. "Would you pick a fucking flavor before I fucking jump over the counter to fucking strangle you?"

He blinks. "I'll take a scoop of vanilla with sprinkles, please."

It's what he gets every time. He's classic, okay? He grins when Eddie completely coats the scoop in sprinkles, because his man knows how he likes his ice cream.

He is paying when one of the girls who works with Eddie comes into the shop. "Richie!" she exclaims. She's pretty, has dark black hair and heart-shaped face and dimples in her cheeks. And, more importantly, she's a fan. She thinks Richie's hilarious.

"Melinda!"

"What are you getting this afternoon?" she asks.

"I'm going with a wild flavor today," he says. "Ready?" He holds up his cone.

She laughs.

("She has a thing for you," Eddie says, irritated. "She's told me multiple time that she thinks you're cute. She pouted when I told her you were taken."

"She has a thing for me because I'm hilarious, Eds.")

She heads into the back to clock in.

Richie is pocketing his change when Eddie grips his shoulder, and tugs. He looks at Eddie in surprise, seeing that his face is tilted up, that he's leaning up. He grins, and he doesn't even care if anyone sees when he leans down slightly, when he kisses his boyfriend.

"I'll see you later, dumbass," Eddie says, turning to start wiping down the counter.

"You're leaving?" Melinda asks.

"Aye," Richie says, "Fraid so, Capt'n. I was just stopping in to see me good matey here, and now, alas, the winds have changed, and I must go to me class." He sighs.

She giggles.

"Is that a pirate?" Eddie says.

He winks. "Thar she blows!" he says, strutting to the door.

And when the door is closing after him, he hears Melinda telling Eddie that she thinks their friendship is just so cute.

---
Even after everything she's done, Mrs. K is still in the picture. Richie had thought that she would cut Eddie off after he refused to try being not gay, and after he really, officially moved to California. But in her own, twisted way, she loves him too much for that.

It's unclear whether Eddie is happy about that fact, or not.

"I don't care what she told you," Eddie says, pacing, and slowly, inadvertently twisting the long, curly chord of the phone around himself. "She's wrong. The clinic isn't infecting unsuspecting students with dangerous, experimental vaccines! Yes, I do. I do know that for a fact."

Richie can't hear what Mrs. K is saying in reply, but it makes Eddie stop in the middle of the room, close his eyes, and pinch the bridge of his nose.

Richie hasn't talked to his parents much since he got to California. Why would he? He called right after he arrived to say that he made it safely, and he called on his dad's birthday at the start of November for a brief conversation with a lot of long, uncomfortable pauses, but that's it.

Eddie, though?

Eddie has a standing phone appointment with his mother. Every single Tuesday at seven p.m., she calls. If he fails to answer, she calls the police.

"Fine," Eddie says. "I promise that I will not go to the clinic on campus if I need medical help."

Actually, he's already been to the clinic on campus.

He kind of freaked out when they first got to California. He was anxious about failing, because Mrs. K fucking put the idea in his head. But, after a couple of weeks, he went to the clinic and got a prescription to help with anxiety, and he's doing much better.

That seems like information Mrs. K doesn't need, though.

"I said I promise, Ma."

"You can just go there to pick up condoms," Richie says.

Eddie gives him a sharp, dirty glare.

"Or, wait, are the condoms being infected with dangerous, experimental vaccines, too?"

"That's just Richie," Eddie says, turning away pointedly. "Yes, he's still my roommate. Why would I do that? No, I'm not tired of him. You don't even know what my grades are! How can you say he's affecting them if you don't even know what they are? Ma!"

It's hilarious, sometimes, to listen to Eddie on the phone with his mother.

And, inexplicably, he thinks of Stan.

He thinks of the way that Mr. K thought Stan was "such a nice boy for a Jew," and he thinks of Stan's little smirk when Richie would imitate Mrs. K's awful, nasally voice, and, suddenly, he really, really misses Stan.

When was the last time they talked?

He can't remember the last time he talked to any of the losers, actually.
He feels a little bad about it. He's just been so busy. He wrote down Stan's number. Somewhere. He should find it, and give him a call, and see what he's up to, tell him about the time the campus police knocked on the door right when Richie was about to blow his wad in Eddie's mouth because Mrs. K had reported Eddie missing after he neglected to answer her 7 p.m. call.

"She is insufferable!" Eddie says, struggling to untwist himself from the phone's curly chord, and slamming it down in the holder.

"Now that I'm at college, it must be a struggle for her," Richie says.

"And she's living with my aunt, and they're, like, feeding off each other, and it's making her worse."

"She needs my sweet, sweet lovin' to mellow her out."

"I can't handle it, Rich. I'm serious. I can't. She is waiting for me to fail, or catch a terrible, incurable disease, or—or have a fucking mental breakdown! She wants me to!"

"You should just hang up whenever she starts talking shit," Richie says. "Show her who's boss."

"I should."

He won't, of course. Richie can't criticize. It's not like his relationship with his mother is anything to brag about.

---

They've just starting eating lunch when Eddie brings it up. "Did you know there's a GSA on campus?" he asks. He holds his hand sanitizer across the table, and when Richie opens his hand, Eddie squeezes some into his palm.

"Depends," Richie says.

"It stands for Gay Straight Alliance."

"Cool."

"I'm going to join."

Richie freezes midway into a bite of pizza. Really? Eddie doesn't usually have qualms about speaking his mind, or being who he is. Usually. The fact that he's gay is the single, uncomfortable exception.

"What?" Eddie says.

"If you join the GSA, won't people know you like . . . " He sticks his tongue in cheek. " . . . and stuff?"

"So?" Eddie is looking at him with a bright, brazen challenge in his gaze. "It's the truth."

"Aw." Richie leans across the table to pinch Eddie's cheek before Eddie can jerk away. "My cute little bowl of spaghetti is growing up and claiming his sexuality!"

"Shut up." There's a hint of a blush in the apples of his cheeks.

Richie just grins.
"Some of the guys in Brit Lit with me are in the club. They say the club does some activism stuff, but it's mostly a social group. So. Do you want to come with me? To a meeting? There's one tonight at eight. They said it wouldn't last more than an hour."

He shrugs. "Sure." Improv doesn't meet on Tuesdays.

He isn't planning on dressing up for the meeting, because, like, it's a meeting. For a club. Why would you dress up for that?

Eddie is agonizing over what to wear, though.

"Since when do you care what you wear?" Richie says, spinning in his chair.

"Shut up." He starts to pull out some of his nicer, choirboy clothes.

"Somebody is feeling fancy tonight. Wait. Do you plan on replacing me with some shyster from this shindig?"

"I like to make a good first impression," Eddie says. "Sue me."

It's cute, honestly. He's checked his hair in the mirror seven times. "Wear the baby blue polo," Richie says. "And if you really want them to go wild, wear your old gym shorts, too." He makes a half-purr, half-roar noise.

"I hate you."

He doesn't. He loves him. And, of course, he wears the baby blue polo.

Richie isn't going to fuck with his hair, or anything. He can jazz his outfit up a little, though. He wears one of his usual black long-sleeved shirts with holes around the collar, and around the cuffs, too, but he pulls an old, loud Hawaiian print button up over top of that to add a splash of color.

The meeting is just in a small, empty classroom.

He's surprised by how many people are there. Also, he's surprised by the snacks. There is some fucking good quality shit. He didn't even need to bring a box of Nerds. He leaves his candy in his pocket and makes a beeline for the table of food, loading up a plate for himself, and a plate for Eddie, too. Eddie claims them a pair of desks in the corner. Richie sits and starts to shovel in cookies and crackers and Rice Krispies Treats.

He recognizes a couple of girls in a row of desks up front.

And, across the room, he sees a guy from his sociology class who seem like a real fucking douche.

The meeting gets started pretty soon after that. It's boring. Richie is planning on listening, really, he means to, but the girl at the front of the room starts droning on about planning some project for awareness, or something, and Richie is having fun rubbing gray streaks on the over waxed tiles of the floor with the heel of his shoe, which is something he discovered by accident, and is actually mildly entertaining.

He tunes in again when there's a burst of laughter.

It's the end of the meeting.

Sort of.
"Please, have some food!" says the girl at the front. Richie is more than ready to oblige. Before he can, he's trapped in a circle of people who approach their little, back-of-the-room corner, who love seeing new faces, and want to welcome them officially.

"I'm Eddie." Eddie's eyes are bright, eager. "This is Richie, my—my roommate."

"Nice to meet y'all," Richie says, miming at tipping a hat.

They chat with the group for a while, talking about where they're from and majors and ways to get involved if they're interested. Everyone is nice, admittedly. They're boring, and most of his jokes go right over their heads, but, yeah, they're nice.

Richie is glad to leave at last.

Eddie had the time of his life, apparently. He is vibrating with excitement when they make their way across campus after. He can't stop talking about everyone they met, and how he thinks they should take up the offer to attend GSA board game night on Thursdays.

"I've got improv," Richie says.

"Shit."

"You should go, though." He grins. "Just remember that it is illegal to kill someone while playing a game of Monopoly."

"I threatened to kill you one fucking time—"

"I remember it like it was yesterday," Richie says. "How could I forget? I tickled the pickle to the memory of the murder in your eyes for a week."

"You're disgusting."

He bumps his elbow into Eddie's affectionately in reply.

"I think I will go," Eddie says. "Steve seems cool." He takes Richie's hand.

Richie thinks Eddie is trying to gain his attention, or something, and he glances at him. But. Eddie is holding his hand, swinging it slightly between them. Just. Holding it.

"I want to help with the stuff they're planning for Human Rights Day, too."

"Yeah." Richie clears his throat. "Totally."

"Thanks for coming with me tonight, by the way," Eddie says.

For you? Richie thinks. Anything.

But when Eddie smiles at Richie, Richie can't help but crack a joke about how Eddie knows he's a slut for free, unlimited Rice Krispies Treats, and Eddie sighs fondly and shakes his head, and they hold hands for the rest of the walk to the dorm.

---

Eddie gets really into the GSA. It's, like, his thing. He goes to the weekly Tuesday meeting every meeting, and he goes to board game night every week, too, and he meets up with people from the club a lot for dinner or the movies or studying in the library.
Richie is glad that Eddie is happy in the GSA.

Personally, he isn't that big a fan.

He comes to meetings with Eddie on occasion. Sure, He goes bowling with them one time. But, honestly, a lot of the people in the GSA are kind of stuck up, and really, like, profoundly unfunny. Also, there's that guy from intro to sociology. Richie had thought he was a douche at the start, and now he knows it. There was a discussion in class once over the role of society in determining sexual morality turned accidently into a heated, off-topic debate about sexuality in general, and the asshole said bisexual was a word for indecisive. Richie totally, one hundred percent supports Eddie's interests, but, yeah, he'll pass on hanging out with that motherfucker.

He'll stick to improv, thanks.

It doesn't bother Eddie that Richie isn't interested. Why would it? It's not like Richie is bothered that Eddie isn't chomping at the bit to join his improv group. They've each got their own thing. And, no matter what their things are, they still always have each other, too.

---

Richie's got a small, boxy TV that his dad bought him. Usually, it sits on his desk. But when they want to watch a movie, he'll prop it on his chair to make it face Eddie's bed, put the VCR that he got for cheap on top, and trip his way over the tangle of chords to sit on the bed with Eddie while they watch whatever movie Eddie picked up from the library.

They're watching *Jurassic Park* on a Tuesday when Eddie says it.

"You know, you kind of look like Jeff Goldblum."

Richie grins.

"You're like a skinnier, hairier—"

"Jeff Goldblum is hot," Richie says.

Eddie is propped up against a pile of pillows, and Richie is propped up against Eddie, using him for a throne: he's seated in between Eddie's legs, and he's got his head on Eddie's chest, and his arms on Eddie's knees.

"You think I'm hot."

"Jeff Goldblum is hot," Eddie says. "You? If Jeff Goldblum had a child with a hairy string bean, that child would look like you."

"Sorry, babe." He tilts his head to look up at Eddie. "You can't take it back. You think I'm a stud. Admit it. You get horny just thinking about my bod, don't you?"

Eddie sighs.

"Boy, do I hate being right all the time," Richie says, nailing Goldblum's accent.

"Well, you don't *sound* like Jeff Goldblum." His arms come around Richie's shoulders, holding him. "You sound like a goat that got kicked in the balls."

"I take it back."

"I'm sorry, is this getting you too randy?"

Suffice to say, Richie is Dr. Ian Malcolm for Halloween that year. Eddie is Alan Grant. They spend half an hour in the dark, crowded basement of a frat house, talking to guys from their dorm, and nursing red solo cups of flat, lukewarm Natty Lite until Eddie tugs on Richie's shirt to make him lean down slightly, and whispers in his ear with hot, wet breath that he's ready to go.

Richie is the one who pushes a path through the crowd.

He's got his head turned back to check that Eddie's still with him when he nearly plows right into a girl.

"My bad!" she says. "Hey, I like your costume! You're the guy from Jurassic Park, right?" She smiles at Richie with bright, hazy eyes, with a tilt of her head.

He grins.

"You look just like him," she tells him.

In the dark, a body presses close to Richie's side from behind, and a hand slips snugly into the back pocket of his jeans.

"Oh!" says the girl. "You're from the movie, too! I like your hat!"

"Thanks," Eddie says.

The girl must hear somebody call for her, because she looks suddenly over her shoulder, and yells in reply. She starts to head off. But she looks back at them again, and says, grinning, "definitely best costumes of the night!" before she disappears into the throngs of people.

Richie is smug.

He isn't prepared for Eddie to squeeze his ass. "Come on."

By the time they get back to the dorm, they don't have the patience to push the beds together.

They end up on the floor.

Eddie straddles Richie, and kisses him furiously, and Richie's still mostly dressed in his wrinkled, half-unbuttoned black shirt with a brown leather jacket, but he couldn't care less. His pants are around his knees, and Eddie's on top of him, and he can't get the lube onto his fingers fast enough. Eddie is mostly dressed, too, in his shirt and the little red necktie and a hat on his head, but that doesn't stop him from yanking Richie's hands away from his ass, and sinking onto him, and riding him, bouncing in his lap, red-cheeked and open-mouthed and curling his fingers into the material of Richie's cheap jacket.

After, when they're a sticky, panting mess in a tangle of half-dressed limbs, Eddie says, "this floor is disgusting."

Richie grins. He likes to think Jeff Goldblum would be proud of them.

---

It happens at the end of the semester. The fight. It's their first since they started rooming together,
and, honestly, with how much they bicker about the state of the room, it's wonder they made it as long as they did without ever having it out.

Richie is right in the middle of the game when Eddie yanks the chord for the Nintendo out of the wall.

"What the hell?!"

Eddie glares furiously at him. "Now that I have your attention, I'll repeat myself."

"Dude!" Richie clutches desperately at his hair. "I hadn't saved that!"

"I'm sure you'll be able to catch up later. I, however, cannot continue to live in fucking filth. There is literally a rotting hot dog under your bed right now! Do you know how disgusting that is? And—and—and how the hell do you even fucking lose a hot dog under the bed?"

"What's it matter?" Richie says, shaking his head. "If it's under the bed, how do you even know it's there?"

"I can smell it!"

"Now you're a fucking bloodhound?"

"Some of us aren't actual trash," Eddie says, "so we can smell the trash that's around us."

This is unbelievable. "What the fuck is your problem?"

"My problem is that you don't even fucking care that there's a rotting hot dog under your bed!"

"If it bothers you that much, throw it out! Eddie's nostrils flare. "It isn't my responsibility to clean up your shit, Richie."

"Fine." Richie gets down on his knees. "Okay? You win." He has to search around with his hand for a moment, but he finds the hot dog, and pulls it out from under the bed. It's disgusting. But, you know, he'll live, and Eddie will, too. He pushes to his feet, drops the thing in the trash. "Happy?" he says, glaring.

"No."

He throws up his hands.

"This place is still a mess! Look! Your shit is everywhere, and—and I can still see that fucking hot dog, because you haven't taken out the trash in a month!"

"Why do I have to take out the trash?"

"Someone has to, and since I've done it the last three hundred times, it's your fucking turn!"

He curls his hand into a fist. "I told you I would take it out."

"Yeah," Eddie says. "You tell me that a lot."

Neither of them says anything for a moment. What the hell was Eddie's problem? If he was that mad about the trash, he could have said so. He didn't have to attack Richie about it. He glares right back at Eddie, and he waits.
Eddie is the first to break. "I can't be here right now. It's disgusting. You're disgusting, and I have to study. Some of us actually care about our grades." He shoves his books into his backpack.

"Great," Richie says, "now I'm trash, and I'm stupid."

"You're an asshole." Eddie yanks open the door. "If you need me, I'll be somewhere that doesn't literally smell like a dumpster."

Richie stands furiously in the silent, empty room.

He thinks about turning his game on again, but he knows he won't be able to focus. He leaves. He doesn't lock the door, because it's Eddie who insists on having it locked if they aren't there, and he isn't doing Eddie any favors after that.

He doesn't know where he's going.

He ends up stopping by the dorm of one of his friends from improv.

She's there, thankfully.

"Studying?" he says, knocking on the doorframe.

"Unfortunately." She makes a face. "I could use a break, though. It's that, or I'm going to start banging my head against the wall. What's up?"

They go for something to eat.

He isn't planning on saying anything about what happened. He can't stop thinking about it, though. And, after a while, he can't stop himself from mentioning it casually, joking about giving up showering to have the time for studying in between video game levels, and when she's laughing, he says that, seriously, studying has taken a toll on his otherwise pristine lifestyle, and the roommate had spent the afternoon fucking screaming at Richie over whose turn it was to empty the trash.

"I'm disgusting, apparently," he says.

"Everyone is disgusting when you're forced to share a room that's the size of a port-a-potty," she says.

"Right!"

"My roommate gets worked up over stupid stuff like that, too. It sucks. And it's like I get that roommates your freshmen year basically have to be random, but it sucks when you get stuck with someone who's got a stick up the butt." She shakes her head. "But, hey. You usually get along with your roommate, right? You talk about him like you guys are pretty good friends."

"Yeah." He prods at his chicken with his fork. "We are. And, actually, we knew each other before UCLA. We've been friends since we were kids."

"He's probably just stressed about exams," she says.

"Probably."

He's glad when she changes the subject.

He's starting to feel it. Guilt. It isn't until he's back in the dorm that the stew of anger, hurt, and self-righteousness in him is finally entirely replaced with the feeling of being a piece of shit,
though.

In Eddie's small, claimed space, things are pristine. It's unreal, honestly. His bed is neatly made just like always, and his desk is tidy, too, with neat, perfect piles of papers, folders, and notebooks, and even his collection of dirty laundry seems somehow clean, sitting so neatly in a basket in his closet, tucked politely under the clean, hanging clothes.

The rest of the room?

Shit.

The rest of the room is kind of disgusting.

To start, Richie's dirty clothes are everywhere. Seriously. There is clothing on his bed, under his desk, in a pile on top of his deflated, overturned laundry bag full of clean, unfolded clothes that he never put away.

His desk is littered with empty soda cans, with empty carryout boxes.

The trash is full to the point of spilling onto the floor.

There's a fucking Snickers wrapper in the tangle of sheets on his bed, which, like, it's no wonder Eddie refuses to sit on Richie's fucking dumpster of a bed when they're just hanging out, reading a comic.

He makes an effort to clean up. He collects his trash from around the room, and he takes everything down to the dumpster back behind the building. He picks up his clothes, too.

By ten, Eddie isn't back.

Richie does laundry. He washes his clothes, and his sheets, too. He thinks of doing Eddie's laundry for him, but Eddie is particular, and Richie isn't going to fuck with that right now.

He's watching SNL when Eddie gets back at last.

Richie keeps his gaze fixed firmly on the TV.

Eddie leaves again with his little bathroom caddy, and while Eddie's in the bathroom, Richie turns off the TV, gets into bed, and pulls the sheet up over himself. He can't deal with Eddie right now. His back is to the room when Eddie returns, but he hears him shuffling around, and, of course, he knows when Eddie turns off the lamp by his bed, plunging the room into darkness.

He hears Eddie climb into bed.

It's quiet.

Go to sleep, he thinks. Stop thinking about it. Go. To. Sleep.

He tenses when hears what sounds like Eddie getting out of bed again. What? He can't even sleep in here now? Really? But, to his surprise, Eddie comes to sit on the edge of Richie's bed.

What the fuck?

"Hey."

Richie is silent.
"I'm sorry," Eddie says. "Rich? I know you're awake."

"Yeah, I'm awake." He balls his hand into a fist. "I just don't want to talk to you."

"You're mad. I get it. You should be. But I have that exam tomorrow, and this semester I got used to . . . to getting to sleep with you when I'm anxious. It's—I'm spoiled. I can't sleep by myself with an exam tomorrow." He scoots even closer to Richie.

Richie won't budge.

"I'm sorry."

"I don't see how you can sleep next to someone as disgusting as I am," Richie says, snide.

"I didn't mean that."

"It sure seemed like you meant it."

"I didn't," he insists. "I was being an asshole, and I'm sorry. I'm really sorry."

Richie is silent.

"Rich." Eddie turns his torso towards Richie, leaning in, and wrapping an arm around Richie's waist, propping his chin on Richie's shoulder. "Please?"

Richie sighs loudly. "Your mom doesn't even beg me this much." He shifts to make more room for him.

Eddie gets properly into the bed, pulling the sheet up over himself. "Funny," he says. "Your mom always wants to cuddle." He presses into Richie's back immediately, wrapping his arm more securely around Richie's waist, and tucking his nose into Richie's neck. "I'm sorry I was being an asshole." His voice is muffled in Richie's skin.

"Whatever."

"I'm serious. I'm getting really stressed about exams, but I shouldn't be taking it out on you. I'm the asshole. Me. I'm sorry, Rich."

There's a pause.

"Forgive me?"

Eddie is clinging to Richie, which is unfair, and he knows it, and his voice is small and sweet, hopeful. Fuck it. Richie rolls over, readjusts, and tugs Eddie closer, manhandling his boyfriend into the position that works best when they share one of these tiny beds.

"I love you," Eddie says, sighing.

The dark of their small, windowless room is almost somehow tangible at night.

There's only a small, yellow sliver at the bottom of the door; the lights in the hallway of the dorm are always on. But, otherwise, it's pitch fucking black. And, of course, Richie's shitty eyes never really adjust to the dark. He likes it, though. There is something weirdly intimate about lying in that kind of darkness with someone else, feeling the weight of him, and the warmth, hearing every breath and sigh and small, shifting movement.
"I cleaned," he says.

"I saw." Eddie's foot rubs Richie's calf. "You didn't have to. I was being a turd. You should have ignored me."

"The hot dog was gross."

"Still." There's something hesitant in Eddie's voice. "You're never mean to me. And, sometimes, I think about how awful I can be to you, and I don't know why you put up with it. I'm worse than my mom sometimes."

"You are nothing like your mom," Richie says, incredulous.

Eddie doesn't say anything. He turns his face into Richie a little, though. He's got his head on Richie's chest, and his hand has snuck under Richie's loose, rucked up t-shirt to lay on his belly, and his fingers are scratching absent at the line of dark hair that leads down from his bellybutton. He does that sometimes. And, honestly, Richie loves when he does it, when he's lost in thought, and he touches Richie instinctively, touches him in an easy, unthinking way.

"And, shit, this place was disgusting." Richie continues. "I know it grosses you out, and I didn't do shit about it. That's on me. I mean, you've put up with it for a whole fucking semester. I think you're allowed to get pissed at me for promising to clean up and never fucking doing it."

"Does this mean we're done fighting?"

"Babe. We were done fighting, like, two minutes ago. Keep up."

Eddie presses a kiss to Richie's chest. "Good."

It's quiet.

"You want to fool around a little bit?"

Richie grins immediately. "What about your exam tomorrow?"

Eddie is already pushing Richie's t-shirt up, shifting, and pressing a kiss to Richie's bare chest. "I just studied in the library for five hours." He starts pressing kisses in a line down Richie's stomach. "I think I deserve a treat." He moves to straddle Richie's thighs, looping his thumbs in the waistband of Richie's old sweatpants and tugging them down.

"Is the treat my dick?"

In reply, Eddie takes Richie's dick out of his boxers. "Got a problem with that?" He strokes Richie slowly, and lays a palm on Richie's inner thigh, stroking the skin with his thumb, and he shifts, allows his breath to wash hotly over Richie's dick.

He's gotten really, really good at this.

Like.

Richie doesn't really have much of a gag reflex, so he's awesome at blowing his boyfriend, but, shit, Eddie is thorough, okay, and he does this thing with his tongue that's probably fucking illegal.

Eddie runs his tongue slowly down the length of Richie's dick, and up.

"Fuck, Eds," Richie says, shaky. "Please."
He fists a hand in Eddie's hair when Eddie's mouth closes around him.

He wishes he could see Eddie right then. The sight of Eddie's head bobbing between his legs, of his dick disappearing into Eddie's pink mouth? It's one of the best fucking sights in the world.

He knows he shouldn't make noise. They don't have any music playing right now. He doesn't want the guys in the room next door to hear him moaning.

But.

He clenches his jaw, and he's able to keep himself quiet, but he can't keep his hips from rocking, but it's okay, because Eddie just fucking lets him. He lets Richie fuck his mouth. Eddie slides a hand around to squeeze Richie's ass, and he hums around Richie's dick, and when Richie tugs roughly on Eddie's hair, Eddie keeps Richie in his mouth, and he swallows it when Richie comes.

"C'mere," Richie says, pulling at Eddie to haul him close.

Eddie shifts, and presses a kiss to Richie's cheek.

"Let me do you." Richie's already got his hands on Eddie's waistband.

"I'm okay," Eddie says. "It'll make a big mess. I do want to sleep over here with you tonight, though."

"Try to leave," Richie says, wrapping his arms around Eddie.

Eddie laughs softly. "I've got to brush my teeth." He kisses his cheek again, and lingers, nuzzling his nose against Richie's cheek softly. "I love you," he murmurs, and he sits up. "I'll be right back."

He really does leave to go to the bathroom, to brush his teeth.

His breath is minty when he crawls back into bed, and he kisses Richie sweetly. They settle in together. Richie knows when Eddie falls asleep fairly quickly, because his body goes loose, and his breathing slows and evens and deepens. Richie is awake for longer, though, lying in the dark, and happy, holding Eddie while he sleeps.

---

He spends the month of break in Portland with his grandparents. His parents are there, too, for the actual holiday itself, but, for most of the break, they're looking at houses in Florida. He's invited to come with them, but he can't think of anything he'd rather do less.

He thinks of driving to Derry for a day to see if any of his friends are back in town for the break. He hasn't seen them in months.

He's going to call to ask, but he can't remember Stan's number. Or Bill's. He tries to think of who else was his friend in Derry, but he's drawing a blank.

Mike?

He watches a lot of soaps with his grandma. He stays up late into the night every night, playing video games. He starts to work, too. It's really fucking boring to spend a month with your grandparents in Maine, okay? It starts when his grandpa pays him ten bucks to shovel the driveway. Suddenly, all of the old, kindly neighbors are offering to pay Ray and Shirley Tozier's handsome young grandson to shovel their driveways, too. He makes fucking bank.
He's able to talk with Eddie twice on the phone. Eddie's mother moved in with one of his aunts just after he moved to California, so that's where Eddie is for the break. Both times Eddie is able to call, he has to talk at a whisper.

("Who's that on the phone, Richard?" asks his gran.

"My friend."

"Tell your friend that your granny says hello."

"Granny says hello."

"Tell him if he wants to come over, I'm making my lasagna for dinner, and I'll fix him a plate."

"If you come over for dinner, Granny will make you lasagna." He raises his voice. "Granny, turn up the volume on TV so I can hear it!" He pauses until the volume on the TV is blasting. "Also, I'll suck your dick."

Eddie laughs quietly over the phone. "I really fucking miss you," he whispers.)

Richie is more than ready to return to California.

His flight gets in several hours before Eddie's flight. He's going to wait, though. He claims a bench, props his feet up on his duffel, and plays his Gameboy.

He's dozed off when he hears his name.

The moment he spots his boyfriend coming towards him with his little rolling suitcase, he doesn't waste any time tripping over his duffle to get to him, and he grabs him around the waist, and lifts him off his feet. "I can't believe you actually waited at the airport for six hours," Eddie says, a grin in his voice. Richie just squeezes him tightly, and exclaims that his baby's come back from war, and smacks a series of loud, wet kisses to his cheek while Eddie squirms and shoves at his chest and laughs.

---

The campus radio station papers bulletin boards across campus with a call for interns. Richie is immediately on board. He was born to be on the radio! He goes by the station as soon as he sees the first half-crumpled, photocopied ad. He walks away with a brand new internship.

It isn't really that glamorous a job, of course.

He shelves the records a lot, and talks to advertisers on the phone, and is never anywhere near a microphone. Still. This is where it starts.

---

He has Eddie stop by the station one afternoon when nobody is around. He wants to show him the place. The station is really fucking cool.

He uses his nasally museum tour guide guy voice, showing him around the place. "And to your left, we have the famed K95 studio. Beautiful, isn't it? Please, no flash photography." He explains how everything works, too, and can't help turning into kind of a dork when they're in the studio, and he's showing the whole fucking shebang to his boyfriend.

"When do you actually get to be on the radio?" Eddie asks.
"Soon." He spins in a chair. "Just got to work my charm. Show 'em what they're missing." He clicks his tongue, winks, and fires a little finger gun at Eddie.

He almost falls out of the chair when he hears a voice from down the hallway.

It's Stu.

"Hey, Richie," Stu says.

"Stu!" Stu is a senior, and in charge. "I was just, ah—this is my roommate. Eddie. I was showing him around the studio. I haven't, like, touched anything, or—"

"It's cool."

Richie nods quickly. Fuck. He really hadn't thought he'd get caught in here.

"I thought for a second when I heard voices in here, you had a girl with you. Trying to get laid by showing off, you know? It wouldn't be the first time." He shakes his head. "Anyway, I just came in to grab some shit I left in here earlier. Carry on." He jerks his head in a kind of greeting at Eddie. "Nice to meet you, man."

"Yeah," Eddie says. "You, too."

Neither of them says a word while Stu makes his way to an office at the back of the studio. It takes him a minute to find what he's there for. He reemerges at last, though, and heads out of the station, and they hear the door shut after him.

"Wow," Eddie says.

"Shut up."

"I've never seen you nervous like that!"

"Nervous?" He scoffs.

Eddie grins brightly at him. "I thought you were going to shit your pants."

"Hey!" He jabs a finger at Eddie in warning. "I was cool!"

"You were gaping like a fish."

"I was A.C. Slater! I was Axel Rose! I was Michael Keaton rescuing Kim Basinger—!"

"It's lucky that Stu didn't realize you were trying to get laid by showing off, or you really would have made a fool of yourself."

"Trying?" Richie says. "There was no trying about it." He curls a hand in the front of Eddie's khaki slacks, and yanks him forward, yanks him flush to his chest. "You, my tasty, bite-sized mini muffin, are a sure fucking thing." He grins.

"Sorry," Eddie says, tilting his head up, and ignoring the nickname, smirking at Richie, "I only put out for guys who are actually on the radio."

---

Sometimes, he doesn't know why they haven't told the whole fucking world that they're together.
This isn't Derry, Maine.

People aren't assholes in L.A.

Why do they have to close the dorm of their room when they want to kiss? Why can't he dance with Eddie at a party in the basement of some stupid frat? Why shouldn't Stu at the radio know that Eddie's his boyfriend?

He's smoking with a group of guys from down the hall when they bring up how his door is shut a lot.

"I would say you were lighting up in there," Bobby says, "but that's what you're here for." He grins. "Seriously, dude. You guys are the only people who actually lock your door. What the hell is that about?"

"I like my pr-i-vacy," Richie says, using a voice.

"Yeah?" Bobby grins. "You like having some privacy with your little gay roommate?"

There's a murmur of laughter.

"What?"

"I don't know how you do it, man," Dan says. "Does he, like, watch you change?" He shakes his head. "That's fucked up." He's amused, glassy-eyed and high and amused.

And, around the room, the guys Richie had thought were his friends are chuckling in agreement.

What the fuck?

He thinks of the guys in Derry who had called him a fairy, who had called Eddie a sissy and a queer and a fruit. They were bullies. They were jocks who had shoved Richie into a bank of lockers when they walked by him just because they could, who had blown their nasty ass spitballs into Eddie's hair because they thought it was funny how Eddie would seize with terror.

Richie was used to bullies like that.

He just never thought his friends would be that way.

"He doesn't watch me change," Richie says, swallowing at the sudden, burning sick that rises in his throat. "I watch him sometimes, though. Can't help it. And since I'm his boyfriend, I'm allowed to. I can watch him change and I can suck his dick and I can fawn over the fact that he's 5'5 of hot, angry, gay perfection, you pimped, bad-breathed glob of shit on a stick."

It's silent.

"You have a problem with that?" He sweeps his gaze around the room. "Yeah. I thought so." He pushes to his feet. "You've got crappy fucking weed, Dan." He wrenches the door open despite the smell of pot that will spill into the hallway, and none of them try stopping him.

Richie doesn't know what to do now. Eddie isn't here. He's with the GSA, and he'll probably be there for the rest of the night.

Thankfully, there's a note on his door. It's from one of the guys in improv, and it says they're meeting up at Casey's dorm if Richie is free, and wants to hang. He does. He can't handle just sitting alone in his room right now. And he knows for a fact that one of the girls in improv is gay,
and the club is cool with that.

It's good to know he's got some real friends.

He leaves the note on the door for Eddie to see in case he gets back before Richie does.

It's past midnight when Richie returns to the dorm.

He emerges from the stairwell into his hall, and pauses. He glances down towards the end of the hall where Dan's room is. He'd felt better for a while, watching old, black-and-white horror movies with his friends from improv, but the cocktail of anger and betrayal and hurt that had burned in his gut not long ago is back.

In the room, Eddie is asleep.

The lamp on Richie's desk is turned on, creating a small, warm pool of light by the door, and casting shadows across the rest of the room; Eddie must've turned it on specifically for Richie to have something to see by when he returned.

Eddie is curled up under the covers of his bed with his back to Richie.

They don't usually share a bed.

But.

Richie toes off his shoes, and strips off his shirt, trips his way out of his pants, and turns off the light.

The room is plunged into darkness, but he stumbles his way to Eddie's bed, and climbs on, kneeling Eddie's back by accident. Eddie makes a sleepy, affronted noise. Richie grins, and pushes Eddie towards the wall, settling into the bed, and tugging Eddie close again, pulling him half onto his chest, half into his arms.

"How was improv?" Eddie asks, smacking his lips, and snuffling, rubbing his cheek against Richie's chest.

"I lost a bet to Casey. I have to talk in Bugs Bunny quotes tomorrow. What a maroon!"

Eddie hums drowsily. "Bad ol' puddy-tat." He wraps an arm around Richie.

"I told the guys in the dorm that I was bi," Richie says.

"Yeah?"

"I told them we were together. I hope that's cool. I know we've never really talked about telling everyone about us, but we've never talked about not telling everyone about us." He's rambling. "And, like, everyone knows you're gay 'cause of the GSA."

"Were they nice about it?" Eddie asks, sleepy.

Richie isn't sure how closely Eddie's listening. His eyes are closed. His voice is drowsy, and his reactions are slow. He wonders if Eddie will remember this conversation in the morning.

"They weren't, were they?"

"Whatever," Richie says. "I told them to suck my dick. But, don't you worry, cutie, you know
you're the only one I really want to suck my dick."

Eddie hums again. "Be still, my beating heart," he mumbles.

He's glad they know. He doesn't want to be friends with assholes like that. He's better off.

"You're really okay?"

"Yeah." Richie runs a hand up Eddie's back and down again. "I am."

"Good. Can we go to sleep now?"

Richie grins. "Sure, babe." And he closes his eyes, and he gives Eddie's ass a little, affectionate squeeze, because he loves Eddie's ass, and he loves Eddie's soft, sleepy voice, and he loves Eddie.

---

He is brushing his teeth at eleven in the morning on April 2nd when it occurs to him that he's forgetting something important. He doesn't know what. He glances at his reflection in the mirror, sees the furrow in his brow, and the pillow crease imprint on his cheek, and the fact that he needs to shave.

He asks Eddie when he's forgetting when they meet for lunch.

"Paper due today? Test? Group project meeting?" Eddie reels off several ideas. "What about improv? Got a performance? Or a change in hours at the radio?"

Nope.

He makes himself brush off the weird, nagging feeling.

It isn't until he's lying in bed that night with his Gameboy that it hits him. "I'm forgetting someone's birthday," he says, triumphant. He glances at where Eddie's lying in his bed across the room, reading a book.

"Congratulations."

"Now I just need to remember whose birthday."

He can't.

In the morning, he's forgotten again entirely, and when Eddie asks him curiously a few days later if he ever remembered what he'd forgotten, Richie jokes that he must have forgotten to give Eddie a good dicking down that day.

(The year before that, they drank beer Richie lifted off his dad on April 2nd, ate a cake that Ben got from the frozen food aisle, and shared a couple of joints. They had to celebrate in style. And when they set off fireworks back behind Mike's house, a blazed Stan curled up with his head in Richie's lap, watching Bill nearly light himself on fire, and singing happy birthday to himself while Richie stroked his hair.

It will be a long, long time before Richie gets that memory back, though.)

---

They hold hands now when they're walking on campus. Richie doesn't know when exactly it starts
to happen, but it does. There was a part of him that was self-conscious at first, but it faded away easily.

These days when Richie slings an arm over Eddie's shoulder like always, Eddie will lean in, and he'll hug Richie's side in a way that's kind of gay.

It *is* gay.

Richie just casually drops the word "boyfriend" at improv. It makes one of the girls exclaim that Bobby owes her ten bucks, because she *called* it. Everyone starts laughing, and when Richie makes a joke about, oh, didn't you know I was a bisexual, they just laugh some more, and nobody says anything that's mean or weird or uncomfortable, nobody looks differently at Richie.

They still don't kiss in public, or anything.

Eddie isn't big on PDA.

But they are together, and they aren't leaving it up for assumption, for interpretation. They are saying it. Richie Tozier loves Eddie Kaspbrak, and they are together.

---

"Hey, so," Eddie says, sitting on top of a dryer while Richie shoves their clothes into a washer, "I got asked on a date."

He glances up. "Really?"

"I probably shouldn't be happy about it, right? 'Cause I had to reject him. And it was actually kind of awkward because he clearly didn't believe me when I said I had a boyfriend, but." He shrugs. "I don't know. A guy thought I was cute. I got asked on a date. I've never been asked on a date before."

"I beg your pardon," Richie says, splaying a hand on his chest.

"You've never actually asked me on a date, dumbass."

Richie sighs loudly. "I get it." He dumps laundry detergent on top of the clothes, slams the lid of the machine, and starts it, turning on his heel. "You're feeling under appreciated. After this long, the romance is gone. You can't resist seeking the attention of other, newer men." He slaps his hands on the tops of Eddie's thighs.

Eddie is grinning at him. "What are you going to do about it?"

"Edward Spaghetward, you have a cute butt and pretty eyes and a magic dick. You are the light of my life. Would you do me the honor of going on a date with me to my bed to watch *Ghostbusters* while I stick my tongue up your butt?"

"Wow."

He grins. "You're welcome."

"Have you considered writing greeting cards for a living?" Eddie sets his hands on Richie's shoulders. "You have such a way with words."

"You inspire me." Richie tilts his head, brushes his lips to the side of Eddie's neck.
"Is that so?"

"I look at you, and suddenly I can only think in dirty limericks."

"That's—" Eddie's whole little body jerks against Richie. "Fuck." He fists at the material of Richie's t-shirt, but he doesn't shove Richie off, and Richie sinks his teeth in just a little bit harder, marking the skin. "Rich," Eddie says.

Richie presses his tongue to the bite soothingly for a second before he starts to suck.

"Really?" Eddie squirms slightly. "Is this the place?"

He hums in reply to indicate, you know, he's kind of busy right now.

"I know what you're doing," Eddie says. "There's only one reason to suck on my neck like you're a fucking Hoover." He pushes a hand into Richie's hair.

His cheeks are flushed when Richie pulls away at last with a loud, wet pop. Richie admires his handiwork. He doesn't usually have the patience for giving Eddie hickeys, but, honestly, he has the talent.

"Really?" Eddie's fingers brush over the mark. "I'm going to have to wear popped collars for a week."

But he's still got a hand on Richie's thigh, and he's made no effort to pull away from him, and Richie just grins. "How about that date, cutie?" he asks. Before Eddie can answer, Richie swoops in, and presses a kiss to the tip of his nose.

---

Eddie seems genuinely pleased about getting asked on a date. Richie gets it. He knows the feeling, knows it's flattering when someone is interested in you.

He should have known there would be more to it than that.

But when Eddie comes home from board game night that week in a really foul mood, does not want to talk about it, and climbs on top of Richie to kiss him roughly, Richie goes along with it. He has no reason to think it has anything to do with the guy who asked Eddie out. Eddie just had a bad night with his lame GSA friends, and he wants the loving, sexy arms of his boyfriend to make him feel better.

Richie is always more than happy to provide his boyfriend with his loving, sexy arms.

---

Eddie pesters Richie into coming to a GSA meeting with him on Tuesday.

He says Richie hasn't been in a while, and people have asked about him. He says Richie needs something else to fill his evenings without improv now that he isn't talking to the guys in the dorm. He says that he wants Richie to come, and it's more fun when Richie comes.

"Would you just fucking come with me?" he says, irritated.

There's a reason Eddie always gets what he wants.

They have dinner right before, arriving a few minutes late with takeout boxes in hand and taking a
pair of seats in the back.

It's during the relaxed, mingling portion of the meeting that it happens. Eddie is called into a conversation with a group that are discussing this month's awareness events. And when Richie makes his way to the table of snacks, he's accosted.

"That's some jacket," says a guy.

Richie turns with a mouthful of Cheese-Its. "Thanks!" He grins.

It's the guy from sociology last semester. Richie is blanking on his name. The point, though, is that he's the douche, and he's looking at Richie like Richie's something he stepped in.

"My gran picked it out for me," Richie says, cheerful. "She's got an eye for sexy, huh? Sent it to me for my birthday." He tugs on the pink, purple, and yellow neon windbreaker. "And, to think, some people's grandparents just send cash."

"I didn't think you cared very much for the GSA," says the douche. "I, sir, am a man of mystery."

"Seriously?" He raises his eyebrows. "Is that supposed to be a British accent?"

This guy is unbelievable. "Okay, Pete," Richie says. "What the fuck is your problem? Huh? Do you, like, get off on being a piece of shit?" If the guy wants to be a jerk, Richie will be a jerk, too.

"My name is Paul."

"Well, you look more like a pill."

Paul's lip curls. "I can't believe someone like Eddie wants anything to do with someone like you."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means I know about the two of you. The whole GSA knows, actually. Eddie told us you were his boyfriend."

"Yeah. I am. You got a problem with that?"

"I'm surprised you don't."

"What's that supposed to mean?" He glares. "What are you fucking hinting at?"

"I'm hinting at the fact that nobody knew for months that Eddie was with you, and why was that? Was it because you like to mess around with him while the door's closed, but you don't want any of your straight, frat boy friends to know? Or, actually, now that I think about it, I wonder if it's just because Eddie was embarrassed." There is something almost triumphant in his gaze. "I mean, look at you."

"Dude, you need to back the fuck off," Richie says, ignoring the confused, angry pounding of his heart.

"Nobody knew that you were together until I asked him out last week, and even then he didn't say your name. I thought he was making it up. It wasn't until I teased him about pretending to have a boyfriend that he admitted he was dating you."
Richie just stares at him for a moment. "It was you?" It comes out louder than it should; he practically bellows it.

"What?"

"You came onto him?" Some small, disconnected part of Richie is aware that people are starting to look at them, that the room is beginning to quiet around them. "You're the one who asked him out?"

"Yeah. I like Eddie. I like him a lot. And the fact that he puts up with you? That he . . ." He shakes his head. "I don't get it. And I still find it hard to believe he's dating you."

"Believe it," Richie spits.

"I mean, why would Eddie want to date some half-punk, half-geek frat boy?"

Richie knows that he doesn't really look like he goes together with Eddie. Okay? He knows. He wears the same, unwashed flannel shirt for days at a time over different band t-shirts. His hair is constantly a frizzy, half-flattened mess. The black nail polish on his fingers is somehow always chipping, and his glasses actually have a crack in them, and if he doesn't have ketchup stains on his shirt, he's got on mismatched socks, and he's lost the shoelace for one of his sneakers, and the tear in his jeans is lined with dried brown blood because he tripped on the stairs. Eddie's the opposite. He wears clean polo shirts tucked into clean, creased khaki pants, and he could be in a fucking shampoo commercial with his soft, wavy hair that's always painstakingly styled, and he's always so neat, so clean, so perfectly fucking pristine.

That doesn't fucking matter, though.

They don't have to look like they go together. They do. They are. Together.

"And there's the fact you're clearly straight," Paul says, going on, "and Eddie says you're bisexual, but—" He scoffs. "Come on. You're the guy that thinks it's fun and easy and cool to fuck around with a guy, but you won't actually end up with one. And if you actually gave a shit about Eddie, you wouldn't be hiding your relationship, and pretending—"

"I've been in love with Eddie since I was thirteen years old, you fucking butt booger!"

Paul is unimpressed. "Do you hear the stuff that comes out of your mouth?"

"Paul," says a girl.

"You talk like a twelve year old."

Richie is going to punch the guy. He actually starts towards him. He's going to sock the asshole.

"What the fuck is going on?" Eddie says.

Out of nowhere, he's there, in front of Richie, and demanding his attention. Richie tears his gaze from Paul to look at Eddie. After a beat, he realizes the whole fucking club is staring at them.

Eddie's gaze softens. "Rich."

"He—" Richie gestures wildly at Paul. "Why didn't you tell me he hit on you?"
"I told you a guy asked me out."

"You didn't tell me it was this piece of shit!"

"I think everyone just needs to calm down," says a guy. "Alright? Let's all just take a step back, and take a breath, and calm down."

It's quiet.

Richie pushes a hand through his hair, and pulls a little. "Fine." He shakes his head, and he looks at Eddie, and he thinks of saying let's go, but, suddenly, he freezes, because he doesn't know what would happen, what Eddie would say in reply, and he hates that he's unsure, that he's upset, that he's a worthless, four-eyed sack of shit, and he should have known better than to come to this club when everyone in the GSA thinks he's a dumb, unfunny jerk who isn't good enough for Eddie.

Eddie frowns. "What did he say to you?"

"Forget it," Richie says, low.

"No." Eddie's nostrils flare. "What did he say?"

Richie feels suddenly, stupidly raw. He thinks of when they were in high school, and the way Eddie would stick up for him. He would tell Richie to shut the fuck up when Richie would make a dick joke during class, but it was in jest, and when the boy behind him would say "what a loser," Eddie would turn his whole little body around to tell the asshole to go fuck yourself on a rusty fork with a viciousness that was frightening. He would never let anyone else bag on Richie. Now? With three dozen people staring at him, judging him? Richie is struck with a desperate, overwhelming pang of want for Eddie's vicious protection.

He swallows. "He just said a bunch of shit," he mutters. "He's a douche."

"Uh-huh." Eddie turns sharply to Paul. "What did you say to him?"

"What?"

"What. Did. You. Say to him?"

Paul sighs. "I didn't say anything he didn't already know. Okay? He's not good enough for you, and you know it, he knows it, everybody knows it. He's a freakin' frat boy. And, yeah, he's bisexual—" He uses air quotes when he says it. "—but you know that's just a word for—"

"Shut up."

Paul's eyes widen. "Eddie."

Richie knows the look on Eddie's face, knows the flush in his cheeks and the purse of his lips and the hard, blazing gleam in his eyes. Eddie is pissed. "Just—for once, shut the fuck up!" he snarls. "We get it. You don't think bisexuality is a thing. But—what the fuck does it matter to you? If a person likes both, who the fuck are you to say they don't? And why the fuck do you care? How's it hurting you?"

"I—"

"I'm not done talking yet, jackass. Where do you get off making assumptions about my relationship? You don't know anything about it, or the guy I've been in love with for years. Richie
is the reason I'm at UCLA! He actually fucking applied for me, because I didn't have the guts to defy my mother! And when I thought that being gay was a disease, and I was an asshole about it, do you know who loved me anyway, and forgave me, and helped me be okay with who I am? Richie fucking Tozier! My boyfriend! My BISEXUAL boyfriend! Bisexual, bisexual, BISEXUAL! The guy who's going to be on SNL someday because he's fucking HILARIOUS! My favorite fucking person IN EXISTENCE!"

Paul looks like he's been slapped.

"And, to be clear, I wouldn't go out with you even if I weren't with Richie, because you're a pretentious little motherfucker, Paul, and you're ignorant, and you've got a stick shoved so far up your ass, your breath smells like farts!"

Eddie is panting with rage.

That.

That was the most fucking amazing thing Richie's ever witnessed in his life.

"Yowza," he breathes.

Eddie doesn't take his eyes off Paul. "Rich, let's—"

"Hold that thought!" He holds up a finger. "Just—" He stumbles back towards their seats, and people move easily out of his way. He grabs his takeout from dinner, and dumps the contents on a desk, snatching up a single, lonely onion ring, and shoving it back in again, and hurrying to Eddie, skidding to a stop.

"What—?"

He gets down on one knee. "Eddie Kaspbrak." He opens the box to display the ring. "Would you—?"

Eddie huffs. "Get up." He grabs Richie by the collar of his jacket to yank him up. Richie grins. He springs up easily, and crowds Eddie's space, and when Eddie turns to face Paul again, he's still got a fistful of Richie's jacket in his hand. "I think we're finished here," he says.

"Yeah." Paul's got a prissy, pinched expression on his face now. "I think we are."

Eddie turns away from him.

"Eddie," says a guy.

Eddie cuts him off quickly. "We'll talk later." And when the guy just nods, Eddie takes Richie's hand, and makes a beeline for the door, forgetting his own takeout box, and ignoring the way people are staring, the way they're pretending they weren't staring before.

In the stairwell, Richie grabs Eddie close again, and smacks a kiss to his ear.

Eddie turns, and pushes up, grabbing Richie by the back of the neck, and dragging him down for a kiss, thrusting his tongue into Richie's mouth, kissing him roughly, possessively.

Richie has half a mind to push him up against the wall and ravish him right here, right now.

Eddie drops back on his heels before he can, though, and just fucking looks at Richie, seeming to search his face, and smiling at him in a soft, worried kind of way.
Richie grins. "If you're my knight in shining armor, does that make me a princess?"

Eddie just shakes his head. "I love you," he says. He pecks another kiss to Richie's lips, and another. "It's always been you. Always. It will always be you." He eyes are bright, earnest.

"Well, I am your favorite fucking person in the world."

He rolls his eyes. "I'm going to regret saying that, aren't I? Whatever. Let's get the fuck out of here." He takes Richie's hand again. "The beds won't push themselves together." He grins.

All in all, Richie would say that this was probably one of his favorite GSA meeting yet.

---

They haven't done much besides doggy style since Richie discovered that doggy style was the greatest gift that God ever fucking bestowed upon mankind.

("Do you know what? I bet Jesus was conceived doggy style. I bet Joseph was just going to do it missionary, and God was like, hey, buddy, pal, slow down, my man, and let me educate you on some things, and that's when Joseph invited the Lord to get freaky with them."

"Beep beep, Richie.")

Eddie hadn't protested, of course. He likes it, too. Richie can get a really good angle when he takes him from behind like that, can hit him in that spot over and over and over until Eddie is begging for more, is shaking and swearing and pushing his ass back against Richie's front with needy, desperate gasps for more, for harder.

They don't talk about doing it differently tonight. They just do.

They undress each other quietly, exchanging dopey smiles.

Eddie lifts his arms up for Richie to tug his shirt off, and when Eddie pulls off Richie's shirt, he leans in and presses a soft, lingering kiss to Richie's chest. Eddie sits on the bed, and Richie pulls off his shoes and peels off his socks and runs his hands up through the soft, pale hairs on Eddie's legs while Eddie removes Richie's glasses, while he undoes the buckle of Richie's jeans. After Richie steps out of his briefs, Eddie touches the backs of Richie's knees, and his hands are warm on the backs of Richie's thighs, touching him like he's trying to memorize him, and Richie runs his hands through Eddie's hair, mussing it, because he gets to do it, and to see it, to see Eddie's hair when it isn't perfect, when it's better than perfect.

It's slow, sappy sex.

Richie lies in the cradle of Eddie's thighs, fucking him slowly; he's got his arms framing Eddie's face, and Eddie's arms are around him, and he's so close to Eddie that their noses are brushing, and he can see the freckles in the irises of Eddie's eyes, can feel the hot puffs of Eddie's breath on his lips.

"Hey, Eddie?" he breathes.

"Yeah?"

He doesn't know how to say it, though. Or what. He doesn't even know what to say. "I love you." He knows that, right? He knows how much Richie loves him? Really, really loves him?
"I love you, too." The tips of Eddie's fingers glide up Richie's sweat-slick back until his arms are hooked under Richie's, and he's pulling him somehow impossibly closer. He arches up, and he swallows the groan that Richie releases, kissing him. "I love you when you're like this," Eddie says, gripping Richie's shoulders. "I love you every way. I love you when you're mine."

"I am," Richie pants. "I am, Eds. I am, I am."

They kiss until Richie can't, until his forehead is pressed to Eddie's, and he's groaning with his lips slotted against Eddie's, fucking Eddie desperately.

After, they stay intertwined for a bit.

"Stay," Eddie says, hooking a leg over Richie's ass to keep him in place. "Just for a minute."

There's something almost embarrassed in his voice, in the request.

"Yes, sir."

Eddie combs his fingers though Richie's hair, pulling gently at the knots, and twisting in the curls.

Richie is tempted to use a voice, a dramatic, debauched Southern Belle voice, or the voice a princess who just had a mighty good time, or maybe a surfer dude because he's been practicing that guy a lot, and he's really, really sexual, and he'd be perfect for a good joke about how you like my dick so much you can't bear to lose it.

The temptation fades away before he can really think about it, though.

He loves the feel of Eddie's hand in his hair. He loves Eddie, and he decides, sweaty and sated and purring at Eddie's ministrations, he's happy to be himself for a bit.

---

The end of the school year seems to overtake them suddenly, coming in a rush of papers and project and exams.

In the midst of that, they sign a lease for an apartment off campus.

They were trying to find a place for the next school year, and it is a place for the next school year, but the least officially starts in June. It has to. Neither of them is about to spend the summer with grandparents, or crazy maiden aunts.

"This is home," Eddie says.

They are forced to stay at the apartment of a guy in improv for a week after they are kicked out of the dorm, but, finally, at the end of May, they move their few, paltry possession to a one-bedroom, kitchen-is-actually-an alcove apartment.

They celebrate the move by eating Thai food the floor of the kitchen.

The place is sparse. They just don't have the stuff for an apartment. They've bought a mattress for the bedroom, though, and a pair of cheap camping chairs to put in front of the TV, and a set of plates, bowels, and cups for the kitchen. It's a start. And, in July, Richie is going to take a plane to Florida for a week to pick up his car, and, also, a table, a set of chairs, and a bunch of old, hand-me-down kitchen stuff from his parents.

It's weird, in a way.
This is the most *adult* they've ever been.

They've got fucking *bills* now.

(His parents are paying for his share of the rent, though, and, actually, his dad had to co-sign the lease for the apartment, but they're *almost* like real, legitimate grown up people now.)

Richie has already gotten himself a job at a nearby movie theater, and Eddie is going to work full time scooping ice cream for the summer.

"You know something we've never done before?" Eddie says, putting the remains of the Thai in the fridge.

Richie is a starfish on the floor. "What?"

"Shower." He turns to look at Richie. "Together."

Richie blinks. "You—?" He scrambles to his knees, and to his feet, yanking his t-shirt off while running for the door, banging his knee on the doorframe, and making Eddie laugh.

The old, cracked claw-foot tub is way too small for both of them. But if they could make shit work in a tiny ass twin, they can make it work in this tiny tub, too. They don't actually have sex, of course. But they grope each other under the spray, laughing in between wet, playful kisses. Eddie makes Richie get on his knees so that he can scrub the shampoo into his hair, and in such close, cramped quarters, Richie ends up with his face pushed into Eddie's stomach, and he blows raspberries into Eddie's belly, making Eddie jerk away, laughing, until Richie grabs him by his hips, hauls him close again, and gives him a nice, steamy blowjob.

And, after the shower, they get into a bed that's actually big enough for both of them.

Summer passes quickly.

They get in a couple of squabbles about minor things, like, you know, not putting the cap on the toothpaste when you're done.

This isn't their first rodeo when it comes to living together, though.

They see some of their friends over the summer, but, mostly, they spend the summer by themselves, living pretty cheaply, and wrapped up in each other's company, making the most of their new bed, and of their new, crappy apartment in general.

There are lots of advantages to having a place of their own:

1) Sex in lots of places.

2) Sex that's loud.

3) Richie can walk around in just his underwear.

4) Eddie can walk around in just his underwear and, sometimes, in one of Richie's t-shirts.

5) Loud kitchen sex while the toast goes cold in the toaster because Eddie looks really good in one of Richie's t-shirts.

Also.
In the dorm, they could never move everything out of the way, spray the whole fucking floor with hairspray, and race in their socks, seeing who can slide wildly across the floor the fastest.

"Well, Dr. K," Richie says, "what's the diagnosis?"

Eddie is sitting on the counter with Richie in between his legs, and he's biting his tongue a little in concentration while he assesses Richie's cut, swelling nose. "It isn't broken." He starts to open a bottle of peroxide, to get a cotton ball out of his jar of cotton balls.

"You're cute."

"Really?" Eddie says dryly. "You've never told me that before."

He grins. "Being an adult is da bomb."

Eddie holds Richie's chin firmly while he dabs at the cut. "You just ran into a wall."

"I slid into a wall. At the speed of light! And it was awesome." He grips Eddie's thigh at the sting of the peroxide. "Worth it," he says, hissing, and he grins, and even without his glasses, he sees Eddie's lips twitch with a smile.

It's a little sad when the summer starts drawing to a close.

Richie is kind of eager to return to school, though, to return to improv and the station and his friends.

(He won't think about homophobic stoners in his dorm who he'll never talk to again, or how Eddie was talking about quitting the GSA in May, or that one of the girls in improv does look at him differently since learning he was bi, looks at him nervously, looks at him like she isn't sure how she's supposed to act around a big, loud bisexual boy.)

The night before classes begin again, they spend the night on the sofa they just bought at Goodwill. It's a good last night. They watch Ace Ventura in their underwear, and they smoke, or, well, Richie smokes, and Eddie shotguns, sitting in Richie's lap, and giggling with every smoky breath that Richie kisses into his mouth. They eat the special gourmet feast that Richie prepared for them, too, a meal of Hot Pockets and Bagel Bites and a bowl of dinosaur chicken nuggets that he cooked in the actual fucking stove, Eds, you're welcome.

In the morning, both of them have classes pretty early, and they go to campus together.

---

The next three years of college are the best. Seriously. They get into their groove, and ride that wave for the rest of their busy, gay college days.

College was fine when they were freshmen, of course. Richie will always remember happily the year that they had sex for the first time, that they learned to live together, that they shared their relationship with the world. It was a pretty monumental year.

But after that year of firsts, of learning, and figuring out things, college is a hell of a lot more fun.

They spend their time with people who aren't just in their dorm, or in their classes, who aren't just easy, situational friends.

They don't go to parties in the basements of frats, but, instead, spend their evenings at the
apartment of guys from improv, or the townhouse that Steven from the GSA has, or they have people over to their place to get high while they watch TV, or play video games, and there isn't very much room, but none of their friends bat an eye when Eddie sits in Richie's lap.

They still get stares from strangers when they're together on campus, when they're holding hands, or when Eddie stands on his tiptoes to smirk into Richie's mouth before he gives him a kiss.

But.

The older they get, the more confident they become in who they are, and what they want, and the rest of the world can just go fuck itself.

---

It's their sophomore year when Riche gets his own radio show. From three to five on weekdays, the airwaves are his oyster. It's kind of a shitty time slot, but he's pleased with himself.

Eddie makes him promote the GSA during the show.

GSA remains Eddie's thing at college.

He actually gets more involved, becoming the treasurer of the club when they're sophomores, and in charge of organizing the fundraisers, and he starts GSA movie night and, eventually, GSA book club.

(That actually ends up way more popular than Eddie would have thought.

They take turns choosing the book. They read everything from *Along Came a Spider* to *The Hobbit* to *Pet Sematary*. For his pick, Eddie makes everyone read *Orlando* by Virginia Wolfe, and when Richie complains endlessly about the difficulty of reading it, Eddie just decides to read it aloud to him, sitting on the sofa with Richie's head in his lap, and reading a couple of chapters a night, pausing a lot for commentary from the audience.)

They meet with their advisors, and declare their majors when they're sophomores, and start taking classes they actually want to take.

It's their sophomore year, too, when Richie gets contacts at last.

He's always hated looking like the world's biggest dweeb in glasses thick enough to stop a bullet.

But, to his chagrin, his dad has always said he wouldn't buy contacts for Richie until Richie could handle the responsibility. It's a fact he never, ever admitted to anyone. He preferred the world to believe that he liked his glasses, or that he'd been diagnosed with itchy eyes, or that his blindness was more powerful than the great, modern invention of contacts.

He's got money of his own these days, though.

He isn't going to wait any longer.

Eddie stares shamelessly at him the first several days when they're just hanging out, when they're at lunch, or watching a movie. "You've seen me without my glasses," Richie says, amused. Eddie insists that it's different, though, and he continues to stare at Richie with a pouty, unreasonably disgruntled expression on his face for weeks.

Richie jokes that Eddie is stunned by Richie's sheer hotness without glasses.
He *is* hotter.

And, like, he can just *see* shit. Whenever. And nothing he sees is smudged with fingerprints.

He can see Eddie when they're having sex.

He kept his glasses on occasionally when they were doing the do in the past, sure, but most of the time if Eddie said "glasses," that was the signal: when the glasses went off, the dick went in.

Now, though?

He can see his dick sliding into Eddie's ass. He can see Eddie's chest hitching with a breath. He can see the shape of Eddie's open, panting mouth, and he can kiss him on the lips instead of, like, on the eye.

Richie's got game, though.

He's wise to shit about his boy.

He takes his contacts out when he gets home from classes one afternoon, and strips to his boxers just because he can. He's eating a bowl of cereal on the sofa when Eddie gets home. He's got on nothing but his boxers and his socks and his stupid, ugly glasses that makes his eyes look three times their size, and that's how Eddie finds him.

Eddie fucking *jumps* Richie when he sees him. Literally. He rides Richie on the sofa while Richie's glasses grow foggy with sweat and slide slowly down the bridge of his nose.

"Do you *like* that I'm as blind as a bat?" Richie pants.

"I just . . ." Eddie is taking him in fast, full strokes, holding a fistful of Richie's hair, and bouncing in his lap. "I like your fucking bug eyes, dumbass."

Richie grins slowly.

"Shut up."

"Aw, babe. I think your cute, murder-y doe eyes are great, too."

Eddie makes a low, irritated nose, and rolls his hips so sharply it makes Richie choke on his breath. "Shut up." he growls. He grabs Richie's glasses and tosses them aside, gripping the side of Richie's face and pulling him close, kissing him.

"I thought—"

"You don't need them now." Eddie wraps his arms around Richie's neck. "I've got you."

So.

Apparently, Eddie *does* like that Richie's as blind as a bat.

It's cool.

Richie continues wearing his contacts at school, but, at home, he is happy to wear his glasses, because he isn't going to argue with what gets his hot little dish of spaghetti going, okay?

---
They go their separate ways for their winter break sophomore year. It's weird. They haven't actually been apart in a year.

He doesn't realize exactly how much it'll suck until it starts.

He's stuck in Florida with his parents, and he thinks of Eddie in Maine, and he realizes after a few long, miserable days that he's, like, homesick. Can you be homesick for a person? The point is that Richie is used to going to bed with Eddie, and waking up with Eddie, to living his life with Eddie, and going cold turkey fucking sucks.

There's a day near the end of break when he imagines he can't even remember what Eddie looks like.

He returns to California first.

Eddie isn't supposed to return for two more days after Richie gets back, but he comes home early.

Richie actually chokes on an Oreo when the door bangs open.

"I had to change my flight," Eddie says, breathless. "I was losing it. You should have heard her going on about why I shouldn't go back, and how her health had really taken a turn for the worse, and she needs me, and I didn't look too good either, and you had probably already forgotten I existed and were busy fucking some stranger in the bathroom of a bar, and if I went back again, you would give me AIDS, and—"

Richie wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, and is on his feet in a second.

Eddie folds easily into Richie's arms.

"Your mom can go fuck herself. I need you. It's like with you gone my fucking heart got blue balls."

Eddie snorts softly. "I missed you, too." He presses a kiss to Richie's chest. "I had to use my inhaler," he admits. "Twice. I haven't had a panic attack in years, Rich. Why does she do this to me?" His voice breaks slightly at the question.

"She's jealous that you get my dick on the regular, and she's got cobwebs in her—"

"Beep fucking beep, sweetheart."

Richie's heart stutters at the endearment.

They aren't separating for break again. It's decided. If that makes them co-dependent, fine. They're co-dependent. Richie's been called worse.

---

The thing that Richie remembers most from their sophomore year, though, is Richie's Rocky Road.

It's the best birthday present he's ever gotten.

And it doesn't even matter that, technically, he's allergic to ice cream.

They're sophomores, see, when they discover that Richie might be developing an allergy to lactose. Dairy doesn't make him sick, exactly. It just makes him a little gassier than usual.
That's his opinion, of course.

"I can still eat the delicious frozen treats at your fine, high class establishment," he says.

"That's a lie," Eddie says, crossing his arms, and glaring at Richie from behind the counter. "It makes you fart like you're a villain on Captain Planet and you're trying to pollute the world with the smell of shit. I hear it. I wake up in the middle of the night, and there's a fucking symphony coming out of your butthole."

"Thanks, babe. Your butthole makes sweet music, too, when I'm—"

"Do you want to spend the night on the sofa with only your loud, poisonous farts for company?"

"They do keep me warm. I mean, your mom keeps me warmer, but—"

Eddie's nostrils flare.

"So . . .?" The guy on shift with Eddie is paused halfway through the effort of scooping. "Do you want the ice cream, or . . .?"

Richie smiles brightly. "Double the sprinkles, please!"

On his birthday that year, Richie wakes once Eddie's already gone into class, but his gifts are strewn all across the bed with a bow on each: there's Gas-X and Beano and Lactaid Fast Act and Mylanta and CharcoCaps.

He doesn't see Eddie until lunch.

"There's my lover!" He grins, drops his tray on the table, and puts a knee on his chair to lean fully across the table. Eddie is, of course, in the middle of chewing, and he jerks away quickly, so Richie's kiss smacks his chin. Richie isn't bothered, falling into his seat, and beaming. "I've never had anyone buy me the whole fucking gas relief aisle at CVS before."

"Yeah, well." Eddie hands Richie his pocket hand sanitizer. "I want to be able to have sex with you tonight."

"That's why I was going to refrain from eating any dairy." Richie squeezes way too much sanitizer on, and ends up rubbing it halfway up his arms. "That's the rule, no? If I have dairy, sex is off the table for the night." He sighs at his sad, sad plight.

"You're going to have dairy today."

He raises his eyebrows. "I am? Eddie Spaghetti, is there something you aren't telling me?"

"Obviously." His eyes are bright, playful.

It isn't until he goes to work with Eddie that he finds out what the secret is. Eddie has another gift for him. Gifts from Eddie have always been gag gifts, because that's their thing. This is way, way better than that. He doesn't know how he'll top it for Eddie's birthday in a couple of months.

The Cow's Pajamas has a special, flavor-of-the-month ice cream every month.

Eddie's never taken up the offer to suggest a flavor.

*Until.*
Eddie has to point out the writing on the chalkboard, because Richie never actually looks at the flavors that are listed up there. This month's special, flavor-of the month ice cream? It's called Richie's Rocky Road, and it's a twist on the classic, is vanilla with cookie dough, peanut butter, and sprinkles actually mixed in.

"You . . ." He gapes. "You got me my own ice cream."

"Surprised?"

He drags his gaze from the chalkboard to look at Eddie. His face is shining with excitement. Richie doesn't waste another second before grabbing the back of his neck, and pulling him closer, kissing him, and it's a messy, overeager kiss, but Richie is way too psyched to care.

"Happy birthday," Eddie says smugly, wrapping his arms around Richie's waist, and tucking himself easily into Richie's side.

"I'll take a triple scoop of Richie's Rocky Road in a waffle cone, please."

The girl behind the counter is friends with Eddie, and she's grinning when she starts to carve a scoop of ice cream out of a tub of vanilla that's streaked with little squiggly colors. The sprinkles, Richie thinks. This is the greatest gift that anyone's ever gotten him ever in his life.

"My farts are going to smell of colorful sugar tonight!"

They're leaving with their cones of Richie's Rocky Road in hand when they pass a woman on her way in with her daughter.

He grins. "May I recommend the Richie's Rocky Road?"

"Oh?"

"I'm Richie, by the way. The Richie. Of Richie's Rocky Road."

Eddie shoves Richie. "Excuse us." They leave the store with the woman blinking owlishly at Richie.

Richie's Rocky Road is really fucking good.

He discovers it tastes the best when it's served on Eddie's tongue.

"There has to be a less gross way for you to say that." Eddie's knee is pressed to Richie's thigh on the bench, and they're both hurrying to eat the ice cream that's starting to melt, that's dripping down the cone, and onto their fingers. "That makes it sound like I'm your mother bird, spooning the stuff into your mouth with my tongue."

"Kinky."

Eddie rolls his eyes, but his hand is warm on Richie's knee, and when Richie leans in to steal another sweet, sticky kiss, Eddie kisses back.

---

It's their junior year when Richie's radio show really gets popular. He's moved to 4 to 8 on weekdays, and he treats it like a baby in a cradle, and rocks it. He turns his voices into characters, and listeners are encouraged to request specific characters, to call in, and ask for advice from one of them. Also, he does a bit where he connects his callers with a random phone number for a
freshmen dorm room, and when the kid with the random number answers, the caller has to pretend they think they're on the line with 911, and it almost always makes the random person absolutely lose their shit.

It's hilarious.

Richie is hilarious, and, finally, the masses are recognizing his genius.

---

It's their junior year, too, when they decide to go to a gay bar for the very first time.

It's a place on Santa Monica Boulevard, and several of the guys in GSA say it's lots of fun, that they have to try it.

They get fake IDs from a friend of a friend.

"Did you pick these names?" Eddie's nose wrinkles. He insists that nobody is going to believe that Richie is named Dick Montana, and he glares when Richie calls him Eugene, baby, and "we should probably forget this before we make complete fools of ourselves, Dick."

They get in, though.

"Now don't you feel silly about getting your balls in a twist," Richie says, slinging an arm around Eddie's shoulders.

"Did you see the way he smirked at me? He knew. He just let us in anyway."

They get drinks at the bar.

They talk to a group of guys who are older and friendly and buy them shots of tequila. "Have you ever taken a shot, babycakes?" asks a man. He laughs when Eddie flushes at the question, but Eddie is determined after that. He grabs the salt, and he goes to town. Richie is fucking in love when Eddie licks the salt off Richie's wrist, downs the tequila like a champ, and winces, leaning into Richie's side when Richie shoves the lime into his mouth.

It's good, old-fashioned fun.

They dance, too.

It takes a couple of minutes for Eddie to get out of his head, and, in that time, he's just kind of staying in Richie's personal space while Richie dances like the drunk, dorky white boy he is. He relaxes after a while, though. He's had a few tequila shots, and nobody is paying much attention to them, and he starts to dance with Richie, taking a hold of Richie's hips, and trying to steady Richie's spastic dance moves, laughing and twirling and grinding his ass into Richie's front, giggling at Richie's wet, messy kisses on his neck.

They start spending more time in West Hollywood after that.

That first bar becomes their place, though. They don't go a lot, because they can't really afford to; they tend to spend too much money on drinks when they're there. But they go when they need a break from school, when they feel like a treat.

---

And, of course, it's their junior year when Eddie starts to toy with the idea of abandoning his plan
to major in business.

It's a Tuesday, and they're watching Jeopardy, and Richie's got his head in Eddie's lap when Eddie asks in a small, painfully casual voice what Richie thinks about Eddie going into medicine.

"You want to be a doctor?" He turns his head to look at Eddie. "For real?"

"No." Eddie is hesitant. "I just... I've been thinking about what I'd actually enjoy doing, and you know I've been taking some psych classes that I really like, and I just—my mom always says I need a good, sensible career, and a degree in business is definitely the best choice for that, but I was thinking about the people who really made an impact on me when I was a kid, and it was nurses—"

"You should totally be a nurse!"

Eddie's eyes brighten just slightly. "Yeah? You don't think it's ridiculous for a hypochondriac—?"

"You'd be so good at it! You patch me up all the time! And you're like calm and collected and all stop being a fucking baby about it, Rich while you pick the pebbles out of my elbow with a pair of tweezers. Come on! That's Being an Awesome Nurse 101 right there."

"Yeah." Eddie smiles. "I'll think about it."

It takes him a while to take the leap, but, after a couple of months, he does. He changes his major to psychology. And, by the end of the year, he's talking about taking the prerequisites he'd need to take if, say, he might someday decide he wants to try his hand at nursing.

---

The summer after their junior year, they go to L.A.'s Pride Celebration Day with a group of their friends from the GSA.

It's awesome.

There are swarms of people in every fucking direction, and it's loud and colorful and crazy.

"I think that's the most fun I've ever had in my life," Eddie says.

He gets a photo from Steve of them in the parade, and he frames it. It's just the two of them in the picture. Richie is wearing a pair of Eddie's short shorts that are obscene on him, a rainbow flag fashioned into a cape, and red, star-shaped sunglasses, and Eddie, of course, looks like a gay Gap model, wearing a purple tie-dye shirt and pink overall shorts and a pair of rainbow, knee-high socks, beaming at the camera with rainbow stars painted on his cheeks, and clinging to Richie's back, getting a piggy-back ride from him.

---

Richie is pretty much finished with his major by their senior year, so he takes a bunch of random, fun classes that year, theater and science of cooking and weightlifting.

("Weightlifting?" Eddie says. "Seriously? I need you to tell me this is a joke."

"What? I've lifted shit before."

"Richie."
"Look. I just lifted this bag of Doritos."

"You've never done any physical fitness ever. We go for a run, and you're wheezing two minutes in. You have the physique of a fucking sock monkey. Richie. Tell me you thought this through beyond thinking that you wouldn't have to write any papers for this class."

"I'm afraid I can't do that, cutie. That is exactly the amount of thought I put into this. It's a class with no papers!")

The classes that Richie takes aren't that important. It's the radio that matters. He's planning on going into radio after he graduates, so that's what deserves his focus.

The future becomes real that year.

After they graduate from college, the roadmap for what happens next is blank. They'll have done everything they were supposed to do. And they'll be free to decide where they want to go, and what they want to do, and how they want to do it.

They'll be completely financially independent, too. His dad's made that clear. He might be a little, teeny tiny bit worried about that part.

But.

He's going to become a big, famous personality on the radio. Eddie is going to become a nurse. And they're going to take the world by storm.

Eddie becomes the president of the GSA when they're seniors.

He's the boss.

Richie tags along to most of the meetings, and he participates in the various social gatherings that Eddie plans, and in the activism on campus he spearheads. He likes to say it's because he's an awesome, supportive boyfriend like that. And that isn't untrue, it's just that also it's because Eddie being the boss is totally the hottest fucking thing in the world.

(He still gets flak from people in the club on occasion.

Usually, it's his fault.

His thoughts are offensive, apparently. Like. After he's asked to weigh in during a debate, he says "marriage is for boring straight people who need a license to stay together after their sex life gets vanilla." And, immediately, he's told that's a super bad thing to say, because he's insulting people fighting for gay marriage rights. Stuff like that.

Nobody ever questions the validity of his sexuality now, though, and that's good enough for him.)

It's their senior year, too, when they start to switch.

They had talked about it before. Back when they were freshmen just figuring out how they liked it, Richie had brought it up. If ever Eddie wanted to top, Richie would bottom.

"You ever want to plow this field, you just let me know!"

And, three years later, Eddie lets Richie know that he wants to plow that field.

They're watching a movie, and Eddie is sitting up, but Richie is half-sitting, half-lying across the
couch with his legs on the table in front of them, and his head settled comfortably against Eddie's chest, and he's in a sleepy, sated mood, enjoying the way that Eddie is playing with his hair.

"Do you know what we should try?" Eddie says.

"Skydiving?"

Eddie twists his fingers in Richie's hair.

"Seeing how many Twinkies we can eat until we barf?"


"What?"

"Switching," he repeats. "In bed. I want to fuck you."

It takes a minute for Richie to process his words. "You want—?" He scrambles to sit up. "You want to fuck me?" His eyes dart wildly across Eddie's face. It's kind of funny to see him blush over this, because Eddie stopped being shy about stuff like this a while ago. This is brand new territory, though. "You mean like actually fuck me? Put your dick up my butt? *Wham, bam, and thank you, ma'am*?" He grins, because fucking finally.

"I take it that means you want to?" Eddie says, smiling.

"We can do it right now if you want!" He starts to tug off his t-shirt. "I can go get cleaned up right now, and—"

Eddie just laughs. "You really want to try it?"

"Fuck, yes!"

"I just . . . you know I like when you fuck me. I love it. But when I'm stressed and I've had to talk to my mom, or just—when I feel like everything is going fucking wrong, I like when you let me fuck your mouth, and I've just been thinking that I . . . I want to fuck you."

Richie can't stop himself from surging in, from grabbing the side off Eddie's face, and kissing him. Eddie's hands grapple at Richie's back, hiking up his t-shirt, and groping his back, and he presses in closer, forcing Richie backwards. "I love you," he breathes. And before Richie knows what's happened, they're sprawled across the couch with Richie on his back, with Eddie on top of him.

Here's the thing.

Eddie's always been a bossy little bastard.

And, of course, Richie's always been happy to give Eddie what he wants. It's kind of how they work. Eddie likes to be in charge, and Richie likes, well, he likes when Eddie bosses him around, when he's flustered and greedy and telling Richie angrily that *you're too hot* and *do it how I like it* and *fuck, I love your dumb fucking ass.*

He likes knowing that Eddie wants him, *only* him, and nobody gets Eddie off like he does.

Eddie's always been the bottom, though, because that's what he's always wanted. Richie's never questioned it. It makes sense that his clean little Eddie Spaghetti wouldn't want to put his dick
anywhere it could get dirty.

But if Eddie's up for it, you better believe Richie is, too. Literally. He is up for it.

Get it?

They've already had sex that night, and showered, too, and they were supposed to be winding down with a movie before bed.

That plan's out the window now.

"Bedroom?" Eddie says, breath fanning hotly against Richie's face.

"You're going to rock my world."

Eddie snorts loudly into Richie's mouth. "Come on, dumbass." He stumbles to his feet, reaching for Richie's hand, and tugging him up, too.

It feels like they're freshmen again, fumbling with eagerness, and the slightest bit uncertain.

This is new, and it's been a while since they've done something new.

They start with what they know, though.

"I've never been this aware of the cleanliness of the inside of my ass," Richie says.

Eddie just sinks to his knees.

His hands brush up the backs of Richie's thighs, and he leans in, mouthing at the crease of Richie's hip, and nosing at the trail of hair that leads down from his bellybutton, teasing.

Richie's erection brushes Eddie's cheek.

He swallows. "If I farted right now, do you think it would make bubbles?"

Eddie licks up the underside of Richie's dick, flattening his tongue at the tip, and letting the head up Richie's dick slide up his tongue, into his mouth.

"Fuck, babe."

Eddie fucking goes to town. He squeezes Richie's ass, and he plays with Richie's balls, and he sucks on the head of Richie's dick like he's a goddamn fucking vacuum, and when Richie fists a hand in Eddie's hair, Eddie grip Richie's hips, and he takes him deeper until Richie's dick is brushing the roof of his mouth, and he starts to fuck his mouth on Richie's dick. Eddie is trying to murder him.

"Eds, babe, I—fuck, I, oh, shit, fuck—"

Eddie pulls away right when Richie is about to come.

Richie's so hard it hurts.

Eddie just wipes at his mouth with the back of his chin, looking up, and meeting Richie's gaze before rising to his feet, and shoving Richie towards the bed.

"I love you," Richie says, fervent.
Eddie gets lube from the stand by the bed before he climbs onto the bed, too, and Richie pulls Eddie into his arms, kissing him desperately, and they're a tangle of limbs in the middle of the bed, kissing and touching and wanting.

Eddie hikes Richie's thigh up, though, and he reaches for the lube that was tossed to the side.

Richie's heart jumps when Eddie's finger brushes Richie's rim.

Eddie's teeth sink into his neck, and Richie bucks against him, and Eddie starts to suck on the spot, leaving a mark. His finger, meanwhile, circles and presses and teases. He starts to kiss his way down Richie's chest, and his teeth flash against Richie's nipple, and he toys with it with his tongue.

By the time he presses the tip of his finger into Richie, Richie is a panting, aching mess.

Eddie is relentless.

He presses kisses down Richie's stomach, and he pulls at the trail of hair that leads to Richie's dick with his teeth.

"Fuck!"

He sinks his finger into Richie's ass.

"Eds, babe, Eds, please—"

Eddie just curls his finger, and pulls it out, pushing in again, fucking him in the ass with his finger, and he licks at the head of Richie's dick, too, swirling his tongue, and teasing the slit.

He clutches at Eddie's hair, tugging, and begging.

Before he knows what's happened, Eddie has slipped two fingers into him.

Richie has to move. He has to. He's got to fuck Eddie's mouth.

Eddie's got his arm hooked under Richie's thigh, and he tilts his head to allow it, and, suddenly, Richie is fucking Eddie's mouth, and Eddie is scissoring two fingers in Richie's ass, and it's so good, so, so good, so damn fucking good.

He's close.

That's when Eddie pulls off him, and shifts up onto his knees, and he fucking manhandles Richie, shoving his back down flat against the bed, and with Richie's leg thrown over his shoulder, Eddie sinks three fingers into his ass.

Richie gazes with heavy-lidded eyes at Eddie.

Oh, God.

He can't keep his eyes open, arching up, and he rocks back against Eddie's hand without even thinking about it.

"Richie, sweetheart," Eddie pants. "Think you're ready for more?"

"Fuck, yes. Yes. Fuck me."

"You have no idea good you look right now." There's a strain in his voice. "You're wrecked, and I
don't even know if I want to fuck you, or I want you to fuck me."

Richie makes himself open his eyes, and lift his head.

_Fuck._

Eddie's the hottest fucking thing Richie's ever fucking seen. His hair is sticking up wildly, and his cheeks are flushed with color, and his teeth have sunk into lip. He glances up, and when he sees Richie's _gaze_, he holds it, and Richie could almost come just from that.

Eddie pulls his fingers out of him.

He has to get a condom.

He's back in a flash, though, and he presses in closer, kneeling in between Richie's spread, aching legs, and rolling on the condom, opening the lube bottle again.

Richie would have thought the first time trying this would be awkward.

It isn't.

Eddie pulls Richie's legs over his shoulders, and he holds Richie's _gaze_ when the head of his dick presses bluntly against Richie's hole, and Richie is really fucking ready.

He's _desperate._

Eddie pushes slowly in.

There's a stretch, and Richie has to fist his hands in in the sheets, breathing out through his nose, adjusting, until he's taken all of him, until Eddie is buried to the hilt in Richie's ass.

"Okay?" he says.


Eddie grinds his hips, and Richie's eyes practically roll back in his head.

"That was—_fuck_, that was good."

"Shut up," Eddie says, pulling out slowly, and pressing in again. "You're—_fuck_, I love you." He starts fucking Richie with slow, even thrusts, and his fingers dig painfully into Richie's thighs.

"Yes, yes, Richie, yes—"

The burn of being stretched open starts fading away.

He tilts his hips.

It brings Eddie deeper, and he hits _that_ spot. "There," Richie breathes. "Babe, _there_. Ah, _fuck_. Fuck fuckity _fuck_." He presses his head back into the pillow, and Eddie starts hitting that spot with every fucking thrust.

"This feels so good," Eddie says. "Oh, God, you have no idea how good this feels. Or, _fuck_, I guess you do—"

Richie just chokes on a laugh.
"You feel so good. I love you. Thank you. Thank you for letting me do this. I love you—"

Richie needs friction.

Eddie is fucking him perfectly, and he needs the relief, needs to wrap his hand around his dick, and he does, pumping himself frantically, and that's it, that's enough. He's coming. He arches off the bed, and Eddie starts fucking him wildly, sliding his hands down to grip Richie's hips, and pounding into him.

He's aware when Eddie starts coming, too; he can feel it.

He hisses when Eddie pulls softly out of him, moving to remove the condom. Richie can't move. He's never, ever moving again.

Eddie comes back, and he's got a towel, and he starts to clean up Richie. Richie catches his gaze, and Eddie leans in, kissing him lazily. He pulls away just to toss the towel to the floor, and flops down again, half on top of Richie, and resting his cheek on Richie's chest.

Richie grazes a hand up Eddie's back. "I can't believe you thanked me." He grins.

"Shut up."

"I mean, you're welcome."

Eddie pinches him.

He jerks and laughs and wraps an arm around Eddie.

"You don't have anything to do the rest of this weekend, do you?" Eddie asks. "We can just lie here? I don't want to move for at least 24 hours."

"Well, I do have a paper for my weightlifting class that's due Monday," Richie says, sighing.

"Really?"

He grins. "Nope. It's weightlifting!"

Eddie's chest shakes with laughter. "Good."

"Hey." Richie brushes his fingers up the knots of Eddie's spine. "We're going to do that again, right?"

"Definitely."

They actually leave the bed soon after that, though, because the pizza won't order itself. It's cool. They return to the sofa, and they watch TV with Richie's head in Eddie's lap.

---

They're at lunch when Richie realizes what he's known for years but never actually admitted to himself.

It's a Wednesday. They're getting sandwiches between classes just like always. Darryl is there. He's a quiet, nerdy guy, a junior, and he's Eddie's best friend from the GSA. He's cool.

"Why is there a number on your hand?" Eddie asks.
Richie has to glance at his arm to remember. "Oh. It's for a girl I'm doing a group project with in astronomy." He grins. "She told me I could call her any time." He dunks his burger into the ketchup, and takes a bite. "Why? Jealous, babe?"

"There's ketchup on your nose," Eddie says.

"Want to lick it off?"

"Nope."

"I bet Alice in astronomy would lick it off."

"You should tell her that," Darryl says, amused. "See how she takes it." He smiles.

"She'd probably be into it." Eddie sighs, and shakes his head. "Richie has a way with people. If they don't hate him, they love him. He had girls into him even when he was a gangly, awkward string-bean with bad hygiene, stupid glasses, and a mop of hair."

"I think you're a looker, too, Eds."

Eddie eyes Richie. "There's still ketchup on your nose."

"Aw, come on. You really aren't jealous that everyone wants a piece of this hot bod?"

"Nope."

"Really?"

"Honey," Eddie says, exasperated.

"What?"

"You'd never cheat on me." He reaches across the table to wipe the ketchup off Richie's nose with a napkin. "Girls can write their numbers on you as much as they like. Doesn't make a difference. You're taken."

For a split-second, Richie is without a comeback.

"Gosh," Darryl says. "Sometimes I hate hanging out with the two of you. It makes me feel painfully single. You know you do that to people, right?"

"Well, Darryl. Tell me. Would you lick the ketchup off my nose?"

Even after the conversation takes a turn, Richie's mind keeps going back to it. There was something about the easy, simple way Eddie spoke. It makes something fucking balloon in Richie's chest, pushing on his lungs and squeezing his heart and filling him completely, and he can't help but smile at the fake wood grains of the fake wooden table.

Eddie's it for him.

Now that he thinks about it, he's known it since he was, like, seventeen. He's just never actually thought about it. But it's true, and he's certain; no matter what comes next, they're going to deal with it together, and that won't ever change, because where they'll end up is always with each other.

Eddie knows it, too. That's the best part. Richie's it for him.
Before they part ways for classes, Richie pulls Eddie in and kisses him thoroughly. After he's finished, Eddie is panting, and his cheeks are rosy, and the smile that sneaks onto his face makes Richie want to kiss him again and again and again. "See you later, lover," Richie says, swiping a kiss to Eddie's flushed cheek.

---

They spend the start of their winter break that year at Eddie's aunt's house in Maine, because Mrs. K is determined to have Eddie home for the holidays.

Richie isn't invited, per se.

He's just. Allowed.

Their junior year, Eddie's mom had made it clear that Richie wasn't welcome, so Eddie had declined to come, and they had spent the break together with Richie's parents in Florida.

"You can bring him," Mrs. K says, "but I won't be happy about it."

Richie has to sleep on the sofa.

He might be allowed to stay at the house, but he isn't allowed to sleep in Eddie's bedroom. Even though he's never actually lived in this house, Eddie's got a bedroom that's specifically his. The room is like a shrine to Eddie, to his childhood, and Richie imagines Mrs. K must have taken photos of Eddie's old bedroom in Derry to recreate it.

The subject is brought up at dinner one night.

"You can turn the room into a proper guest room," Eddie says. "Really. It wouldn't bother me."

"I couldn't live in a house that didn't have a room for you, puppy."

"And, you know, if you want me to make any changes, I can," says his aunt Nadia. "Do you want a bigger bed maybe? We can't have you sleeping in a twin when you're the man of the house."

"I'm not the man of the house, though." Eddie's hand has tightened on his fork. "I don't live here."

"You will soon, though!" She beams.

"Nadia," Mrs. K says.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Eddie asks. "I . . ." He looks between them, and he catches on before Richie does. "Do you think I'm moving back here after I graduate?" His voice rises slightly in pitch. "Ma. I— you have to know that I'm not moving back here. I'm not. I'm staying in California. I'm getting my master's, and becoming a nurse. I'm staying."

She sighs. "Let's have this conversation some other time, Eddie-bear."

"Ma."

"Nursing is for women," Nadia says.

"Incorrect," Richie says.

"Nobody is talking to you." Mrs. K shoots a nasty, sour look at Richie. "Fine, Eddie. You want to talk about it? Let's talk. You know I only want what's best for you. I've indulged your need for
independence, but it's time for you to come home again. I need you."

"You manage just fine without me, Ma," Eddie says.

It's like she doesn't even hear him. "And you really want to clean up after sick, diseased strangers ever day instead of looking after your own poor, struggling mother?" She looks at him with big, droopy eyes.

"It's not about you!" he protests

"And, darling, you might not like it," Nadia says, "but you need your mother, too."

"Yes!" Mrs. K says. "He never would have been foolish enough to think of nursing for a career if he hadn't been so far away."

Eddie just sighs.

"And you might be using your father's money right now, but it won't last you forever. Do you really think you can support yourself on your own? I can't bear the thought of you going without your medications because you don't have the money for them."

"I can pay for medicine when I need it," he says, flat.

"Never mind that the longer you're away, the more entrenched you become in this idea that you're a homosexual, and that puts you at risk for dozens of diseases, baby, and—"

"Okay," Richie says, "this is insane."

"Let it go," Eddie says.

"No!"

"This has nothing to do with you," Mrs. K says. "You've been nothing but a bad influence on my Eddie from the start. I shouldn't have even let you into this house. I can't imagine what nasty homosexual diseases you're carrying with you, and—"

"He isn't your Eddie."

"He—"

"Talk to the hand!" Richie says, shoving his hand in her face.

She gasps.

He shoves his chair back loudly. "Come on, Eds. My grandparents are, like, an hour by bus. Let's get the fuck out of here." He starts to get to his feet.

"Eddie isn't going anywhere with you!"

"I think that's for Eddie to decide."

"You are terrible, filthy boy," Mrs. K snarls, "and, someday, my boy is going to realize how worthless you are, and—"

"Ma," Eddie says, sharp. "Don't talk to him like that."
"Eddie, baby, I—"

"You know, I am pretty fucking filthy," Richie says. "I am rude and dirty and a really bad influence on your precious poodle pumpkin of a son, but, guess fucking what, if you really believe I'm riddled with nasty homosexual diseases, then you better believe your son is, too. You know why? You know where I like to stick my dirty, diseased dick, Mrs. K?"

"You—"

"I stick it in his butt!" he exclaims. "I stick it until I'm balls deep in his ass, and he loves it!"

Mrs. K gasps.

Eddie starts shaking slightly before he slaps a hand to his mouth.

"Eddie?" Mrs. K says.

Eddie's hand slides up to cover his eyes, and Richie realizes Eddie is laughing. "Oh, my God!" he exclaims. He stands up slightly to reach across the table, to get a hand on the back of Richie's neck and pull him in, kissing him.

"Eddie!"

"I love you," Eddie says, full of warmth.

Richie grins. "I know."

He sighs. "You really should just let her get it out of her system, though." He sits back in his seat, but he takes Richie's hand, intertwining their fingers on the table, and turning to look at Mrs. K. "Sorry, Ma. Ignore my boyfriend. Please, continue." He blinks innocently at her.

"You—" She cuts off.

"Yes?"

She stands abruptly, making the dishes on the table rattle when her knees hit the edge. She takes a few loud, deep breaths. And with her lips pursed so tightly it hurts to see, she stalks out of the kitchen, throwing her napkin on the floor.

Eddie's aunt's gaze cuts from her to Eddie, to Richie, and her glare is murderous.

"Pass the potatoes," Richie says, cheerful.

Suffice to say, their visit with Eddie's mother ends earlier than planned.

(Richie has to use the bathroom, and that's why he leaves the bedroom. Honestly. It isn't his fault that it's easy to overhear the conversation even from upstairs, to see where Eddie's seated in the kitchen with his mother.

"I don't know why you hate me," Mrs. K says, her face blotchy with color from crying.

"I don't hate you."

"You don't love me!"

Eddie sighs. "I do love you, Ma. You know I do. You're my mother. That'll never change."
She doesn't even deserve that lip service to devotion, in Richie's opinion.

But.

Eddie isn't touching her. It would be easy for him to take her hand, or for him to wrap an arm around her shoulder. He doesn't, though. He sits in his seat a foot away from her, and he keeps his hands planted firmly on his knees. It doesn't even look like he wants to touch her.

*Good,* Richie thinks.

After everything she's done to him, she doesn't get to know what it's really like when Eddie loves you.

He retreats to the bedroom again. Eddie comes back after nearly half an hour, climbing onto the bed and collapsing against Richie's slide, snuggling into him. Richie presses his smile into Eddie's hair.

They make it through Christmas day with Mrs. K, and on the 26th, they take the bus to Portland, and Richie's grandparents are waiting at the station for them.

"This is such a wonderful Christmas surprise!" gushes his gran. "And here I thought that lovely brooch you got me off QVC was going to be my favorite present of the year. But, now, we've only got the one guest room for you, because I haven't had time to clear my sewing from the other. You boys don't mind sharing, do you? It's Eddie, isn't it? I promise the bed's got clean flannel sheets, Eddie. And I hope you're hungry! I bought a chicken pot pie from Save-A-Lot, and it's warming in the oven right now!"

All in all, Richie would probably rate this year's break their best Christmas break to date.

---

They return to California soon after, and the future that Eddie's mother said he wasn't ready for comes barreling towards them. They *are* ready. Eddie is accepted into UCLA's master's nursing program, and school starts winding to a real, final finish, and when Richie thinks about the future, he can only think that he can't fucking *wait.*

---

They graduate from UCLA on a clear, sunny Saturday in May. It's actually a little boring just sitting in the sun during a ceremony that seems to drag on endlessly, squinting at the stage while people Richie doesn't know blather about whatever. They make it through it, though.

They graduate.

After the ceremony, Richie's parents treat the two of them to a big, fancy lunch.

"I'm sorry your mother didn't feel up to coming," Maggie says.

"It's fine," Eddie says. "I know planes make her anxious." He smiles. He means it; he told Richie earlier that he really isn't upset his mother didn't come, that he'd never expected her to come. "I'm glad you guys were able to make it here, though."

"Me, too. It's nice to see where my son's spent the last four years."

They make small talk for most of the meal.
They talk about Richie's cousins, and how Maggie's been volunteering a lot in Florida, and whether the boys have any fun plans for the summer.

They talk about the future a little, too.

It's awkward.

"Richie says you're going to school for nursing," Went says. "I was surprised. You're smart. Now you've got a bachelor's. I would think you'd just got for it, become a doctor." He grins. "You'd make a lot more money!"

"Yeah, um." Eddie takes a sip of his water. "The kind of work I want to do is . . . well, I'd be better suited to do it as—as a nurse."

"And, obviously, I'm going to be the breadwinner," Richie says.

"Obviously," Went says, amused.

"Once I'm a rich, famous radio host, Eddie'll just have to look pretty. Right, Eds?" He makes to pinch Eddie's cheek, and suffers a swift, violent elbow to the ribs in retaliation.

"Yes," Maggie says, "because becoming a rich, famous radio host is a very achievable goal."

He shoots a finger gun at her in reply.

They've just ordered dessert when Went clears his throat and presents a card to Richie. "Open it." He's eager for Richie to see what he's gifting him.

Richie knows it'll be money.

He got five hundred when he graduated from high school.

He's right. It's money. Specifically, it's a check for three thousand dollars.

He gapes. "Dad . . ." He looks at his dad, and Went is pleased, grinning, and clapping Richie's shoulder.

"Make it last," Went says. "The bank of Dad is closed." He grins. "I'm proud of you, Rich. Can't wait to see what you make of yourself in the world. And if you ever change your mind, and decide you want to go into dentistry, you just say the word. You, too, Eddie. I've got friends at dentistry schools across the country, you know." He flags a waitress. "Excuse me! We'll take another bottle of the red, please."

It's another hour before they leave.

They're making their way out of the restaurant at last when Eddie's steps slow, so Richie's steps slow, too. "Hey," Eddie says. "When you did you tell your parents about us?" His voice is too soft for them to hear.

"What?" Richie frowns. "I didn't, or—I haven't."

"Seriously?"

"I think I'd remember if I came out to my parents, babe."

"You've been talking like they know. Richie. You called yourself the breadwinner."
He did, didn't he?

Shit.

He hadn't even realized what he was saying. He sees his parents so little, and he's so used to saying what he wants, when he wants. He's so used to living his life without a filter.

Why hadn't his parents even batted an eye?

On the street, Went goes to get the car, and Eddie ends up going into the restaurant again, because he's just going to use the bathroom really quickly, and Richie is left on the sidewalk with Maggie, and his mind is moving way too fast.

Do they really pay that little attention to what he says?

Do they just assume he's a weirdo?

Or do they know, and they just don't care that he's madly in love with a boy?

He watches his mother. The older he gets, the less he knows how to talk to her. He has to ask. He can always just make it into a joke if she takes it poorly, right? And she's in a pretty good mood, because he graduated, and she had a lot of wine at lunch, and she's going on a cruise with her friends in a week, and she's really excited about it.

If ever there were a time, it's now.

He swallows. And before he can chicken out, he says, "Hey, Ma."

She raises her eyebrows.

"You, ah. You know that Eddie's my lovah, right?"

She eyes him, and starts to smile, shaking her head fondly at him. "That's how you choose to tell me? Really? You are something, dear. I'll give you that. Yes, I know. I assumed. It's been Eddie this, Eddie that for years." She starts rooting through her purse.

He stares.

"If I hadn't already suspected, I knew for certain after I got a call from Sonia Kaspbrak a few years ago. Apparently, you made her son gay. And you're going to give him AIDS." She glances up and at Richie, and there's another wry, knowing smile playing on her lips. "That woman is a real piece of work, isn't she? Honestly. It's a wonder Eddie turned out to be such a lovely, well-adjusted boy with a mother like that. Goodness! It's sunny out today, isn't it?" She continues to search in her purse, and, after a beat, she finds her sunglasses.

He kind of wants to give her a hug.

If she were Eddie, he would. She isn't, though. She's Maggie, and he can't just go grabbing her in big, overly affectionate hugs.

"It's California, dude," he says, using his surfer dude voice.

Eddie emerges from the restaurant, coming to stand by Richie with a small, soft smile.

Richie smiles, too, and takes his hand, bringing it up to press a kiss to his knuckles, and when Eddie looks from Richie to Maggie and back, Richie just shrugs. She knows. Eddie's eyes go
suddenly, beautifully bright, and he intertwines their fingers, squeezing Richie's hand.

---

Summer passes much like every summer before it. Richie gets back his usual, part-time job at the movies. They move into a slightly nicer place that has laundry in-unit.

And when summer ends, Eddie goes back to school again.

Richie is done with school, though.

It's nearly five months before Richie gets a call, and learns he finally has a real, full-time job in radio. One of the girls who worked at the radio at UCLA with him helps him get it. He's an assistant to the guy in charge of scheduling at a mid-sized rock station, and, mostly, that means Richie helps with selling ad time for the station.

He's done it before. He's good at it. He's got the charisma of a natural born salesman.

And just like at UCLA, he'll work his way up.

(There's a guy at the station who loves Backstreet Boys, but he admits that New Kids on the Block will always be his first, greatest love, and Richie thinks, *I had a friend who loved that band*. It bothers him when he can't remember who.

He mentions it to Eddie.

"I can't imagine who would willingly admit to liking New Kids on the Block," Eddie says, and, well, he's not wrong.)

He's done with school, and he's out in the world, and he's crushing it.

---

It's when they're eating pizza for breakfast that Eddie says his present for Richie is a surprise.

"That's kind of the point of wrapping a present, Eds." His birthday is going fucking great: he was woken up with a blowjob, he's enjoying frozen pizza for breakfast, and now there's talk of a surprise. "Do I get to open my secret surprise present?"

"Nope."

He raises his eyebrows.

It isn't until they get into the car that Eddie smiles a smug little smile, and reveals the blindfold. "I said it was a surprise, didn't I?" He has Richie put it on, only to lean across the console, and tighten it, checking that Richie's properly blinded.

"Is this going to end in sex?" Richie asks.

"Better."


They aren't in the car for too long, and when they get wherever they're going, Eddie insists Richie keep the blindfold on. He takes his hand, and lead him through what Richie assumes is a parking lot. They going in somewhere, and Richie is met with a blast of cool, regulated air, and the distant,
tinny sound of shuffling, the sound of barking.

"Eddie, my love," he says, trying to catch up.

Eddie tugs the blindfold off.

He's grinning. Richie is stunned. They're at the local animal shelter.

"We've talked about it," Eddie says. "Time to take the plunge. Today's the day we get a dog, Rich."

"Seriously?" He looks at Eddie in amazement. "You want to?"

"I've been by the shelter a couple of times over the last few months." His eyes are lit up. "It's up to you to pick the dog you want, of course, because it's your birthday, but a litter of puppies was abandoned on the freeway in January, and the shelter was able to rescue the majority of them, and they're finally ready for adoption. I claimed a puppy for us. But if you want to get a different dog, that's fine! I just had to claim her in case you wanted her. There are plenty of people who'll want her, though, if there's another dog that catches your eye." He's chatty with excitement, and he's been planning this for months, and Richie's heart starts beating faster at the realization that this is happening, they are getting a dog.

He claps his hands, and rubs them together. "Okay, then! Let's see our baby girl!"

The puppies are black and white and brown, a mix of breeds. "We think they're probably part German Shepherd, part Labrador," says the woman at the shelter. They're energetic, too, playing and tumbling and barking, and she plucks one easily out of the group to hand to Richie.

She's got big black ears, and her tail is wagging furiously, and she whines and barks and squirms in his arms, licking at his chin.

He grins.

Eddie's arm circles him. "Happy birthday."

They take the puppy home with them.

Eddie's got everything they need for her in the trunk of the car, which means the rest of the day is spent just setting up shit for her in the apartment, and playing with the puppy, arguing over what to name her.

"I think it's sweet," Eddie says. "Lady. It's a sweet dog name."

"Eds, I was born with a natural creative genius."

"Deeznuts isn't creative. It's stupid. You were born with stupidity."

"What about Stain?"

Eddie is suspicious. "Why?"

"Then when we're in the park, we can yell Come, Stain!" He grins. "Get it?"

"No." He shakes his head. "No. That's—it's—that's fucking animal cruelty, Rich. My God. How can it possibly be that PooPoo has been your best suggestion so far?"

"Yes! I knew you secretly liked PooPoo!"
He sighs. "What about Waffles?"

"Waffles?"

"It's cute."

The puppy starts trying to tug a stuffed toy chicken out of Richie's grip. "Cute? It's cute? Look at this fucking majestic creature, Edward! She's a beast! She's a man-eater! And you want to name her some cutesy, wootsy name?" He growls at the puppy, and she drops the toy and barks and wags her tail so wildly it makes her little butt shake, too.

"What about Pancake?" Eddie says.

"I need you to move away from breakfast foods."

"I would name her any breakfast food before I named her Kurt Cobark."

"Hey!" Richie points a finger at him. "You didn't even give Kurt Cobark a chance!"

"What about Princess?"

"It's my birthday, Eds," Richie says. "I can't believe you're antagonizing me on my birthday. My birthday!"

In the end, they compromise. They have to. They don't want to take too long to pick a name, and have her think her name is puppy, because that's what they've been calling her while they argue.

Her name is Queen PooPoo Waffles.

In a day, it's shortened to Queeny. It figures. That's probably why Eddie agreed to the name. Richie still thinks that Kurt Cobark would've been fucking awesome. He gets to shout, "Come, Queen PooPoo Waffles!" in the middle of the park, though, so he's satisfied.

The next several months are a whole new world.

Queeny has a lot of energy.

At the start, she's a fucking dog hurricane. She is unstoppable. She pees on a lot of things, and she breaks a lot of things, and she nearly tugs Eddie's arm out of the socket when she sees a squirrel on her walk. She is attached to them, too, and wants to spend 24/7 with them, which is great. Mostly. It's hard to have sex when there's a puppy pawing sadly at the door, trying to break in, and making sad, whiny howling noises.

Eddie is determined to make her the best, most well-behaved dog in the world, though.

He buys books about it and has the both of them attend puppy training school with her. It's intense. They spend hours teaching just her one particular thing at a time, and Eddie makes Richie practice commanding voices, and if Richie is caught giving Queeny any treats she hasn't yet earned, there is hell to pay.

It works, though.

She sits when they say sit, and she comes when they say come, and she heels when they say heel. She learns not to try to get at food that isn't given to her. She can shake their hands, and she howls when asked to sing, and when they tell her to play with her chicken, she knows to leave them alone, and she can't bother them until one of them opens the bedroom door again.
She is supposed to learn that she isn't allowed on the sofa, or the bed.

Richie is bad at enforcing that rule, though.

"I guess I should just get used to living in filth," Eddie says, sighing, and watching Queeny settle at the end of the bed.

"You love it."

"Nope."

"You love us. Queeny! Tell your daddy you love him!"

Queeny barks happily.

She's probably the best dog ever. For a block of cheese, she'll hop right into the tub for a bath every week. She goes on runs with Eddie, and she barks at the TV when Richie gets frustrated with a game, and she'll howl along to *Believe* by Cher on the stereo, because she is the best dog ever.

---

Richie isn't really in love with his job. It's a start, he knows. And he tells himself that he has to put in the time, and he'll be on to bigger and better before long.

It starts to wear on him, though.

He's *bored*.

There is nothing remotely exciting, interesting, or challenging about selling adverts.

---

They celebrate Y2K with a night on the town. It's the end of the world, after all. They go bar hopping with a bunch of their old friends from UCLA who are in town for New Year's, and there is karaoke, and a game of poker, and a lot of stupid drunk antics. It's great. It's like they're in college again.

But, at 11:45, they separate from their friends, and they make their way to their favorite gay establishment, sitting at the bar and doing tequila shots and singing along drunkenly to R.E.M.

"The world is ending in about thirty seconds," Eddie says, sitting on the edge of his stool at the bar, and keeping one of Richie's thighs tucked securely between his own.

"Sound like there's time for a quickie in the bathroom."

"If you have anything you need to say to me, now's the time to say it."

Richie grins and claps his hands to Eddie's face, smooshing his bright pink cheeks. "Eddie, my little gay hedgehog." It's a testament to how drunk Eddie is that he giggles in reply. "You are the light of my life. You are the jelly in my doughnut. You are the hand that always lovingly fondles my balls. I would not be the man I am today without you."

"You're a *turd,*" Eddie says.

And when people start counting down from ten, Richie tugs Eddie all the way into his lap and hugs him tightly, yelling the countdown into his mouth.
At midnight, the world doesn't come to an end. Richie wouldn't know if it did, of course. He's got his favorite boy in his lap, and he's kissing the fuck out of him, and the rest of the world doesn't matter so much.

---

He's always been popular at the station. His impressions, in particular, are a hit with his co-workers, and he can't blame them, because his impressions are downright fucking *chuckalicious*. Seriously. He can do anyone from Forrest Gump to Oprah to Donald fucking Duck, and, yowza, his George W. is right on the money. Even if he's just the guy selling the ads, his genius *is* appreciated at work.

And, of course, being fucking loved by everybody he works with can only be a good thing in the long run, right?

---

Richie starts cooking actual food. Or, well, he decides to try. He's always been able to microwave with finesse, but he is ready to up his game, and cook stuff that, you know, isn't pre-packaged and processed and technically already cooked.

He buys a cookbook, and everything.

He's great at casseroles and burgers and stuff like stew that he can just throw a bunch of shit into.

Eddie won't eat any chicken that he makes, because there was a *smidge* of pink in one of the breasts of chicken Richie cooked on his very first try at chicken, and Eddie won't respect that Richie's chicken cooking skills have improved.

Meanwhile, Queeny is thrilled to enjoy *anything* Richie cooks.

"Unlike some people, she supports me," Richie says.

"Yesterday I had to stop Queeny from eating another dog's shit," Eddie replies, mild.

Anyway.

It's his idea for them to host Thanksgiving that year.

"Richie is something of a cook these days," Eddie says, talking on the phone with a woman from his program, and inviting her to come. "He thinks he's ready to tackle a turkey."

He *is* ready.

He makes that turkey his bitch.

And, okay, he could have mashed the potatoes a little bit more, and the pie is from a box, and the cranberry actually retains the shape of the can that he dumps it out of, but the point is that Eddie didn't think Richie could cook a turkey, and he cooked that turkey like he was Julia fucking Child.

It's kind of exhausting to cook a meal for six of your nearest, dearest friends, though.

By the end of the night, Richie can't move. He's stuck on the couch. He might just spend the next several weeks lying there with his feet on the table, and his face in the pillow.

"Dishes are done," Eddie says, dropping to sit on the couch beside Richie.
"Mmhmm," Richie says.

"That cranberry sauce from a can was surprisingly good. My aunt used to make cranberry sauce from scratch. It tasted like sweetened cat vomit, or what I imagine sweetened cat vomit tastes like."

"Cool."

"You doing okay over there?" There's something fond in his voice, and amused.

"I'm great."

"Hey." Eddie shifts slightly. "Here."

Richie doesn't think twice about the invitation, turning, and moving to settle his head in Eddie's lap, sighing. He noses a little at Eddie's stomach. And, understanding, Eddie starts carding a hand through Richie's hair.

Queeny has to join in, too, jumping up, and curling up half on top of Richie's legs.

He likes being sandwiched like this, likes having his head in Eddie's lap, and the sweet, warm weight of Queeny's head on his calf.

"Do you know what?" Eddie says, thoughtful. "I like holidays."

"I think you're supposed to."

"You're supposed to, but I never really have before." He sighs. "It's like I was programmed to associate every holiday with my aunts and my mom and having everyone fawn over little, perfect Eddie and with—just—with getting fucking smothered, with getting my cheeks pinched until they're raw, and . . ."

"D'you want me to pinch your cheeks right now? I can. I'm here for you, babe."

"I think you're missing the point."

"What's the point?"

"The point is that I like holidays better without cheek pinches." He twists a lock of Richie's hair around his finger. "Tonight was fun."

"You're welcome."

Eddie laughs softly. "It was the best turkey I've ever eaten in my whole life," he says. And when Richie smiles, Eddie's thumb brushes sweetly over his lips.

He must fall asleep after that.

He hears Eddie turn on the TV, and it's a comedy, because he's aware of a laugh track playing, and the next thing he knows, it's dark, and Eddie is urging him up, is taking his hand, and leading him through the dark to bed.

"Queeny," he mutters.

"I just took her out," Eddie says.

He crawls onto the bed. "Did you really like my turkey?"
"I loved it." Eddie's arms wrap around Richie from behind, spooning him. "I love you." He presses a kiss to Richie's ear, and Richie is asleep.

---

It happens almost immediately after Eddie starts at the hospital. He's finished his program, and he's an R.N, and he's got the job of his dreams. Things are going pretty great for Eddie P. Spaghetti. And that's when Richie's career comes crashing down around him.

It happens like this.

They need a co-host for the early morning show at his station.

He practices his voices for days, and he brings some tapes of his show at UCLA to the interview, and he dresses up, too, wearing a tie, and the shiny black shoes that he had to buy for graduation. This is his chance to get on the radio.

Everyone at the stations says he's got the thing in the bag.

Eddie, too.

"You're hilarious," Eddie says. "People would love driving to work with you every morning. And you printed off that list of ideas for gags, right?" He fixes Richie's tie. "It's going to be great. You're going to be great."

"Aw, babe," Richie says. "It's cute when you start hyperventilating over me."

"Shut up."

The interview is at eleven in the morning.

It's straightforward. "Okay, Rich. Tell me why you'd make this station some money." His boss is a large, bald man who never sits up straight, loves the 49ers, and thinks Richie's hilarious. The interview is a formality.

And at the half hour mark, Richie is feeling pretty fucking good about his chances.

"Where do you see yourself in five years?" Jimmy asks.

He grins. "Here. Besides a brief, terrifying time in my childhood when I wanted to be a ventriloquist, being a voice on the radio has always been my dream. And I plan to make it happen at this station, with this show. Here. This is where I want to be in five years." He jiggles his leg under the table.

"Good. That's what I want to hear. Good. Now, of course, I can't legally ask if you're pregnant—" Jimmy's eyes brighten at the joke, "—but you planning on having any kids? You got a girl?"

"Well, I've got a guy," Richie says, "but I doubt I'll be knocking him up any time soon."

"What?" Jimmy's whole expression has frozen. "You've got a guy?"

That's when Richie knows he's made a mistake. "I mean, yeah, I'm . . ." He means to say that he's with Eddie, you know, Eddie, I talk about him a lot, my Eddie. He can't, though. The words are stuck in his throat, and his heart is thudding in his stomach.
"You're a homo?"

"I'm bi, actually, 'cause I ain't picky." He clicks his tongue, and grins, shoots a finger at Jimmy. "So . . ."

Jimmy doesn't laugh. "You've got a boyfriend?" he says. "You?"

"Yeah." Richie clears his throat. "Yes."

"Okay, um." Jimmy starts shuffling his papers. "Well, I think we might've covered everything." He won't look at Richie. "So, um. I'll let you know." And when he does look at Richie, his eyes dart away again quickly.

"Thanks."

It isn't until he's halfway down the hall that he stops, and leans his head on the wall, closing his eyes. *Fuck.* He should have known better than just to throw it out there that, oh, by the way, he's got a boyfriend. He *does* talk about Eddie a lot. People know they live together. He must not have ever actually said it was more than that, though.

He'd just assumed they knew, and were okay with it.

He's been spending too much time in West Hollywood. He's forgotten. The rest of the world isn't fucking okay with him being who he is, and loving who he loves.

He makes it back to his cubicle and ends up staring at the picture that he's got pinned up just to the left of his computer. It's Eddie, glaring at the camera, and flipping it off. For a split-second, he thinks about taking it down.

He doesn't, of course.

He isn't ashamed, or embarrassed. He decided years ago that he was who he was, and he wouldn't pretend otherwise. Jimmy can go fuck himself.

He starts to rifle through the piles of shit he couldn't make himself do earlier, because he was excited. But he can't make himself do that shit now, either. He ends up shoving out of his seat, and going to the coffee place downstairs for a soda to help him focus.

He's useless for the rest of the workday, though.

He starts to drink as soon as he's home.

Eddie gets home soon after him. "Hey!" He toes off his shoes. "How did it go? I thought you were going to call the hospital on my break? Did it go okay?" He's eager, but, when he gets a look at Richie, something like trepidation starts creeping onto his face.

"It went, ah, how you say, *not too good,*" Richie says.

Eddie's face crumples with sympathy. "Fuck. I'm sorry, sweetheart."

"Whatever."

But Eddie isn't buying that, of course, and Richie had known he wouldn't. He comes to sit on the couch with Richie, and pulls him into a hug. Richie turns his face into Eddie's neck, and breathes in the smell of antiseptic and detergent and cherry almond lotion. "Do you want to talk about it?" He rubs Richie's back.
Richie pulls away. "There isn't much to say. They just, ah. They said they're going in a different
direction." He shrugs.

It's a lie, obviously.

He can't bring himself to tell the truth. What's the point? They are going to go in a different
direction.

"What can I do to help?" Eddie asks. "Say the word. You want cheeseburgers for dinner? A
blowjob? Me to laugh at your mom jokes?"

He grins, and surges forward suddenly, forcing Eddie backwards, and ending up sprawled on top of
him, pinning him against the sofa. "Mwah, mwah, mwah." He smacks wet, exaggerated kisses to
his face. "You know just how to take care of me, Eddie Spaghetti!" He wiggles to settle more
comfortably on top of Eddie, and presses his face into Eddie's neck, sighing.

"I take it to mean you want dinner, a blowjob, and some fake laughter after a cuddle?"

He hums.

Eddie starts combing his fingers in Richie's hair.

*I love you*, Richie thinks. *I love you, I love you, I love you.*

In the morning, work is kind of a bitch. People keep asking him how he thinks it went, and how
they're excited to find out what he's got planned for his show. He jokes, and changes the subject.
He isn't that close with his co-workers, honestly. They're just fine to work the day away with, but
he isn't about to bare his soul to any of them.

He doesn't get the job.

It's fine.

He knew he wouldn't, and he's ready to look for work at other, *better* stations.

But, before he can get the chance, he's fired. He definitely wasn't expecting that. He's called to talk
to Brian, because he works directly under Brian, and that means Brian is responsible for evaluating
him, and, apparently, for firing him, too.

"What the *fuck*?"

Brian is apologetic, and he explains that the sales for ads are way below what they should be.

"Bullshit," Richie says. "It's because Jimmy wants me gone."

"Rich."

"It's because I'm a *homo.*,"

Brian winces. "Come on, man. This isn't on me. I'm the messenger." He sighs. "But, honestly, you
fucked up. You shouldn't have told him. Don't ask, don't tell. Right? That's how it works. Why the
fuck did you tell?" He looks at Richie like Richie has to admit he's right.

"You're joking."

"Rich."
"You think this is my fault?" He is incredulous. He's worked at the radio for over two years. He thought Brian was his friend. "You think I deserve to get canned?"

"That isn't what I'm saying."

"It sounds like exactly what you're fucking saying."

"I'm saying that you should have kept your mouth shut, man. You know I'm right. There's a reason you always just called Eddie your boy. You never called him your boyfriend. You were making it easy for everyone to assume he was your friend."

"Bullshit! I've never pretended Eddie was anything other than my boyfriend!"

"This is pointless. Look. You'll get severance. And you didn't sign a non-compete, so you can get another job. You will get another job. You're smart, and you know your shit. You won't have a problem finding something."

"Wow," Richie says, clenching his fists, "that's so nice of you to say."

"Rich, come on."

"You're a mighty good fellow. Really. You're a fucking stand up guy. Does Mother fucking Theresa know about you? 'Cause I bet she'd like to shake your hand."

Brian's mouth thins. "You don't have to be an asshole."

"Says the guy who's literally in the middle of firing me for having a boyfriend."

"No," Brian says, cold.

"No?"

"I'm firing you because ad sales have plummeted, and since that's primarily your responsibility, we have to let you go."

Richie shoves his chair back. "I'll pass, thanks."

"We'll mail your severance."

"Suck my dick."

He knows everyone is looking at him when he storms out of Brian's office. He wonders what they know. He wonders how many of them are shocked that he's bi, or, actually, most of them probably think he's just a big ol' gay.

It takes him about ten seconds to pack up his cubicle.

He grabs his picture of Eddie, his bag of Twizzlers, and the fancy marble nameplate that Eddie gave him when he got the job, and he's done.

By noon, he's unemployed, and high on the sofa in his apartment.

He was saving the weed for when Casey from improv at UCLA came from Chicago to visit next week.

He needs it now, though.
Eddie gets home to discover him spread-eagle on the ground in a circle of chips, cookies, and cereal, watching the ceiling fan circling slowly above him. "You're high," Eddie says, amused. He comes to stand over Richie, blocking the view of the fan with his soft, pretty face.

"I quit," he replies.

Eddie's brow furrows just slightly.

"My job. I quit. I'm done."

"Oh," Eddie says. "Okay." And he looks at Richie with a small, soft smile.

"That's it? You aren't going to yell at me?"

Eddie squats down in front of Richie. "Nope." He brushes the orange Dorito crumbs off Richie's chin. "We'll find you something better. Get you on the radio. Z95.7 can suck my dick." His eyes are bright, encouraging. Certain.

"That's what I said!"

Eddie tugs affectionately on Richie's hair. "I'm going to change. You want to order us something for dinner? And, actually, before I change, I'll go to Blockbuster." He moves to his feet, and starts for the door, picking up his keys from right where he'd left them.

"I thought the Dodgers were playing tonight," Richie says.

Eddie's gotten really into the Dodgers. It seems like they watch them every other night now. Richie loves Eddie, but the appeal of baseball is lost on him.

He's gotten fucking great at giving fake commentary for the games, though.

"I'd rather just watch a movie with you," Eddie says.

"Liar."

"Does that mean I'm picking the movie?"

"Nope." He considers. "Get *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure.*"

"Okay."

"You know how it soothes me."

"I know." He does. He's gotten pretty good at looking after Richie when Richie's a sad, pathetic sap. He's had to do it a lot lately. "Is that it?" he asks, jingling the keys in his hand.

"Get some of those snow caps, too. Like, a lot. Get three boxes of snow caps."

"Got it."

He leaves, and, in the quiet, Richie's smile fades a little.

He doesn't actually manage to make it off the floor in the time it takes Eddie to walk to Blockbuster's, get the movie, and return. But once he's back, he starts to complain about what a mess Richie's made, and Richie has to get up, to give him a smooch, and order the Chinese, and put on the movie. The rest of the night is easy, because Richie focuses on Eddie, and he doesn't
think about the station or the assholes he thought were his friends or what the fuck happens next.

It isn't until they're getting ready for bed that Eddie asks. "Hey, I don't want to push you, but did you want to talk about it?" He holds Richie's gaze in the mirror.

"Nah." Richie spits out his toothpaste. "There's nothing to talk about."

"Okay. But you know you can always talk to me, right?"

"I know."

Eddie's cheeks are bright pink from being thoroughly scrubbed, and he's in only his briefs and one of Richie's old t-shirts and a pair of socks, and Richie is certain that Eddie is the most perfect human being ever.

"Talking isn't important, though," Richie says. "That's not your job anymore. Starting at about ten a.m. today, you, Eddie Spaghetti, became my sugar daddy."

Eddie rolls his eyes. "Hardly." He starts out of the bathroom, turning off the light.

"I'm your slut now."

"You were already a slut," Eddie says, "and you were already mine."

He grins. "But our situation has changed! Let's hash this out now. Do you want me to start calling you daddy all the time, or just save that for bedroom?" He climbs onto the bed.

Eddie pointedly faces the wall with his back to Richie. That's okay. Richie is happy to be the big spoon.

"Daddy, are you—"

Eddie elbows Richie in the chest. "Beep beep, Trashmouth." Three seconds later, he reaches for Richie's arm, and wraps it around his waist.

It doesn't seem so bad, suddenly, to have lost his job. He's got Eddie. And it wasn't what he wanted to be doing anyway. It's for the best, really. He'll be able to get a job at a radio station people actually listen to, and, on the very first day, he'll tell every motherfucker there he's got a boyfriend, and nobody will give a shit, and he'll go on to become the hilarious radio personality he was born to be.

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It isn't as easy as he wants it to be. He remembers, of course, that when they graduated from college, it took him months to get a job at a radio. It'll take some time now, too. But. It's miserable to live in limbo, and have no idea how long it'll last.

Also, he doesn't even know exactly what kind of jobs he wants to apply to.

Should he apply to anything in radio?

Or apply to be on the radio?

"You want to be on the radio," Eddie says. "Apply to be on the radio. If that's what you want, we can make it happen."
He does.

He wants to be on the radio.

Right?

He gets an interview for radio ad sales, because that's what he knows, and he has to explain why he was fired, and it should be easy, but it's not. He can't find the words. And when Eddie asks him about the interview, he lies, and says the guy at the station must've known Richie didn't really want the job.

Four months pass, and he has no idea what the fuck he wants.

(Eddie had shit to think through when they were in college, but he realized what he wanted, and he made it happen, and he hasn't looked back once since.

Why would he?

He fucking *loves* being a nurse. It *fits* him. Eddie's always been the type to arrive in the clutch, to help you when you need it most, and Richie knows Eddie likes that, likes when he's needed. And nobody needs anybody the way people *need* nurses. Eddie is good at it, too.

Richie's glad Eddie's found the job that's perfect for him, of course.

But.)

He gets a job at a trendy bagel store, because he needs a way to make *some* money.

His parents got them a Dell for Christmas last year, and he wastes a lot of time that way, too, surfing the Internet for hours at a time, sitting in his boxers, and talking to strangers on AIM.

He teaches Queeny how to dance by hopping on her legs, turning in a circle, and barking.

On a night when Eddie's working, he goes to a new comedy club that opens just three blocks over from their apartment, and when he sees they have a monthly amateur evening later that week, he's psyched.

On Thursday, he is one of the first to put his name on the list.

His routine is admittedly pretty raunchy, because his best, most practiced voices are raunchy, and he goes on a whole little spiel about balls, and he says "here's the thing about butt sex" at least seven times, but the audience is roaring in laughter by the time he finishes his never before done bit about pirates, because a good pirate voice just lends itself so easily to jokes about seamen and raising the mast *and pay no mind to the barnacles on me oar, matey*, and he thinks he does pretty well.

"You should come back next month," says a guy. "That was some good shit."

It was.

He *killed* it.

He makes a beeline for where Eddie's seated. He came straight there from work, so he's in scrubs with a cardigan on top, and he's got a drink in front of him, and even in the darkness of the club, Richie can see that Eddie's face is shining. He sits, and Eddie immediately slides a hand around Richie's waist and pulls him closer, kissing him thoroughly.
"What'd you think?" Richie asks.

"I think I would've liked being a pirate." He brushes back Richie's sweaty hair with his hand. "Who knew there was that much gay sex going on aboard ye average pirate vessel?"

"If it's gay pirate sex you want, I can give you gay pirate sex." He tilts his head to kiss Eddie's jaw, to nose at his cheek, and murmur into his ear. "How'd you like to walk me plank, matey?"

"I'd rather suck it," Eddie says, breezy.

Richie fucking chokes.

"Seriously, though." Eddie's hand settles on the back of Richie's neck. "You were great up there."

All in all, it's a good fucking night.

His success at monthly amateur evening isn't exactly a thing he can put on his resume, of course.

"It's a skill," Eddie says. "You can make an audience laugh hysterically. That isn't something that everyone can do, and it's something that's relevant to radio. You should find a way to include it. I'm serious."

In the morning, he prints several copies of his resume and gets all of them in the mail to various radio stations. He doesn't actually include the fact that he rocked the comedy club monthly amateur night on his resume, but that isn't the point. He knows he's hilarious, and he's meant to have an audience, and even if it takes him a while to get the audience, he'll get it.

Right?

He doesn't hear back from any of the stations, and he lets Eddie tell him it's just because none of them are hiring at the moment.

---

He can't really sleep when he isn't doing much during the day. He lies in bed with energy that's unspent. He thinks about the fact that Eddie's supporting the both of them right now, that Eddie's got this great, secure job with benefits, and Richie is fucking up everything.

He works at fucking bagel store.

He leaves the bed to smoke on the balcony, because Eddie doesn't like it when he smokes in the apartment.

It startles him when Eddie shuffles onto the balcony, too. "Why are we awake at two in the morning?" he asks. His cheek is imprinted with the crease of a pillow, and all of his hair is sticking up hilariously on the left, and he's wearing a blanket like it's a cape.

"I felt like masturbating with the wind in my hair," Richie says.

"Okay." Eddie perches himself on the cheap lawn chair they use in place of actual balcony furniture. "I like to watch."

Richie just smiles.

His gaze randomly sticks on Eddie's blue slippers. They're monogrammed with his initials. It was Richie's Christmas present for him last year, and it's one of the best presents Richie's ever gotten
Eddie, because Eddie fucking loves his fancy monogrammed slippers.

Richie dashes his cigarette against the railing. "Come on." He takes Eddie's hand.

Back in bed, Eddie snuggles sleepily into him. "We'll talk about in the morning?" he murmurs. He presses his nose into Richie's neck, spooning him.

"Yeah," Richie says.

But, of course, when Richie wakes in the morning, Eddie has gone to work, and Richie has to go to work, too, because the bagels won't just sell themselves.

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He becomes a regular at the comedy club's monthly amateur evening. There are lots of regulars, of course. Richie, though. He kills it every fucking time. On his fifth amateur night, he's called "a favorite of our club!" by the host, and people actually greet his entrance with applause.

It's lucky he's got a fucking endless supply of material.

He starts to practice each new, upcoming routine with Eddie. It's better to practice on a person, and Eddie always takes it seriously. He takes actual notes for Richie, and he'll tell Richie when something isn't working, when he needs to cut a line from a story, or move a joke to later. It's not a job, obviously. He's picked up more hours at the bagel store to the point that he's basically starting working there full-time. His focus is definitely on his comedy, though. If he can build a kind of local, loyal base of fans for himself at the club, he'll be able to use that when applying for jobs on the radio. He needs a way to sell his personality, and he's found it.

If his name is known for popular standup comedy, he won't be stuck at some lame assistant ad sales job.

If he plays this right, he can finally get a job on the radio.

His eighth amateur night is his best.

Every single story is a hit. None of the jokes fall flat. He worked really, really hard on this routine, practicing it with Eddie and revising it again and again and again, and it shows.

He's on a high when he waves to the crowd, blows a kiss, and leaves the stage.

He gets a kiss from Eddie as soon as he reaches their table.

Eddie is always eager for kisses after Richie leaves the stage. It doesn't matter that Richie's usually a sweaty mess from standing under the glaring stage lights. He'll grab his face and pull him close and kiss him eagerly.

"How'd I do?" Richie grins.

"I laughed so hard I cried, and I'd already heard the whole thing."

He grins, and presses his smile into Eddie's cheek because he's just so fucking happy. He's never felt this sure of himself. Eddie's hand slips under the back of Richie's t-shirt to palm at his damp lower back, because apparently he's happy, too, and the fact that Richie's shirt is stuck to him with patches of sweat doesn't even bother Eddie.

"I love you," Eddie says.
Richie pulls away just slightly to preen. "Who doesn't love a hot, hilarious guy like me?" He grins.

"You are, you know."

"What?"

"Hot."

The word hangs in the air, and it's how he said it that matters: low, suggestive.

And Eddie knows exactly what he's doing.

"Yeah?" Richie swallows.

Eddie holds his gaze. "And you know what's really hot?" The tone of his voice goes straight to Richie's dick, and when his eyes drop to Richie's mouth, Richie's throat goes dry. "Seeing you on stage, and you've got the microphone right up close to your mouth, and . . ." His own lips part almost inadvertently before he looks up to catch Richie's gaze again.

Richie has to kiss him.

He has to.

He grabs Eddie's face and plunges his tongue into Eddie's mouth, kissing him roughly, and Eddie responds eagerly, pressing in close and tightening his thighs around Richie's waste, digging his fingers into the skin of Richie's back.

Eddie doesn't even draw away from Richie to ask. "You want to get out of here?" he breathes. He rubs a hand up Richie's thigh.

Richie nods. "I'm going to fuck you with my tongue 'til you can't fucking walk."

"Fuck," Eddie says. "Let's go."

Richie is already on his feet.

Eddie leads the way out of the club, keeping a hold of Richie's hand, and Richie just nods at the people who greet him, who compliment him, who seem like they want to start conversation that he obviously can't participate in.

They hurry to the apartment in a horny, eager rush, holding hands tightly, and bumping into each other repeatedly, pausing for a split-second at a time to steal quick kisses.

Richie crowds Eddie against the door of their apartment when they make it there at last, mouthing at the back of his neck, and pressing his dick into Eddie's ass while Eddie fumbles to get the key into the lock.

They trip their way into the apartment, laughing, and Richie spins Eddie around quickly, kissing him.

Eddie shoves Richie back against the door to close it. His hand start tearing at the buttons of Richie's shirt, and he ducks his head to kiss at the skin that he reveals. Richie curls a hand in Eddie's hair, canting his hips into Eddie when Eddie's tongue curls over his nipple.

He's got plans, though.
He pulls Eddie's head up, kisses him sloppily, and starts to walk them both towards the couch.

"I told you," he pants. "I need a taste of that ass." He pushes Eddie down onto the couch, and sinks to his knees in front of him, curling his thumbs in the waist of Eddie's scrub pants, and pulling them down, leaving them to pool at Eddie's feet because the bulge in Eddie's briefs can't be ignored, and he has to get his mouth on it.

Eddie's breath hitches when Richie's teeth scrape his erection over the material of his briefs.

"Turn," Richie says.

Eddie rolls over. It leaves him bent over the front of the couch with a hand on the back of the couch, with his face pressed into the pillows, and with his ass right where Richie wants it.

He tugs Eddie's briefs down just far enough to reveal his ass, and leans in to press his lips to the dimples of Eddie's back, to flash his teeth against the curve of Eddie's ass.

"Richie," Eddie gasps. "I—"

"Hold that thought."

Eddie fucking whines, and Richie almost sprints to the bedroom for lube, for a condom.

He gets back to discover Eddie hasn't moved.

"That's my boy," he says.

"You're a dick."

He grins, and he parts Eddie's ass cheeks with his hands and licks a stripe up Eddie's crack, tonguing at his rim. He bites at Eddie's ass while he squeezes lube onto his finger, while his thumb rubs the lube on, and nuzzles the bite with his nose, circles his tongue around Eddie's rim teasingly until Eddie's is trembling, is begging. He lets his breath wash hotly against Eddie's hole. And when Richie thrusts his tongue in finally, Eddie pushes back against him desperately with a wrecked, pleading yell of Richie's name.

"Just—yes, Richie, please—!"

He gave it up the ass to Eddie that morning, so Eddie is already pretty stretched, and he's gotten him worked up, and he digs his fingers into Eddie's ass while he fucks Eddie with his tongue.

They're both still mostly dressed.

Eddie's briefs aren't even entirely off, and his pants are tangled on his sensible white sneakers, and he's even still got his favorite navy cardigan on over the top of his scrubs.

Richie's fully dressed.

Eddie's rubs the heel of his hand against the bulge in the front of his briefs. "Richie," he whines. "I—I'm—"

"You want my mouth on your dick?" Richie says.

"No! I—"

But he's already drawn away, and he grins for a split-second at the way Eddie's asshole flexes
around nothing, and when Eddie start to swear at him, he remembers to focus, and he rolls Eddie
over again to tear his briefs down properly, to take Eddie's dick out. "Happy to," he says, grinning.
He takes the whole length of him at once, letting Eddie's dick hit the back of his throat.

Eddie's a mess, shaking and moaning and scratching at Richie's back and shoulders and scalp,
bucking his hips.

Richie pins Eddie's thighs down with his arms.

He's in charge.

His balls are so heavy it hurts, and he's got spit smeared on his cheeks, dripping off his chin, and
streaking down his neck, and his dick is throbbing in his jeans.

It's so fucking hot when Eddie winds up wrecked.

Eddie's smart enough not to say he's about to come, but he can't stop the desperate, gravely "uh, uh,
uh," noises he starts to make, and Richie knows what that means.

Richie tears away with a grin. "Where do you want my mouth now, baby?"

"You—" Eddie attacks Richie, surging forward suddenly and shoving him backwards and
straddling his hips. "—piece of shit—"

Both of them struggle with the button of Richie's jeans, and Eddie lifts himself up slightly for
Richie to lift up, too, and tug his jeans down along with his boxers.

His dick springs free, and Eddie squeezes half the bottle of lube onto his palm and grasps Richie's
dick, pumping it, and coating it.

"Do—?"

Eddie isn't interested. "No," he growls. He shoves four fingers into Richie's mouth, holding him by
the jaw and meeting his gaze, and with a fierce, flushed face, he sinks onto Richie so easily it's like
his ass is meant to fit Richie's dick.

They seem to realize at the same exact time that he forgot the condom.

Richie's eyes widen.

"Whatever," Eddie says. "Just—it doesn't matter anyway." He starts to fuck himself on Richie's
dick, panting, and looking at Richie with his mouth hanging open, with his pupils blown wide with
lust. "I love you. I love you, but—ah—you are such a dick—"

It feels so good. So, so fucking good. He's got his bare, throbbing dick buried in Eddie's wet, hot
ass, and Eddie is riding him mercilessly, and he thinks he might be about to transcend this mortal
fucking plane.

"I see you on that stage, and—" He squeezes his eyes shut for a split-second, arching his back, and
reaching a hand between them to squeeze his dick. "—and—you're waving your hands and you're
—you're smirking at your own fucking jokes, and you've got the microphone and—and only I get
that, only I get your hands, and I get your mouth, and I—"

Richie starts sucking on his fingers.

"You're mine. Mine. You're—fuck, Richie, I—uh, uh, uh—"
He throws his head back when he comes. His ass clenches tightly around Richie's dick, and even when he's painting Richie's chest with his cum, he continues to clench around Richie's dick purposefully, and he whimpers at the overstimulation when Richie continues to fuck up into him.

"Now," he pants.

Richie bites Eddie's fingers when he comes.

Eddie rises off Richie with a wince. "Fuck me," he breathes, and he collapses on his back beside Richie.

"I did," Richie says, catching his breath.

"I know. There's cum leaking out of my ass right now."

Richie turns his head to look at him. "Regretting it now? Taking it raw?"

"Nope." Eddie smiles.

"Really? What about disease?"

Eddie scoffs softly. "It's your dick. It's never been anywhere that's not me."

He grins. "Hey. You really like seeing me on stage?"

"Obviously." Eddie pulls at the sleeve of his sweater to wipe at the spit that shines on Richie's nose and cheeks and chin. "It just . . . it makes me proud. And possessive."

"Ah, yes, but you know I only vant you, my love."

"Is that a vampire?"

He shrugs. "It's new."

Eddie makes an okay, not bad face. "It has potential." He turns his head to the ceiling again.

"This is weird," Richie says, toying with the bottom of Eddie's sweat-damp, wrinkled button-up. "Our dicks are the only part of us that aren't dressed. Usually, it's the other way around."

Eddie just smiles.

Richie can't help but roll himself onto Eddie, throwing a leg over his legs and an arm over his waist and settling his head on Eddie's chest.

"Two minutes," Eddie says. He pets Richie's hair. "Then we're taking a shower."

They get up to shower even sooner than two minutes, of course, because the cum is drying, and the sweat on their bodies is cooling, and Eddie starts feeling really dirty, really quickly.

That's just a part of his charm.

They clean each other up under the spray of the shower, and Richie talks about his ideas for his next amateur night, and when they crawl into bed, Eddie says with sleepy, certain confidence that he's sure whatever Richie does will be great.
He's eating his Coco Puffs in his boxers when the phone starts ringing. He narrows his eyes at the phone. Today is one of those rare, awesome days when his day off aligns with Eddie's day off, and he is not giving that up to cover some fucking flake's shift.

But if somebody at the hospital is calling for Eddie, he's got to pick up.

"I'm a burger, what's your beef?"

There's a pause on the phone. "I'm looking for Rich Tozier," says a man. "I take it that's you?"

"Present."

"Mr. Tozier, my name is Tony Agnolo. I'm a talent agent, and I saw you at the Funnybone last night. I wanted to talk to you about your comedy."

Richie freezes with the spoon in his mouth.

"You're talented. I was actually at the club last night to see your act. One of the managers had tipped me off about you. I'm going to be frank with you, Mr. Tozier. I see a lot of amateurs, and most of them aren't worth a damn. You've got talent, though. And you've got presence. That's important."

Richie's brain might be broken.

"I had wanted to talk to you last night, but you were, ah. Preoccupied."

"I've got a boyfriend," Richie says, immediate. "If you have a problem with that, you should tell me right now."

"Buddy, I don't care if you're gay or straight or have a fucking cactus between your legs. You're funny. And I want to represent you, and get you some real gigs."

They make plans to meet up for dinner that night.

Even after he hangs up the phone, Richie's in shock. He didn't even know talent scouts for comedians were a thing! But a talent scout was at the Funnybone last night just to see Richie, and he was impressed, and he wants to help Richie make a career out of just being really fucking funny.

His gaze snaps over to the door when Eddie returns from his run with Queeny.

"It's nice out today," Eddie says. Queeny bounds ahead of him to greet Richie first. "We should go for a walk later if you're up for it."

Richie starts across the room towards him.

"What?"

He grabs Eddie's face in his hands to smack a kiss to his mouth. "Mwah!" And before Eddie can protest, he hugs him so hard he lifts him off the ground, and he starts to spin him around, peppering his face in kisses.

"Rich!" He laughs. "I'm sweaty!"

"I'M FUNNY!"

"Congrats?"
He sets Eddie on his feet. "Babe, I just got off the phone with a talent agent. He called me!"

Eddie's eyes go wide. "You're serious?"

"We're going to meet for dinner! He wants to represent me! He's going to make me an actual fucking comedian!"

"Oh, my God!" Eddie's face breaks into a smile. "That's— that's amazing! That's—"

Queeny has to jump in then, pawing at Richie's back and barking and trying to her nose her way in between the two of them. They break apart with a laugh, and Richie rubs her ears and holds her face and tells her "I'm going to be famous, PooPoo!" She whines happily back at him, wagging her tail violently against Eddie's leg.

"I never doubted it," Eddie says.

Richie moves up again, and Eddie moves in. They hug. Eddie fucking clings to Richie, and Richie holds Eddie as tightly as he can, and Richie doesn't really know what's going to happen next, but he's so happy right now he can't be bothered to care.

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Agnolo gets him actual, paying gigs, and the pay isn't great at first, but it's something, and it starts getting better over time, and he thinks he can make a career of this.

He quits his job at J.T.'s Bagels.

It was never his plan to become a stand-up comedian, but he likes it.

And, in November, he's invited to go on the road. He would be one of two featured acts in a show that's headlined by a guy who was on SNL. It's pretty much exactly the break he needs.

It would be a lot, though. They would be driving the whole fucking country in a bus with shows nearly every single night. It would be go, go, go.

"How long would the whole thing last?" Eddie asks.

"Almost four months."

He nods. "I would have thought it'd be longer than that." He smiles. "We can do that. I'll miss you like crazy, but we can talk on the phone. We can make it work."

"Yeah?" Richie is excited, but it makes a sick feeling rise in his stomach to think that he'll go nearly three months without Eddie. He hasn't been without Eddie for longer than a day in years. "You won't fall in love with some sexy doctor while I'm gone?"

Eddie takes the beer out of Richie's hand.

They're in the kitchen, and Eddie's just gotten home from work, and Richie started drinking long before he got there, because he was excited, and because he was anxious.

He takes Richie's hands. "If you only believe one thing I ever tell you, believe this. Doctors. Aren't. Sexy. They're egotistical, and they're jerks, and they've got complexes the size of Texas, and I will never be attracted to any of them." His eyes are bright.

Richie grins. "I don't know how I forgot." He pulls Eddie into his arms.
"It's going to be great, sweetheart," Eddie says, softer. "I mean, I'll miss you. But you can't pass on an opportunity like this."

He's right.

He calls Agnolo to say he's in.

The tour doesn't actually start for several more months.

Now that the lineup is solidified, they need to advertise the show, and tickets have to go on sale, to be on sale for a while. The more time passes, the more excited Richie gets. Shows start selling out across the country, and, sure, they aren't selling out because of him, but the fact remains that he's going to perform in front of completely packed audiences.

At six in the morning on the day the tour is set to start, Eddie drives Richie to the bus, and they sit there in park for a minute, staring at the bus in front of them.

Eddie reaches back to fish a bag from the back. "Here." It's a red gift bag.

Inside, there's a nose hair trimmer with a bow on top.

"You'll be on the road for your birthday, so I figured I'd have to give you your present early."

Richie grins. "You take such good care of me." He leans over the console for a kiss.

They don't actually say goodbye in the car.

They have to load Richie's suitcase onto the bus, and they talk to some of the people loitering there, people that Richie is going to spend four months on a bus with, and, finally, Richie walks Eddie back towards the car.

"Call me tonight?"

"Definitely."

Eddie steps into Richie's arm, hugging him.

"Here I am, off to make something of myself," Richie says, using his thickest Southern drawl. "And I reckon you'll forget about me soon." He sighs. "But, oh, it does do my heart good to have you in my arms one last time, darlin'."

Eddie doesn't answer; he just holds onto Richie a little tighter.

"And when you hear the sound of the wind whistling in the sycamores, think of me, and know I'm thinkin' of you."

Eddie pulls away at last. "You're a dumbass," he says, fond.

"I love you, too."

Eddie tilts his head up in that way of his, the way that means kiss me, and Richie does, cupping his face and kissing him sweetly.

His throat starts to close up when it's over. "I'll call you," he says.

Eddie leaves then, because he's got to get to work, and the bus is set to leave soon anyway, and
Richie is left to clear his throat and put on a smile and board the bus. This is it. He's gone from radio host wannabe to bagel store clerk to somewhat successful comedian, and now, at last, he's got his chance to make it big.

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His monologue for the road is a combination of his most popular jokes, stories, and one-liners.

It's a hit.

He's only given about twenty minutes, but he makes it work.

He likes the group on the road with him. Mostly. The MC is kind of a dick, but he likes the other featured comic, and, obviously, he's a fan of the headliner, and the handful of crew who travel with them are great, too. Still. It's kind of lonely to be on the road.

He misses his friends. He misses his dog. He misses his boyfriend.

He really, really misses his boyfriend.

He talks to Eddie on the phone every night, recounting his day, and listening to Eddie's, and that helps ease the loneliness a little. He wants to go to bed with him every night, though, wants to hug him and kiss him and cuddle on the couch with him. He's forced to settle, instead, for listening to Eddie complain about new hospital policies for an hour with the phone cradled close to his ear.

The first city where they spend more than one night is Chicago.

Usually, they drive through the night after a show.

They've got rooms in a hotel in Chicago, though, and they decide to spend another night just because, getting on the road in the morning, and that's the night he finds her.

---

He goes into the little corner diner because it's late, and it's raining, and it's the first halfway decent looking place he sees. He shivers a little at the warmth that greets him when he steps in. The sign by the door says to seat yourself, and he chooses a booth at random, shrugging off his jacket, and grabbing a bunch of napkins out of the dispenser to dry off his face, to pat at his wet, frizzy hair.

Most of the guys have friends in Chicago, but Richie is on his own for the night.

The place is almost completely empty. There's a couple in a table by the window, and a man at the counter. After an evening in a packed comedy club, the quiet is deafening.

"Hey, there." There's the waitress, too. "What can I get for you?"

"Hello, beautiful! I'll take a water, a Coke, and a beer. Is that allowed? And I'll take two slices of some of that weird Chicago pizza. Also. I need some chocolate. I need the best, most chocolate-y dessert you've got."

She smiles. "What about a slice of cheesecake? We've got a really good double chocolate cheesecake. I can even drizzle more chocolate on it to sweeten the pot if you want?" She raises her eyebrows.

He slaps his palm to the table. "Sold!"
"Great," she says. "I'll be right back." She's pretty, sweet-cheeked and petite and with curly red hair that's tossed up into a high, loose ponytail.

He watches her walk away and, out of nowhere, thinks, *gosh, I love that girl.*

Weird.

"Excuse me," says a man.

It's one of the pair that was sitting by the window.

"You're Rich Tozier?" He says it like a question. "We were just at the show you opened for." He smiles. "You were hilarious."

"Does that mean you're a fan? I'm meeting a fan? That's what's happening right now?"

"I think that is what's happening right now," says the guy, laughing, and he reaches to shake Richie's hand. "If you count my wife, that's two fans." He nods his head at the woman by the window, and she smiles, and waves. "Your show was great. Seriously. You had me in stitches."

He hopes he doesn't look as flushed as he feels. "Thanks, man. I'm glad you liked it."

"I really did. Well, I'll leave you be. Have a good night."

"You, too."

Richie is left to grin to himself. He just got recognized in public. The moment he gets back to the hotel, he's calling Eddie, and he's bragging that he's got real, actual fans who recognize him in public.

"You're famous," says the waitress, returning with a water, a Coke, and a beer.

He sighs. "It's true. I can't go anywhere these days without being crowded by my adoring fans." He shrugs. "It's the cost of being as amazing as I am."

"Humble, too," she says, amused.

He clicks his tongue, and shoots a finger at her.

"This explains why I feel like I know you," she continues. "You came in, and I swear I recognized you, but I couldn't place you. I must have seen you on TV, or something."

"Well, actually," he says, "I haven't made it onto TV yet." He drags out the word until she starts laughing softly. "I think I recognized you, too, though. You aren't from L.A., are you? Or did you go to UCLA?"

She shakes her head. "Nope. I've been in Chicago pretty much my whole life."

"Shame." He points a finger. "Have you ever visited the scenic trash town of Derry, Maine?"

"I . . ." She blinks. "Yes, actually. I'm—I'm from Derry. You are, too?"

He stares. "You're really from fucking Derry?"

"Rich Tozier," she says, soft. "Rich Tozier." Her eyes narrow just slightly like she's trying to see him better, to remember him.
It hits him like a punch to the gut. "Beverly Marsh!" he exclaims. "Bev!"

He remembers her.

Of course, he remembers a skinny, red-kneed girl who used to give him the finger a lot. But. He'd completely forgotten about her, and here she is right in front of him. "Don't you remember me, Bev? It's Richie! Good ol' Trashmouth!" He's talking to Beverly fucking Marsh.

"Oh, my gosh." Her smile lights up her whole face. "Richie."

He's already getting up out of the booth.

She laughs when he hugs her.

It's like he's opened a spring-loaded box of memories he didn't even know he had. He hasn't thought about Bev in years. He used to skip English class to smoke stolen, shared cigarettes with her, though, and he used to call her Molly Ringwald, and he once played chicken with her in the quarry, with her and Eddie and a bunch of others.

He remembers.

They break apart at last, and he moves to sit, gesturing at her to sit, too.

"This is a trip," he says, shaking his head.

She grins. "How are you?"

"I'm good. Didn't you hear? I'm famous!"

"I would've expected nothing less," she says, fond. "I guess you're a comedian? I remember you used to think you were funny."

He claps a hand to his chest. "Think? I used to think I was funny?"

She laughs.

"What about you?" he asks. "Besides rudely insulting the famous, what are you up to?"

"I, um. Well, I work here. And I've got a job at a bookstore, too. Got to make ends meet, you know?" She drops her gaze to the table for a minute. "But I'm actually—I've started designing clothes on the side, and I'm hoping to make something of that, you know? I've got ideas."

"Bev, the fashionista. I love it! I need to ask, though. Be real with me. How much Hawaiian print is involved in your designs?"

"It's almost all Hawaiian, actually."

"I knew it! Sign me up. I'll get a full Hawaiian suit, please."

She grins.

The bell on the door clangs loudly to announce another customer.

"I should go. But, ah. It's great to see you, Richie." She starts to get up. "Are you going to be in town for a bit, or . . .?"
He winces. "I'm leaving early tomorrow. I'm free tonight!"

"I work until closing at midnight."

"Bars are open until two!" He grins. "I can wait for you to get off. Service here is actually slow. I only just now got my drinks, and who knows when my food is coming, so. Take your time, really. I'll obviously be here for a while."

She smiles. "Okay." She goes to greet the group of customers who've come in, but she glances over her shoulder on the way, and catches his eye, smiling.

Bev.

He can't believe it.

Bev!

He wishes he could call Eddie right now.

Bev stops by the table again with his pizza. "I've been trying to remember who else we used to hang out with in Derry. I remember you had a whole little club. Right? I feel like I'm blanking on so much." She shakes her head and when she sees that he's already got half a slice of pizza in his mouth, her lips twitch with amusement.

"Honestly," he says, "I haven't thought about anything remotely related to Derry since, like, I left."

"Me, neither." She bites her lip. "I remember there was you, and . . . and Bill?"

He stares. "Shit. I haven't thought about Big Bill in years! I don't even know when I saw him last. I wonder what he's up to these days. Shit." He can picture Bill perfectly in that moment: with his stupid, floppy hair and his cutoff jean shorts and his beloved, little old lady bike.

"I bet he's doing well for himself," Bev says, smiling.

"He's probably already married with kids."

"That wouldn't surprise me." She leans her hip on the booth. "Who else have we forgotten? There was a big group. There was you and me and Bill, and—"

"Stan!" How could he have forgotten about Stan? "Stan the man!" And, suddenly, he is struck with snapshots of all of them at the Barrens and at the quarry and at the Aladdin, of Bill and Stan and Eddie, too, and "Mike!" he exclaims. "We can't leave out Mike. My man. Think he's still on the farm?"

"He was a sweetheart. I remember. Mike was such a sweetheart."

"And let's not forget who'd fuck a book if he could!" Richie says. "Benjy! Smart, husky, and lovable!"

"Ben." She smiles when she says the name. "I can't believe I forgot about Ben."

This is crazy.

Why hasn't he thought about any of his friends in years?

He wonders if he can get in touch with Stan.
"And, ah, there was Eddie, too, right?" Bev says. "Kaspbrak? Do you remember—?"

"Eddie?" he says, incredulous. "Do I remember Eddie? Of course!" He could never forget his boy.

"Yeah?"

"I never forgot about him. We live together. I'm actually currently tapping that."

Her eyebrows fly up. "Seriously?"

"Seriously." He grins. "Eddie's my guy. My sweetheart. My man numero uno. Has been for years. We went to UCLA together." It occurs to him suddenly to pause, to gauge her reaction. "You don't have a problem with that, do you?"

"Do I have a problem with Eddie being your sweetheart?" Her eyes are bright. "No, I don't have a problem with that. I think it's great. I'm happy for you. How is Eddie?"

"He's a nurse!"

"Really?" She blinks. "Wow. Good for him. I don't think I would have guessed that."

"Is it because you think of him as that cute lil' hypochondriac?"

"I . . . yes. Actually, yes. I can picture him with his fanny pack, and everything." She smiles. "And he's become a nurse?"

"After he broke his arm, he figured out his mom was a psycho, and he got past the hypochondria shit. Mostly. He's actually really great at taking care of people. I got a picture of him if you want to see." He starts to pull out his wallet. It's the picture he used to keep in his cubicle at the station. Now that his cubicle is on the road, he keeps it in his wallet. "He's a looker, by the way. Try not to swoon too much."

"I remember when he broke his arm," she says. "I can't remember why, but I remember that. I do."

He shows her the photo. It's gotten flimsy with age, and has a crease in the middle. Eddie's still cute, though.

"Eddie!" she says. "He looks like he hasn't changed much." She glances at Richie, and she can't quite manage to suppress a smile. "Since he's flipping off the camera, I assume you were the one taking this photo?" She raises her eyebrows.

"How did you know?!"

She laughs. "And you guys live in L.A. now?"

He nods. "We went out there for college, and stuck around after."

"Hey, lady!" It's the guy at the counter. "Can I get some service here?"

She rolls her eyes at Richie. "On my way!" Her voice is cheery by force, and she leaves Richie alone to exclaim to himself yet again on what a fucking unbelievable evening this is.

Bev!

They don't have too much of a chance to talk for the next two hours. Somehow, the place gets busier over the course of an hour. She brings him cheesecake, though, and another beer when he
finishes his first, and she keeps looking over at him, smiling, and making him want to hug her again.

The place does start to empty out eventually, though.

The cook leaves before Bev.

She flips the sign to closed, and Richie sits at the counter to entertain her while she cleans up. He offers to mop the floor for her, but she won't let him help her. She gives him another slice of cake on the house, and, in the time it takes him to eat it, she gets the whole place cleaned up.

She pulls a black leather jacket on over her powder blue uniform, and they leave, locking the door.

The rain outside has become a drizzle.

It makes his heart swell with fondness when Bev pulls a pack of Winstons from the pocket of her jacket. She lights up, and when she sees his grin, she offers the pack to him. They stand silently on the street for a minute, turned in towards one another, and smoking.

"I don't smoke much these days," he admits.

"Really?"

"Eddie has this thing about lung cancer. Apparently, it kills you? That seems to be the theme of the diseased lung pictures that Eddie likes to tape to the fridge."

She smiles. "Sounds like he's taking good care of you."

"He tries."

"So." She crushes the end of her cigarette under her heel. "You want to get something to drink?"

"Lead the way."

She picks a bar that's only three blocks over, and it's crowded, but it isn't unbearable. Bev knows the name of the bartender when she calls for a couple of Budweisers. Everything is cast in color from the colored lights above, and there's a jukebox that's playing some 80s song that Richie could remember the words to if he tried, and everyone in the bar is young and relaxed, having a pretty good time.

They find a table in the back, and clink their bottles to toast old friends.

"Okay," Bev says. "Start from the beginning." Her face is glowing in a ray of soft green light. "Tell me everything I've missed in the life of Richie."

He clears his throat. "I was born on a gray, rainy day."

"I changed my mind. I don't care. I think it would be more fun to stare at that wall over there."

He grins.

"How about, um. How'd you get together with Eddie?" she asks.

"Well, I was high—"

She laughs. "Did you trick him into it? I feel like you tricked him into it. Did you tell him there
was a disease going around that gave you massive, eventually fatal boils unless you held hands with a boy, and, oh, look, Eddie, my hand is available to save you?" She gestures.

"No." He stares. "And now I hate myself, because that's such a good fucking idea!"

She smirks.

Bev is fun. He can't believe how easily he forgot. She can give it as well as she takes it, and she's easy to talk to, and there's just something about her that makes Richie want to cause a ruckus, that encourages him, and makes him more.

It's like they're birds of a feather, and here he was for years thinking that he was one of a kind.

(He remembers in civics class when he was bored, and he decided to ask "why?" to every single thing Mr. Brewer told them about the system of checks and balances, and, finally, Mr. Brewer reached the end of his rope.

"Raise your hand again, Mr. Tozier, and I'll give you detention," he said.

"I'm curious!"

"Well, curiosity killed the cat."

Richie was drumming the beat of *Take On Me* on his thigh when Bev slipped a note onto his desk. In her messy chicken scrawl, she'd written *but satisfaction brought it back*. He grinned, and glanced at her, and they raised their hands at the exact same time to ask a question.

How could he have forgotten that? How could he have forgotten the afternoon that both of them spent in detention for impertinence? How could he have forgotten *his* girl?

They talk about Eddie for a while, and about UCLA.

They drink.

They play a round of darts, and Richie is terrible, but Bev is, too, despite the fact that she insists in between teary laughter that she's *the best* when she's sober.

"Do you really have to leave tomorrow?" she asks, taking the beer that he hands her.

"Sadly." He sighs. "The tour must go on."

"How long have you been on tour?"

He shrugs. "Going on nearly three weeks. It's kind of miserable. I mean, it's the opportunity of a lifetime! But I miss Eds. And I'm supposed to be on the road for another three months!" He picks at the label on his bottle. "I don't know. I just don't do so well without him. *Lame*, I know. Mock me if you must." He takes a sip of his beer.

"It might be a little bit lame," she says, soft. "But it's sweet, too."

"What about you?"

"Me?"

"Yes, you, Carmon Sandiego," he says, grinning. "You got yourself a lover?"
She snorts. "I wouldn't call him that. I have a boyfriend. He's . . . It's new. Honestly, I'm envious of you, Richie. You've got your partner in life. We aren't even thirty, and you've found the guy. And now you're out just—seeing the world. Or the county, I guess." She smiles.

It strikes Richie suddenly that Bev is sad.

"You're doing pretty well for yourself, Trashmouth," she says, dropping his gaze, and sipping her beer.

"You know," he says, "you're welcome to join me on my spectacular comedic journey."

"What?"

"You can come on the road with me. Hotels are paid for, and transportation. And you get my company 24/7!" The idea's just occurred to him, but suddenly he's certain it would be awesome. "Bev," he says, growing very solemn, "this is the chance to change your life."

She twists her lips in amusement. "Change my life by becoming your groupie?"

"My assistant, Bev. Obviously. Celebrities have assistants. It's a thing. I saw it on TV once."

"Is that so?" She downs the rest of her beer. "I think I'll have to pass, unfortunately. I like Chicago. And I don't really love working two mind-numbing, minimum wage jobs, but I've got plans. I'll figure it out. I've got Tom, too."

It's quiet.

The bar is starting to clear of people. Richie has no idea how late it is, but they've been there for at least a couple of hours. It might be time to end the night.

He doesn't want to, though.

He refuses.

"Do you know what it's time for?" He bangs his bottle on the table. "Dancing!"

"Ooh." She grins. "I like to dance."

"Do you tango?"

Her eyes go wide. "Tango?" She's delighted.

"I tango. I took a class with Eddie." He goes to the jukebox with her laughter following behind him. It takes him ten seconds to pick a song. He has to spend longer getting a quarter out of his pocket, but he manages. "Beverly!" He thrusts his hand into her face.

She claps a hand to her mouth to cover her snort when Like a Prayer by Madonna starts playing. "This is music to tango to?" she asks. But she takes his hand, and he sweeps her into his arms.

It's a mess, admittedly.

He took a class with Eddie, and while Eddie was a natural, Richie was more like a beached whale trying to mosh at a wedding. Or that's how Eddie put it. He has no lack of enthusiasm, though, and it's doubled by the beer he's downed, and, anyway, skill isn't important at two in the morning.

Bev laughs hysterically while he tries to tango his way through the bar with her.
They're both gasping for breath when they collapse at the bar after. That's when the bartender says it's last call. They order two last beers, and stay at the bar, sort of talking, and sort of enjoying good company.

He regales her with some perfected voices.

She's got a few of her own. Who knew that Bev was actually The Godfather? She can also sing the whole intro song for *Pinky and the Brain*, which is pretty much the greatest hidden talent ever.

They're kicked out of the bar at three.

Outside, she lights up again, and he shakes his head at her offer of a cigarette, but he ends up taking a drag from her cigarette.

"I live nearby," she says.

"I'll walk you."

Her sad, wistful smile is back again.

They don't talk on the walk.

And when her feet start to slow, he slows, too. "This is me." She comes to a stop at last, and nods her head at a brown, rundown building.

"You got a pen?" he asks.

Her surprise is visible in the light of the streetlamp, but she fishes a pen from the pocket of her uniform.

He takes her hand, pushes up the sleeve of her jacket, and writes his number on her forearm. "I don't have an email," he adds, "but Eds has got one." Under the number, he writes epkasbrak@yahoo.com as neatly as he can with a red ballpoint pen.

Her fingers curl slightly against his elbow while he writes.

"You're welcome to spam him with links to the dancing badger animation." He grins. "He loves it."

"I bet."

"Seriously, though." He caps her pan, and she pockets it, pushing her sleeve down, and touching a hand to her forearm, to where he wrote his number, and Eddie's email address. "He's going to be so psyched that I ran into you," he says.

She smiles. "Give him a kiss for me."

There's a pause.

She moves in first, pushing up on her tiptoes, and wrapping her arms around his neck. He hugs her. She's seems impossibly small in his arms, and there's a faint, sweet smell about her that must be from her perfume, and he kind of wants to pick her up, throw her over his shoulder, and carry her home to Eddie in L.A.

She makes a small, soft noise, dropping to her heels, and pulling back enough to look at him.

She's crying.
She smiles, though, and wipes at her cheeks. "I'm sorry." She sniffs. "It's stupid. I just—I had no idea how much I missed you until you were here. I'm just being silly, though." She shakes her head.

"I know the feeling," he admits. It's true. He had no memory she existed this time yesterday, but.

"I'll call you. I promise. We'll keep in touch this time."

He nods.

"Good luck with the rest of your tour."

He watches her walk away from him, fumble with her keys, and unlock the door of the building. She glances at him again. He gives her a thumbs up, which is dumb, but he's had a lot to drink, and he doesn't know what else to do.

"See you later, alligator," she says, raising her voice just slightly to cross the short, dark distance between them.

He grins. "In a while, crocodile."

And with one last little smile, she disappears into her building.

He sighs. He needs to get a move on, because it's three in the morning, and the rain is picking up again, and there's no reason to stand in the street in the dark by himself.

---

He tips his head back against the door of his hotel as soon as he shuts it. He's exhausted. He kicks off his shoes and shrugs off his jacket and his hoodie and his t-shirt and stumbles his way out of his jeans, falling onto the bed in only his boxers.

He could fall asleep just like that with his legs dangling off.

He doesn't, of course.

He grabs the phone, dialing a nine to make a call out of the hotel, and punches in the number for home sweet home in L.A. Eddie will probably be asleep. He'll get to hear Eddie's clear, even voice on the machine, though, and he'll leave a message, and that'll be enough for now.

He picks up, though. "Hello?" His voice is thick with sleep.

"Hey, babe," Richie says.

"Rich." There's a kind of relief in the way Eddie says his name. "Is everything okay? I was worried when you hadn't called by midnight my time. I told myself you were just having a night on the town, but I had visions of you getting hit by the bus. You're okay, though?"

"I'm fine. Kind of drunk? I'm sorry I didn't call earlier."

"It's okay."

"I ran into somebody when I went for dinner after the show, and we ended up going for drinks. I only just got back to the hotel. You won't believe it, though; Eds, you won't believe who I ran into."

"John Belushi."
"That would've been fucking awesome. He would have been like *hey, Richie*, and I would've been like *fuck! John Belushi! I thought you were dead!* and that's when I would have learned that ghosts are real. That would have been the best night ever."

"Well, who was it really?"

"Bev."

He can almost hear the wrinkle in Eddie's brow when he says, "who?"

"Beverly Marsh. We were friends with her back when we were kids in Derry, remember? Red hair? Pretty? She used to wear a key around her neck, remember?"

"I . . . you know, I think I do. I remember."

"She was the waitress at the diner I went to for dinner."

"Cool."

"She's awesome. I mean, I remember that she was awesome when we were kids, but she's *still* awesome. And it's, like, I have no idea how I haven't thought about her in years. She moved to live with her aunt in Chicago when we were thirteen, remember? But. Still. It's Bev. I can't believe I just fucking forgot about her."

"I don't think about Derry much anymore," Eddie says.

"Me, neither."

"How is she? Bev?"

"Fine. She . . . I gave her our number. Your email, too. I want to keep in touch with her."

"That sounds nice." Eddie's voice is growing steadily sleepier.

"I should let you go," Richie says. "It's late. And you've got to be at work in, like, six hours."

"Okay."

Eddie's soft, sleepy voice makes Richie's heart constrict.

"I miss you," Eddie says.

"I miss you, too."

"I tried to cuddle with a pillow, but it wasn't the same. The pillow didn't fart, or squish me in the middle of the night when it rolled over. And I didn't wake up with morning wood poking me in the back."

He smiles. "You've got Queeny at least."

"Gross. I don't want Queeny's morning wood poking me in the back."

"Good to know." Richie rolls onto his side to trap the phone even closer to his ear. "I'll cross bestiality off kinks to explore."

"You're the worst."
He grins. "I love you, too, sugarpuss."

Eddie doesn't reply. Richie can hear him breathing in, breathing out. It's a low, lovely sound, and familiar in a way that makes Richie ache with longing.

"I'll call earlier tomorrow. We can talk more. I have a lot to tell you."

"Okay."

"Goodnight, Eds."

Eddie sighs softly. "Goodnight, Richie."

Even after he hears the click that signals Eddie's hung up, it takes him a minute to reach over and hang up the hotel's phone. He winds up with his face pressed into the thin, over-washed bedcover. He thinks it'll be impossible to go to sleep when he misses Eddie so much, but it is late, and he is tired, and as soon as he musters the energy to turn off the lamp by the bed, he's asleep.

---

He wakes to a fucking splitting headache. Although the curtains by the window are glowing with gray morning light, the room is still pretty dark. The clock by the bed reads 5:17 a.m.

What the hell?

There's a pounding on the door.

Oh.

That's why he's awake. But. Who the fuck is knocking on his hotel room door at 5:17 in the morning? He sits up, and clutches at his head. He didn't drink that much. He's only been asleep for about five minutes, though, so that's probably why he feels like a piece of shit.

The knocking on the door hasn't stopped.

He pushes to his feet. Some shit better be fucking on fire. He tears the door open.

He blinks. "Bev?" He's hungover, exhausted, and bleary-eyed, and the light in the hallway of the hotel doesn't help. He's forced to squint at her, trying to adjust to the light. What the fuck is going on?

"You mentioned this was where you were staying," she says.

He nods. "Yeah." She's in jeans, a loose green shirt, and her same leather jacket, and she's got a duffel bag slung over her shoulder, and he has no idea why she's here.

"And when you were joking about getting star treatment, you said your room number."

He's kind of at a loss. "Sounds like something I'd do." He scratches at the back of his head. "Is something the matter? Or, um. Do you want to come in?" He turns to gesture at the inside of his room.

"I need to know if you were serious about your offer."

"My offer?"
"To come with you." She swallows. "I guess it probably was just a joke, or whatever. But I—I want to. I'm done with Chicago."

"Oh."

She looks away from him. "Shit. This was stupid, wasn't it?"

That's when he sees it.

His head is muddled, and that's why he doesn't really think before reaching out and tugging on the collar of her shirt to get a look at the angry red smudge that's peeking out. Something in his stomach goes tight at what he finds. The angry red smudge is the top of a nasty, swelling bruise that's at least the length of his hand and very obviously fresh.

He looks up, and she meets his gaze with a startlingly fierce expression.

He's got a lot of questions.

"Bus doesn't leave until ten," he says. "D'you want to come in? There's a bed. For you, I mean. I have a bed, and there's another bed you can take. Fuck. I'm really fucking tired."

She smiles. "I could use some sleep."

He steps back slightly to allow her in, and she takes the invitation, passing him, and bringing her duffel with her.

---

Richie remains bleary with lack of sleep when they leave the hotel in the morning, pick up coffee at Starbucks, and board the bus.

He hasn't planned what he'll tell the crew about Bev, but he wings it.

He introduces her and says she's a friend of his, and he says he hopes it's cool if she joins the group on the road, because, he jokes, he's decided he's officially famous enough for an assistant.

Nobody has a problem with it, thankfully.

They get on the road, and it sinks in slowly that this is happening, that the bus is trundling out of the city, and Bev is there on the bus, is coming, too, is smiling and laughing, sipping a coffee and talking to the crew and charming the lot of them.

"Hey." Carter sits beside Richie when Bev is talking to Donny. "I thought you were gay."

He stares. "I'm bi." He's way too tired for this conversation. "Why? What's up?"

"What's up? You say you've got a boyfriend, and, three weeks later, you bring that piece of ass on to be your assistant, and you want to know why I'm surprised? Really?" Carter is the MC, and he's good at his job, but he's an asshole. "I mean, you know I'm not one to judge! I'm just surprised you're getting yourself something on the side when usually you can't shut the fuck up about your guy at home."

"She's my friend."

"Sure." Carter smirks. "That mean it's cool with you if I go for it?"
He should probably say it's cool with him. Bev might want Carter's attention. He doubts it, but he should probably allow Bev to say so herself. He can't handle the look on Carter's face, though. Bev isn't a piece of ass, and it's not cool with Richie if Carter goes for it, and Richie didn't invite Bev to join the tour so she could deal with this motherfucker.

"Hey, baby," Carter says, smiling.

Bev is back.

"She's a lesbian." Richie looks at Bev. "You're a lesbian."

Bev doesn't miss a beat. "I am. Good to know that's how we're introducing me now."

"That's a shame." Carter sighs heavily. "You're a good-looking girl."

"Thanks." Bev's voice has gone slightly dry. "Donny says he needs to talk to you about tonight's venue."

Carter gets up. "No rest for the wicked." He leaves at last.

"I'm a lesbian?" Bev says, taking the seat by Richie.

"I panicked."

She smiles. "It's okay that I'm here, isn't it? It isn't going to cause trouble for you?"

"I am the trouble, baby. It's my middle name. I'm Richie Trouble Tozier."

"Sexy," she says.

He grins.

"For the record, I'm not a lesbian. But I'm not straight. I find it's easiest to say I don't conform to labels."

"Cool." He nods. "I'm a bisexual."

She pinches his cheek. "You're a cutie, is what you are."

"Hey! That's my line!"

They doze off after that, sort of talking, and sort of leaning into each other's sides, trying to make up for the sleep they lost last night.

Bev fits easily into life on the road.

She's easy to get along with, and she doesn't mind having a shitty sleep schedule, and she's ready to help with anything: talking to a concierge at a hotel about issues with rooms and helping the driver navigate traffic at two in the morning while everyone else sleeps and buying cold medicine by the bucket when three of the guys get sick at once.

Richie throws around new jokes with her, too.

He never does ask her about why she came, or how she got that bruise he saw only once.

He figures if she wants him to know, she'll tell him.
He mentions the bruise to Eddie, of course. "I think the guy she was with was hurting her," he says. "And she must've been living with him, and she had no where else to go." It makes anger burn in the pit of his stomach, but he can't change what's already happened.

She's far away from the guy now.

Things are better on the road with Bev for company.

He's happier.

It helps, too, that reviews for the show only grow more glowing with time. If somebody on the bus doesn't tell Richie first, Eddie will read the reviews to him on the phone. Mostly, the reviews are praising the headliner, but a lot of them mention Richie, too.

"They like me!" he exclaims. "They really like me!"

Apparently, he's a hilariously honest storyteller and delightfully vulgar and a belly-aching good time. According to a review in the Boston Globe, he's a refreshingly eager presence on stage whose energy and enthusiasm is infectious. And, to his delight, he's more than worth the price of admission.

It's everything he could have dreamed.

But, as happy as he is, he can't help but miss Eddie.

Sometimes, he goes a whole day without even thinking about Eddie, and when he's reminded of him, it's like a punch to the gut. He forgets about Eddie, and Bev finds the nose trimmer box in his suitcase, and he says it's a joke present from Eddie. And, suddenly, he misses his boyfriend so badly he thinks he wants to cry.

Or there are times when he's thinking of Eddie, and he can't picture him.

His mind is blank.

It makes him panic, and he fumbles to get his wallet, to find the old, crinkled photo of Eddie, and he stares at it desperately, drinking in the sight of Eddie, and reassuring himself silently that he didn't really forget what Eddie looked like. He could never forget the brown of Eddie's hair or the shape of his scowl or the smattering of freckles on his cheeks.

"I think I'm losing my mind, Eds," he confesses, the phone pressed tight to his cheek. "I swear, sometimes I think I can't remember what you look like."

"Me, too," Eddie says.

"Yeah?"

"You know how Tony taped you when you performed at that business execs dinner? Well, I got a copy from him. I watch it—I watch it almost every night, because it calms me down."

Richie's chest aches. "Is your anxiety bad again?"

"It's like my head tricks me into thinking I'm forgetting about you, and it triggers a panic attack. Dr. Rhys says we can try changing my prescription, but I don't know that it'll help. It's—it's like how I know I can breathe, but somehow I still have asthma attacks; I know you're coming home soon, and you love me, and everything is going to be okay again soon, but I just get panicky that
you won't come home, that I'll lose you, and—"

"I'll be home in two weeks," Richie says, desperate.

"I know."

"And if you need me to come home now, I can. I can finish early. I can—"

"No," Eddie says, firm. "No. I can wait two weeks. Let's do this right. Just—don't forget about me, okay?" He gives a small, watery laugh.

"I could never forget my Eddie Spaghetti."

"Good."

"My little gay peanut."

"Your what now?"

"My tasty vanilla bean ice cream banana split."

Eddie laughs softly. "What?"

Bev emerges from the bathroom. "Is this your weird way of having phone sex?" she asks, standing in her pajamas, drying her hair with a towel, and looking at Richie with bright, amused eyes.

"Bev says hello," Richie says, grinning.

"Hi, Eddie!"

He can hear the smile in Eddie's voice when he replies as loudly as he can, "Hi, Bev!"

Soon they'll all be together.

Soon.

He assumes that Bev is returning to L.A. with them. Why wouldn't she? It surprises him, then, when they're loading up the bus, and she brings it up.

"You know there's something we haven't talked about," she starts.

"How unfair it is that lizards can get their tails chopped off and just, like, grow a whole fucking new one again, but we can't even regrow a measly pinky finger?"

She eyes him. "No."

"Fine." He sighs. "What do you want to talk about?"

"Tour is over after three more shows." She hands her duffle to him. "And I was thinking I might come to L.A. with you when it's over? I know we haven't talked about it, so I hope this doesn't take you totally by surprise. Thing is, I, um. I've used up most of the money I had when I joined the tour, and even if I get a job as soon as we get to L.A., it'll take me a couple of months to save up for a place to live, and I—"

"I thought you were going to stay with us," Richie says.

She blinks.
"I already told Eddie to get the guest bedroom ready for you. You have to stay with us. He got new sheets just for you, and everything."

"I don't need new sheets," she says, biting her lip, and failing to hide her smile.

"Trust me, Raggedy Ann." He throws an arm over her shoulder. "You're going to love the city of los angeles."

"Do you know I'm actually pretty excited about it?" She reaches up to intertwine their fingers. "Starting over again? It should scare the hell out of me that I've got almost no money, and no back up plan, but I just . . ." She shrugs. "I don't know. It's like I'm thirteen again when I'm with you. I'm brave again."

"I have that effect on people," he says, matter-of-fact. "I'm inspirational."

Four days later, they have their last show in NYC.

That's it.

They're finished with their big, three-month comedy tour across the country.

Carter says they should stick around the city for a while. "This is my turf," he brags. He says he'll introduce them to some people who can really make shit happen for Richie.

"Sorry, chum," Richie says, "I've already got my plane ticket home to see my man."

And, for a split-second, he forgets the name of his man.

What the hell?

His chest tightens with panic.

"Yeah," Carter says, "I'm aware your gay ass is whipped by Eddie fuckin' Spaghetti!" He says the name in a silly, high-pitched voice and sighs right after, shaking his head. "Well, if you ever do want to make it in this business, you give me a call." He talks like he's more famous than Richie, when, in reality, he's spent the last three months just being the guy who introduces the real, featured comedians. "You're pretty alright for a homo."

Richie should probably be offended.

He's learned to ignore Carter's bullshit, though, and, besides, this is the last time he'll have to put up with it.

He's done.

He's going home again.

To Eddie.

Eddie, Eddie, Eddie.

"You know," Bev says, looking at Carter like she doesn't know exactly what he is, but he's gross, and he's something she's stepped in, "you're an actual piece of shit."

It's a really good thing the tour is over.
There's a chance if it had gone any longer, Bev would have socked Carter in the face.

Instead, they board a plane at JFK only a few hours later fly couch, nonstop to L.A., and they'll get into LAX in the middle of the night, sure, but Richie isn't going to wait to leave for a reason as stupid as wanting to arrive at a more "reasonable" hour.

He doesn't love flying, because tiny airplane seats aren't meant for tall, gangly men.

He's too happy to care about that right now.

He squeezes his way into his seat, and he slumps into Beverly, letting his head fall on her shoulder. "Goodnight," he says. If he falls asleep, time will move faster, and he'll be home in a jiff.

---

It's four in the morning when they make it home to his apartment at last. He knows Eddie will be asleep. He fishes the keys from his pocket, and his mind is moving a mile a minute, trying to decide how he'll wake him up.

Is he going to tiptoe in, crawl on top of Eddie in bed, and yell his name into his ear?

Throw open the door and scream?

Turn on the lights of the bedroom, drop his coat, and announce at the top of his lungs in his best smoker's voice, grandmamma, it's me, Anastasia?

He never does decide, because he walks in, and Eddie is sleeping on the sofa.

Richie's heart leaps happily into his throat at the sight.

He's dressed entirely in Richie's clothing: he's got on Richie's green socks and Richie's boxers and one of Richie's old, worn Nirvana t-shirts. He must have been trying to wait up for them. He's sitting, and he's going to have a crick in his neck from the way it's bent backwards while he snores.

Queeny is sleeping with her head on his lap.

At the opening of the door, she perks up, and when she realizes it's Richie, she fucking throws herself off the couch to get to him.

"Hey, girl!" he says, trying to keep his voice as quiet as possible. "Hey, baby!"

On the couch, Eddie groans softly. "Queeny," he says, irritated. He rubs at the back of his neck.

He hasn't properly woken up.

Good.

Richie gives Queeny a kiss, and starts for Eddie, shooting a glance over his shoulder at Bev. She smiles, and closes the door behind them, and he's got his eyes on Eddie, because, really, he's only ever had eyes for Eddie. He crouches in front of Eddie, and that's when Eddie seems to catch up.

His eyes go wide.

"Hey, babe," Richie says, grinning.

He chokes. "You—!" He surges towards Richie, grabs him and hugs him and squeezes him tightly.
Richie just presses his smile into Eddie's neck. Eddie's wonderfully warm, and he smells like lotion, and he's hugging Richie fiercely, clinging to him like a fucking spider monkey. Richie is finally back where he belongs.

And when Eddie wraps his legs around Richie's waist to hold him even closer still, he thinks he might fucking burst with happiness.

Queeny is pressed in close to them, too, nosing at Richie's back happily, and whining.

"I missed you," Eddie says, and the word is thick with emotion.

Richie grins against Eddie's neck, and can't help but smack a kiss to the skin. He tilts his head up, and kisses the underside of Eddie's jaw. He shifts, and he starts peppering loud, wet kisses all over his face, and he feels Eddie's body shake with giggles.

"I missed you, too!" Richie says.

Their eyes meet.


"My—"

He bends his head to bite at a nipple over the material of Eddie's stolen t-shirt, and that makes Eddie jerk against him with a laughing little exclamation of his name. "And I missed your belly," he continues. He ducks down further to hike up the t-shirt and burrow his face into Eddie's warm tummy and blow a raspberry that makes Eddie bend over with laughter.

He sighs, and decides he'll stay right here a while. He doesn't even care that his glasses are digging into his face. He could die right here, right now, and he'd die happy.

"Bev!" Eddie says.

"Hi, Eddie," Bev says, warm. "It's good to see you. And, I don't mean to alarm you, but I think you've got some kind of sea urchin stuck to your stomach."

Eddie's fingers comb through Richie's hair. "It's okay," he replies. "It's my pet."

Richie bites Eddie's stomach for that comment.

He doesn't actually move, though. He's very happy here, thank you. He turns his head to rest his cheek on Eddie's belly, though, and get an eye on Bev.

She's amused. "I'd hug you, but..."

"You can hug me!" Eddie holds his arms out to her.

She laughs, but she moves to bend awkwardly over Richie's body, and she hugs Eddie with Richie's head sandwiched in between them.

He's in a sandwich of his two favorite people, which is pretty fucking great.

Queeny barks loudly in Richie's ear, and Bev pulls away with a laugh to pet her, and to allow her to climb onto the sofa, to snuggle in close to her parents.
"I cleaned up the guestroom for you," Eddie says. "We've just been using the closet for extra storage space, but I emptied it, and the dresser is empty, too. Make yourself at home."

"Thanks, Eddie."

"I bought you some new sheets, too, and I washed them before I put them on."

She smiles. "You really didn't have to do all that."

"I wanted to." He scrapes his nails lightly against Richie's scalp. "I'm really happy you're here. I can't wait to show you around the city! You're going to love it."

"I'm excited," she says. "And I'm exhausted, so I think I'm going to head to bed. Also, I should probably get out of here before, you know, Richie remembers he missed your dick, too." She grins.

"I did!" Richie says. "How did you know?!"

She laughs.

"Guestroom is just down that hallway," Eddie says, pink. "Bathroom's on the right."

"Got it." She heads into the hallway, and out of sight.

Richie tilts his head up, pressing his chin into Eddie's stomach, and meeting his gaze, but the crack he was going to make about giving Eddie's dick a kiss is lost when he sees the tenderness in Eddie's gaze.

"You're home," Eddie says, like he just can't believe it's true.

He shifts up.

Eddie's hands cup his face, and the kiss is chaste at first, soft and sweet. His eyes fall closed, and he breathes out slowly, relishing in the scent and warmth and closeness of Eddie. Eddie's thumbs stroke his cheek, and he deepens the kiss.

Richie feels dazed when it's over, and Eddie rests his forehead on Richie's.

"Bed?" Eddie suggests.

He nods. "Bed." They get up together, and Eddie presses another sweet kiss to Richie's lips before he takes his hand, turning off the lamp by the sofa, and leading him blindly down out of the room, down the hallway, and towards their bedroom.

---

They kiss again in the bedroom. It's dark. The lights from the street are making the curtain over the window glow faintly, though, and they can see each other in the shadows.

"You need to sleep," Eddie says.

"No."

Eddie pushes gently at Richie's chest. "Sit," he murmurs.

Richie sits on the edge of the bed with a sigh.
His heart swells with affection when Eddie takes off his glasses for him, setting them aside. Quietly, they undress him. He shrugs off while jacket while Eddie kneels down in front of him to unlace his shoes, to take off Richie's shoes, and peel off his socks, too. He presses a kiss to Richie's knee before he rises up again. Richie falls backwards onto the bed, unbuckling his jeans, and lifting his hips to pull them down, and Eddie tugs them the rest of the way off.

He sits up. "C'mere."

"Shirt," Eddie says.

Richie tugs his shirt off. "C'mere," he whines.

Eddie comes closer, and Richie hugs him tightly, sighing into a kiss.

He imagined that he'd be on Eddie like white on rice as soon as he got to the apartment, but he's exhausted, and, honestly, he thinks he would be content to spend the rest of his life just holding Eddie close, kissing and kissing him.

"Do you need to brush your teeth?"

He smiles. "No."

Queeny had padded into the room after them, and she chooses that moment to jump onto the bed, whining, and nosing at Richie's back.

"Hey, Queeny Poo," he says, petting her.

"She missed you."

"Well, she'll never have to again." He leans into Eddie. "From here on out, I'm making it big at home." Eddie's hands are playing with his hair again. "It's L.A. or bust."

They get properly into bed eventually. Queeny settles at the end of the bed, and Eddie pulls up the covers, and Richie rolls until he's half on top of Eddie. He's got a leg thrown over one of Eddie's legs and his arm curled around Eddie's waist and his head on Eddie's chest. He can hear Eddie's heartbeat. It's calm and even, and it lulls him to sleep in a matter of minutes.

---

Bev's first day in L.A. is one for the books. None of them actually make it out of bed in the morning. They make up for it, though.

They go down to Santa Monica Boulevard for brunch in the afternoon, and they gorge on food family style, stuffing themselves shamelessly with lobster eggs benedict and a veggie supreme omelet and biscuits with gravy and chocolate chip pancakes and chicken with waffles.

And, after, they take Bev down the street to their old, favorite bar for the evening.

They talk about everything that Bev has to do in L.A., and they do shots, and they dance all of them together.

Bev is drunk on the walk home when she throws her arms over their shoulders and says, "my boys!" before she tugs them closer to smack wet kisses to their cheeks.

To be fair, Richie is drunk, too.
Also, Eddie.

They're drunk, and they're happy, and they're reunited.

Bev fits seamlessly into their lives.

In the months that follow, things just fall into place like that's how it's always been meant to be.

She gets a job quickly; it's at a local LGBT bookstore that's looking for someone with enthusiasm for "creating a community" at the library. They love Bev. She's friendly, easy to talk to, and creative at coming up with various community events for a bookstore to host.

After a couple of months, she mentions that she should probably start to look for a place to live.

"There's no rush," Eddie says.

"We like having you around," Richie says.

In the end, she doesn't get her own place. Why should she? She insists on giving them money towards rent, though, and she starts helping pay utilities, and the guestroom officially becomes her bedroom.

("I guess I'm now an official, licensed third wheel," she says, surveying the fresh green paint on the walls of her bedroom.

"Congratulations," Richie says.

She sighs. "I don't think I can join the union until you guys tie the knot, though, and it becomes really weird that I live with you." She eyes him. "You got any plans for that?" There's a smile in her voice.

He shrugs. "Eddie says the California Supreme Court is going to shut that shit down ASAP."

It's awesome that San Francisco is suddenly, happily allowing same sex marriage, but people are already up in an arms about the deterioration of good family values, and Eddie says it's only a matter of time before the city is forced to stop.

"Besides," he says, "why marry the cow when you get the milk for free?"

She snorts. "Come on, Fabio. We're supposed to meet your cow for lunch in half an hour.")

It's almost a year to the date that Bev moved in with them that they celebrate Pride with her.

She's never been.

They missed the celebration last year when Richie was on the road, but they're going to make up for it this year.

She makes their outfits for them.

She doesn't simply have a mind for design; she's good at actually making the clothes, too, at sewing and at fitting pieces together so seamlessly Richie couldn't have paid for better.

She makes a short-sleeved, button up shirt out of an actual rainbow flag for Eddie, and she buys pastel pinks short shorts for him that match the pastel pink bowtie she found for him.
She uses a flag for Richie, too. She decks him in a tank top that's made from the bisexual pride flag, cargo shorts that she made herself from dozens of blue, pink, and purple squares painstakingly sewn into a checkered bisexual pattern, and a pink, blue, and purple Hawaiian print button-up that she found at Goodwill. Overall, he's a big, clashing mess of loud bisexual pride.

For herself, she's got a rainbow tube top, a flowing, ankle length pink, blue, and purple skirt, and a headband with a big, tie-dye flower sewn on.

"How do I look?" she asks.

"Beautiful," Eddie says. "Then again, you'd look beautiful in a trash bag."

They spend the whole weekend at the festival, going to shows, drinking, partying in the streets, and, of course, joining the parade on Sunday.

"I think I've slept about three of the last 48 hours," Bev says, sprawling in the back of the car.

"Regret it?" Eddie asks.

There's a smile in her soft, sleepy voice. "Nope."

"Never!" Richie says, and he drums his hands on the wheel.

"You know," Bev says, "my aunt told me when she caught me kissing a girl in high school that I was just doing it for attention. It's been like that my whole life. It was like that when I was a kid, too. Everyone's always seemed to think they knew me better than I do. And, you know, the worst was when Tom demanded to know how many people I'd slept with, and he found out I'd been with a girl, and he laughed, and joked about every girl wanting to experiment, and how he wasn't mad about it, because *lesbian sex doesn't really count.*"

"Tom's a dick," Richie says.

"He was."

Eddie reaches across the console to take Richie's hand.

And when Eddie decides three weeks later that it's time for them to get their own cellphones, he says Bev has to get a phone on their plan, too.

(They get RAZR flip phones, because Eddie's research says Motorola is the best. It's great. Richie looks totally like a spy when he flips his phone open and puts it to his ear and uses his best spy voice.)

"Welcome to the family, Bev," Richie says.

"It's an honor," she replies.

"I hope you're excited to start having annual doctor visits. I'm told it's considered *preventative* medicine. You don't have to do anything, though. Eddie will make the appointment, and he'll leave sticky notes around the house to remind you about it, and, also, he'll make a list of any suspicious freckles you have for you to give the doctor to have him check for cancer. It's the most fun you'll have all year, guaranteed."

She grins.

To celebrate their new family phone plan, they have brunch.
It's kind of become their thing.

They make an afternoon of bunch at least once a month, sharing their plates, and complaining about work, soaking in the sunshine, and enjoying living their best lives in Richie's favorite place in the world.

---

It isn't difficult to make a career in comedy in L.A. It's a city that's **known** for entertainment. There are plenty of venues for him to perform in.

Also, he joins a sketch comedy group with shows that sell out weekly.

That's where he really flourishes. He's always been great at improv, and there are plenty of opportunities for it with the sketch comedy group. Plus, he loves the group. They're fun to plan with, to perform with. They're fun to know, and he gets close with a lot of them.

He continues to perform fairly often at the Funnybone.

It's where he got his **start**.

His agent starts talking about having him record a special for TV, and that's a pipedream, but Richie has gotten pretty good at dreaming.

Tony announces that he's going to film Richie's next big show at the Funnybone, and he's going to submit the tapes to several TV stations, because he's convinced that Richie can make it bigger than just being a personality in L.A.

His next big show is happening in September.

He's going to be at the Funnybone for a weekend. He's got shows on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, and tickets are sold out within a week of going on sale. He's excited, because he's got really big plans for a brand new routine.

It's something that he started to plan on the road.

And when he mentioned the idea to Eddie, Eddie had encouraged him to go for it.

He's got to come up with a name to advertise the show, and he names it **The Real Richie Tozier**, because, well, he's going to be talking about himself for an hour. He's always been willing to include small pieces of himself in his routines, but he's never had a whole routine really be **about** himself before. He's ready to do it, though; he wants to do it, to talk about being bisexual, and what that's meant for him over the years, finding a label and fitting in and fumbling his way into successful, bisexual adulthood.

Bev helps him with a lot.

He wants to surprise Eddie with it, though, because Eddie's kind of featured in it.

"Should I be worried?" Eddie asks.

"I paint only with a painfully honest brush, Eds," he says.

Eddie narrows his eyes.

"No," Bev says, amused. "You shouldn't be worried. You know Richie thinks you hung the moon."
She's not wrong.

He thinks Eddie will like the show, and not just because he's featured in it, and because Richie does, in fact, sing his praises just a little bit. He'll like it because it's honest, and it's funny, and it's something an advocate for equality would appreciate. Or, at least, Richie really hopes that Eddie is going to like it, and appreciate it, and be proud of him for it.

---

(He doesn't realize the consequences of what he's doing. He's dredging up the past, but it doesn't feel like that. It's been so long, everything he plans to talk about seems almost idyllic to him: obstacles he's overcome, and he can look back on with the smile of someone who knows it's going to be okay in the end.

How was he to know that Eddie would see it differently?)

---

The show on Thursday is *spectacular*. Dozens of people want to talk to him after, to tell him how great it was, how real and relatable and hilarious, too. He's high on life that night.

Tony says the recording is "money making magic."

It makes him especially eager for Eddie to see the show on Friday.

Basically, the show is Richie talking about his life thus far.

He talks about growing up being that geeky bi asshole who didn't know that being bi was a thing, and how he was asking to get a punch in the face when he was a kid with his glasses and his teeth and the number of jokes about your mom he liked to make. He talks about college, about the GSA, and a guy who told him being bi meant being indecisive. He talks about after college, about living large in West Hollywood, and struggling to become a big radio star, about that time he was fired from the radio after he mentioned his boyfriend in front of his boss, and how it turns out funny doesn't discriminate, and he does a bit about what you'd be like if you had a cactus for a dick.

The stuff he's discussing is heavy, sure, but he's practiced at making anything funny.

He makes a beeline for the table where Eddie sits with Bev as soon as the show is over.

"Nailed it," Bev says, grinning. He hugs her.

"It was good," Eddie says.

That wasn't exactly the reaction Richie was hoping for.

Eddie hasn't even properly *looked* at Richie yet, choosing to stare at his beer. What's the matter? Why won't he look at Richie? Where's the kiss he always greeted Richie with? He glances at Bev, but she shrugs her shoulders at him.

Did Eddie dislike the show that much?

"How come, um." He meets Richie's gaze. "How come you never told me that?"

"Tell you what?"

"That you got fired." There's an edge in his voice. "You said you *quit*."

"Tell you what?"
"I'm . . . going to get a drink," Bev says, backing up, and seeming to disappear.

"It was a long time ago." Richie frowns. "Eddie, what—what's the big deal? It's not like everything didn't work out. I'd probably still just be a voice on the radio if I hadn't been fired. This? This is way better than that."

"You got fired from your job because of our relationship, and you never told me, and—instead, you lied to me about it, and you don't get what the big deal is?"

"Eds," Richie says.

"You're right." He waves a hand, refusing to look at Richie again and starting to get to his feet, pulling his jacket off the back of his chair. "Why would that bother me? It shouldn't. I'm being completely absurd. I don't want to know about important things that happen in your life."

"Eddie."

"I'm going to go. You should stay, though. Talk to your fans. I mean, they're the people you don't think twice about sharing your life with, so. I'll see you later."

"What the fuck?" Richie says.

Eddie is already on his way to the door, but he doesn't just get to walk away like that.

"Hey!" He chases after him. "Hold on." It isn't until they're out on the street that Richie catches up, that he grabs a hold of Eddie's arm. "We need to talk about this."

"Talk?" Eddie says, acidic. "You want to talk? You?"

"Yes, asshole. I do. I want to talk."

Eddie jerks his arm out of Richie's grip. But he doesn't try to walk away. He crosses his arms, purses his lips, and glares coldly at Richie.

"Okay." Richie blows out a breath. "Why are you mad right now?"

"Why am I mad right now?"

"Why am I mad right now?"

"Yes!"

"Why am I mad right now?"

"Yes!"

"I'm mad because you never fucking tell me shit! You—you just—and you never get mad at me. Why is that? Why is it that you just—?" He shakes his head. "I just never do anything that makes you mad? Seriously?"

Richie is incredulous. "I get mad at you."

"No, I get mad at you, and you get upset and you just ignore the issue. You just ignore me until I apologize for getting mad at you, and we move on. You never start it. How is that possible? How is it possible that you've never had a reason to be mad at me?"

"You're mad that I . . . don't get mad at you?" Richie frowns. "That we, what, don't fight enough? Eddie. Come on. I love you, but—"
"The fact that you love me can't possibly mean I don't piss you off sometimes!"

"You're pissing me off right now!" he exclaims. "What the fuck? I can't believe you're mad at me because I don't get mad at you enough!"

"I am mad at you because you never take anything fucking seriously!" Eddie says, breath coming fast. "And when something is serious, you deal with it on your own, and you don't include me. I'm your boyfriend, Richie! We've been together since we were fucking kids! If we were straight, we'd have gotten fucking married by now! And, still, you won't even fucking tell me when you get fired from your fucking job!"

"It was years ago!"

"That just means you've been lying to me for years!"

"I haven't been lying to you for years! It's not like I get up every morning and think, bwahaha, today seems like another good day not to tell Eddie I was fired. I lied to you ONCE a long time ago!"

"Lies of omission are lies, Richie."

He throws up his hands. "I don't—" he splutters. "I'm sorry, okay? I'm sorry I didn't tell you. If I could do it over again, I would tell you."

"Bullshit."

"Bullshit? What the fuck is that supposed to mean? You don't think I'm—"

"It means apology not accepted."

Richie gapes.

And before he can think of how he is he supposed to respond to that, Eddie has spun on his heel like the drama fucking queen he is, and started off down the street.

He thinks about running after him again. But what's the point? Clearly, Eddie wants to be mad at him.

He goes back into the club. It's loud. He feels disconnected from everything happening around him, from the talking and the laughter and the buzz of people just having a good fucking time.

"Rich, buddy!" The manager of the club is heading for him with a big ass grin. "There you are. I was looking for you. There's somebody I want you to meet."

"I—" He shakes his head. "Not right now."

Bev is sitting at the table they abandoned so quickly, sipping a drink, and smiling at a woman who's taken Eddie's seat.

"You're going to love this guy," insists the manager.

Richie lets himself get dragged off. Whatever. This isn't exactly the night he'd envisioned, but, apparently, he doesn't have any better options right now.

---
By the time Richie makes it home, Eddie has curled up to sleep on the couch. He's in his pajamas, and he's got the blanket tucked up right under his chin. It makes Richie feel like a piece of shit.

"I'm surprised he didn't take the bedroom, and lock you out," Bev says.

Richie isn't.

Eddie probably figured Richie would pound on the door until Eddie opened it. Richie's never slept on the sofa a day in his life, and he's never, ever going to. If Eddie is the one who's pissed, Eddie can sleep on the couch.

"You going to wake him up?"

"Why?"

She raises her eyebrows. "I don't know. To talk?"

"It's two in the morning." He tugs off his shoes. "I'm too fucking tired for another talk."

Bev doesn't argue with him. If her judgment is written on her face, he doesn't know it, because he makes a point not to look at her. He heads to his room, and he goes to bed.

---

He wakes up earlier than usual to the smell of breakfast. It's not like he was getting a great night's sleep. He couldn't get comfortable. And if he's smelling breakfast, that means Eddie is awake. Eddie is really only good at cooking breakfast dishes.

He's got his back to Richie when Richie comes slowly, reluctantly into the kitchen.

"Morning," Richie says.

Eddie doesn't bother turning around.

Richie sighs, and sits on a stool at the counter, rubbing his eyes. "I don't want to fight any more." He stares at Eddie's back, willing him to turn.

"Me, neither."

"Does that mean we can stop? Please? I'm sorry about everything."

Eddie moves, revealing the omelets that he's cooking, and opens a cabinet, taking a mug, and going to pour a cup of coffee. Richie watches, silent. He doesn't know what to think when Eddie places the mug of coffee in front of him. The gesture is kind, forgiving. But. The look on Eddie's face isn't. His expression is grim, and there's a hard, determined look in his eyes.

"What's it going to take?" Richie asks. "For you to forgive me? What do I need to do?"

"I'm not mad at you anymore," Eddie says.

He's suspicious. "Have you told that to your face?"

"I want you to go to therapy."

He blanches. "What?"
"I'm not mad," Eddie says, "but I need you to do this for me and for yourself. It's not healthy to keep everything bottled up inside. You need to talk to someone. If you won't talk to me, I want you to talk to a therapist. Just." He sighs. "Try it, and I'll forgive you for lying to me."

"I am not going to therapy," Richie says. "I don't need to! Are you serious? I'm not keeping things bottled up inside! I didn't tell you one little thing years ago, and—"

"Rich."

"You're the one whose mother fucked with his head for his whole fucking childhood! You go to therapy!" It's low, but he's on the defensive.

Eddie doesn't bat an eye. "I've dealt with my issues with my mother. I've put physical, mental, and emotional distance between us. I talk to her once a month, and she knows the topics of conversation I will not entertain, and I see her once a year on her birthday. If you recall, I came up with this plan to let her be in my life in this diminished, healthier way after I talked to a counselor at UCLA. A therapist." He crosses his arms.

"I'm not going to therapy."

"Yes, you are."

"Therapy is for fucking crazy people!"

"That's one of the most ignorant, insulting things you've ever said. Therapy is important, and it's healing, and it helps a lot of people. I'm a nurse; I think I'd know."

"Well, I'm not going."

Eddie crosses his arm. "Yes, you are."

"No," Richie says. "I'm not."

He narrows his eyes at Richie. "Bev!" he yells, turning on his heel, and heading for her bedroom.

"Hey, no!" Richie says, wide-eyed. "No way! You don't get Bev!"

"Beverly!"

He races after Eddie. "Bev is on my side! BEV! Don't listen to a word he fucking says!"

Beverly's bedroom door is locked. Eddie pounds on it, saying they need to talk. Richie shoves him aside to pound on it, too, and to tell Bev that Eddie is out of his fucking mind, and Bev needs to set him straight. From inside the room, there's a groan.

"He thinks I'm deranged!"

"That's not what I'm saying! Bev! I need you to tell Richie that—"

"Both of you need to fuck off!" Bev shouts. "It's, like, six in the morning! And if you're having a marital spat, there is no way I'm getting in the middle of that at ANY time!"

Well, fine.

Richie eyes Eddie in the shadowy, narrow hallway.
"I just want you to try it."

"No." He shakes his head. "No way. I should've told you about getting fired, but it was years ago, and I'm fine, and you're fine, and nobody is going to therapy. End of discussion."

He isn't going to budge on this.

And if that means that Eddie insists on sleeping on the couch for a week, fine. He can sleep on the couch. Richie will sleep just fine by himself in their giant, fluffy California King, thank you very much.

---

The therapist has an infuriatingly calm expression, sitting on the sofa with her ankles crossed primly, and her hands in her lap.

"Is the box of tissues for when I cry?" Richie asks.

She smiles kindly at him. "Why don't you tell me about yourself?"

"My name is Richie Tozier. I'm hilarious. Personally, and professionally. I'm a Pisces. And, I don't mean to brag, but I recently took a quiz on the Internet, and I discovered that if I were yogurt, I would be key lime pie flavor because I'm cool under pressure, refreshing, and little bit daring."

"Can you tell me why you're here?"

"My boyfriend."

She raises her eyebrows.

"We got in a fight. He's mad about something that happened a million years ago, and he refuses to forgive me until I go to therapy to talk about my issues."

She nods. "Alright. And what are your issues?"

"My boyfriend is mad about something that happened a million years ago, and he refuses to forgive me until I go to therapy to talk about my issues." He smiles. "Also, I'm allergic to shellfish."

"I see. Can you tell me more about what happened a million years ago?"

"I'd love to," he says, leaning forward slightly. "You're going to take my side in this. I got fired, okay? And, bear in mind, this happened years ago. Like I have a new job. And it's a better job! Honestly, getting fired was one of the best things that ever happened to me! But, at the time, I didn't tell Eddie. I just told him I quit. And it wasn't a big deal. But he came to my show the other night, and a part of my new routine mentions getting fired way back then, and I'd never gotten around to telling him about it, and he was pissed. That's it. That's why I'm here right now. Now. You tell me. Who's the crazy one in this scenario?"

She hums. "Why didn't you tell him?"

"Why—?" He throws up his hands. "What's it matter?!"

"It matters because it's why you're here. Right? You're here because your boyfriend is upset that you didn't tell him. So. Let's talk about it. Why didn't you tell him? Were you embarrassed?"

"No." He shakes his head. "It wasn't like that. I wasn't fired because of me. I mean, it was because
of me, but I didn't do anything wrong. I got fired 'cause my boss was a fucking homophobic asshole, and the moment he learned I had a boyfriend, he wanted me gone."

"Oh." Her gaze is sympathetic. "I'm sorry."

"Nah." He waves a hand. "It's fine. I got over it." He makes a face and says in his best, most pompous French accent, "Je m'en fous! I don't have time for your petty, puritan homophobic vibes!" He leans back again in his seat. "The point is that it's ancient fucking history. I'm better off."

"I'm glad." She smiles. "You haven't answered my question, though. Why didn't you tell your boyfriend that you were fired?"

He scoffs. "Because!" Really, why is this such a big deal? "He didn't need to know. I was the one who got fired. It was my problem to deal with."

She tilts her head. "You're in a relationship. If he were fired, you wouldn't consider that your problem? You wouldn't want to know?" Her gaze is soft, knowing.

"Is this you explaining to me why he's mad? I get why he's mad. I mean, I don't think he has the right to be so mad that I have to go to therapy to make him feel better about it, but I get that he's hurt I didn't share my burdens with him, or whatever."

She seems to consider him. "Why don't you tell me about your boyfriend?"

"Eddie?"

"Eddie." She nods. "Can you tell me about Eddie?"

"Okay." If she wants him to talk about Eddie, he'll talk about Eddie. And if she thinks it'll get him to talk, she's right, and she'll regret it, because he can talk about Eddie for days. The hour will be up in no time. "He's about yea high." He holds up his hand. "Very gay. Adorable."

He's right. The hour is up in what seems like much less time, and Eddie will be thrilled to learn that Richie's therapist now knows every minute detail about him.

---

He finds Bev smoking on the balcony in one of his t-shirts over a pair of Eddie's boxers.

She's trying to quit. It's a process, she says. There's currently a photograph of a disgusting, diseased lung on the fridge that's framed in a heart she drew with lipstick.

"How was therapy?" she asks.

He cracks open his beer. "Fine. I talked about Eddie for an hour."

"You going to go again?"

"I told Eds I'd go three times." He sighs. "The things I do for that man. And does he appreciate it? Actually, yes. He gave me a blowjob when I told him I'd go to therapy."

She smiles.

"And, honestly, it's not like I don't know how to talk."

"You are Richie Trashmouth Tozier."
He eyes her. "Do you think I should have told Eddie about getting fired?"

"Baby, I am not the person to ask." She shakes her head. "If I ever give you advice, do the opposite."

They sit out there a little while longer, smoking and drinking and shooting the breeze.

---

The therapist asks Richie to tell her about his childhood, about his parents. "Ooh, boy." He rubs his hands together. "This is the part where you tell me everything's my mother's fault, right?" He's more than happy to give her the deets on good ol' Mr. and Mrs. Tozier.

It takes up most of the hour.

Things circle back to Eddie at the end, though.

"What do you love about Eddie?" she asks. "He's in almost all of your childhood stories. He's obviously an important person in your life. Why is that? What draws you to him?"

"To be real with you, I don't remember, like, anything from growing up that doesn't include Eddie."

She nods.

"He's my man."

"And what do you love about your man?"

He shrugs. "He's cute. He's fierce. He's smart. He stands up for me, and he, like, believes in me. He's funny." It's weird; he's never thought about why he loves Eddie.

"He loves you," she says.

"Who wouldn't?"

"And you love him, too."

"Obviously."

She smiles. "Does he know you love him?"

"What?" He frowns. "Yes. He's my boyfriend. We've been together since forever. He lives with me."

"Have you told him you love him?"

This is ridiculous. "Yes," he says. "I have told my boyfriend of over twelve years that I love him."

That's when she starts talking about love languages, or some such shit. He doesn't know why. He isn't here for that. He doesn't need help loving Eddie. If there's one thing he can do, it's love his favorite human being.

Honestly, he's offended.

He's more than grateful when the hour is up. "See you in a week, boss!" Her smile is amused, and he shoots a little finger gun at her before he's out the door.
He can't make himself stop thinking about it. They're in the kitchen, and they're making dinner together like always, and they're having a nice, normal evening. His mind keeps circling back to the way his therapist had questioned him, though.

Eddie is telling a story about fighting with insurance on behalf of a patient.

Richie puts the sauce on simmer. Eddie is chopping up mushrooms, but that doesn't mean he can't accept a hug. Richie wraps his arms around Eddie from behind, interrupting him, and rests his chin on top of Eddie's head.

"Are you listening to me?" Eddie asks.

"Yes."

He hums skeptically in reply, but he tilts his head out from under Richie's chin, and offers his cheek up instead.

Richie smacks a kiss to his cheek. "You know you're the cutest?"

"Someone did tell me that once."

He kisses him again and again and again. "Cute, cute, cute."

He presses his nose into Eddie's cheek.

Eddie stops cutting the mushrooms and reaches for a dishtowel, wiping off his hands. He turns more fully into Richie's arms. Before Richie can give him a big wet kiss on the lips, he takes Richie's glasses. "I'm washing these tonight," he says. He wipes the lens on the dishtowel, and, when he's done, he leans up on his tiptoes to press soft kisses to the indents on the sides of Richie's nose before he slips the glasses on him again.

"I love you," Richie says. See? He says it.

Eddie smiles. "I love you, too." He kisses Richie softly, pulling way before Richie can deepen it, and giving him a nudge. "Sauce," he says. And he launches into his story again.

---

He tells the therapist that this session is going to be it for him. "This is the day we say goodbye." He's paying for this shit out of pocket, you know, and, also, Eddie only made him promise to go to three, and, look at that, this is magic number three.

"Okay," she says. "Well, I'm always here to talk."

"That's why we love you."

She smiles. "Since you won't be in again, can I offer you some advice?"

"Go for it."

"You said you're here because Eddie wants you here. He was upset that you didn't tell him you were fired, and he feels that's indicative of a deeper-seated issue. After everything you've told me, I think I have a suggestion for how you can start to address what's upsetting him."

She crosses her ankles. "Talk to your boyfriend, Richie."

"What?"

"Talk about everything you want to say, and don't."

He stares. "I don't know if you know this, but I talk a lot. Inability to talk is not a problem I have. I could make conversation with a turd." Has she really not picked up on that yet? "And, obviously, Eddie isn't a turd. I can talk to him. I do talk to him."

"You didn't tell him you were fired from your job."

"That was one thing one time!"

"Is that it, though? Is that really the only thing you've stopped yourself from telling him?"

"Yes!"

"I don't mean secrets, or if you've ever lied to him. I'm talking about the things you're thinking, or feeling." She leans forward slightly. "Richie, it seems to me you've shaped your relationship with Eddie into one that mirrors your relationship with your parents." She pauses.

"My relationship with Eddie is nothing like my relationship with my parents."

"Your parents were around physically when you were growing up, but they weren't truly present. You were never comfortable enough with them to talk to them, to say everything you wanted to say. That's why you developed your voices, and why you're able to make everything into a joke."

"I make everything into a joke because I'm hilarious," he says.

"You said your parents never missed dinner with you. Right? Now I'm going to make an assumption. Correct me if I'm wrong. You never miss dinner with Eddie."

"I—" He opens his mouth, and closes it. "What the fuck does that have to do with anything?"

"The fact that your parents were always physically present was, in your understanding, a sign that they loved you," she says. "Therefore, it's important to you that you're always physically present in your relationship with Eddie. To you, that's proof that you love him."

"You say that like you think I don't love him," Richie says, angry. "I do. There's nothing in this whole fucking world I love even half as much as I love that little, uptight bastard!"

"Richie, I believe you when you say that you love him." Her voice is placating. "I promise. There's no doubt in my mind that you love him, and it sounds like he loves you, too. That isn't what I'm trying to say."

"What are you trying to say?"

"I'm trying to say that you've never, ever felt comfortable talking about your feelings. You'll talk to people about serious things when it has to do with them. If Eddie has an issue, you'll talk about it with him. But when it comes to your problems? You keep them to yourself. Your parents were present in your life, but they never talked with you about your fears or insecurities or hopes, or your problems, so you learned to keep those feelings to yourself."

He hesitates. "I—I talk about my feelings with Eddie."
"Sometimes," she says, "I'm sure. But can you tell me honestly that you always tell Eddie everything that you're thinking and feeling and wanting?"

He's quiet.

"And when he tries to talk about things, you shut it down. That's why you're here, isn't it? He's upset with you that you didn't share something very important with him." She pauses. "Richie, you struggle with talking to others about your feelings."

"I wrote an entire comedy routine about my life."

"I bet it was funny. Honest, even. But it wasn't about your feelings, was it? And if you talked about your feelings in it, they were feelings you'd already processed by yourself. Things you've worked through, and have found a way to make funny for other people."

He glares. "I talk about my feelings."

"You haven't talked about them with me." Her calm, unchanged demeanor is infuriating.

"Well, I talk about them with Eddie," he says, annoyed.

"Really?"

"I got him to date me, didn't I?" He crosses his arms. "I got him to live with me. Spend his life with me. That involved some exchange of feelings."

"There are more ways to say I love you than with words," she says, gentle. "I'm sure Eddie knows a lot of what you don't say. After all, this is the you that he's always known, that he's fallen in love with, and is used to loving."

"Okay." He shifts in his seat. "So? What's your point? You say I don't talk about my feelings with him, but you say he knows the things I don't talk about anyway. So . . . ? What is the point of this conversation?"

She considers him. "I want you to keep a journal."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I'm serious," she says, with a twist of amusement in her lips. "Keep a journal for a couple of weeks, and write your thoughts at the end of day. If you feel bad about anything that happens in a day, write it down. If someone does something that makes you feel any particular way, write it down. If you get hopeful about something, or fearful, write it down."

He eyes her. "Is it graded?"

"I won't ever look at it. This is for you, Richie. Consider it practice in articulating your feelings. And if you really don't want to continue our sessions, that's your choice. I want you to do this one last thing for me, though. Okay? Do you think you can?"

"I suppose." He sighs.

"Good." She smiles. "I'm going to give you my email, and after you've tried journaling for a couple of weeks, I want you to email me."

"Okay."
"Is there anything else you want to talk about?" She hands him a slip of paper with her email, and, to his amusement, she gives him a new, blank journal, too; it's one of those cheap, black-and-white composition notebooks. "You've paid for an hour." She smiles. "We've got plenty of time left today."

"Nope," he says, rising to his feet. "I've got to get started on this lil' puppy." He knocks his knuckles on his journal, and, giving her a salute, he leaves.

---

He taps his pen against the page for a solid ten minutes. He sighs. He asks Eddie if he'll do his homework for him.

But.

After a while, he tells himself that he's going to fill the page. He's going to take this seriously. He writes about Bev's awful taste in music. He writes about how many people would disagree with his therapist for saying Richie doesn't talk enough. He writes some jokes he's perfected.

He fills a page.

Over the course of two short, busy weeks, he discovers it really isn't difficult to fill a page.

He writes about how great dogs are. He writes that it bothered him when he heard a couple of guys at a club talking about how stupid his voices are. He writes a long, angry rant about Republicans. He writes that he likes when Eddie greets him by just tilting his head up casually in expectation of a kiss. He writes about looking into adoption on the Internet, because he thinks he would be good at raising a kid, but, actually, he admits, he would be terrible at it.

After the two weeks are done, he emails his calm, smarty-pants therapist.

Did it! he says.

He expects her to reply with a bunch of questions about how it made him feel, was it cathartic, doesn't he think it would be nice to say that stuff out loud to someone, etc. She doesn't. She sends him a reply fairly quickly, and it's a single, horrifying suggestion.

Show it to Eddie, she writes.

He glares at the email for a minute. But, honestly, this is really on him. He should have known she would pull some shit like that.

---

He takes the notebook into the kitchen with him in the morning. Eddie had gone for a run at the crack of dawn, and he's back, making them breakfast while the radio plays softly. He watches Eddie cooking for a moment.

It's Saturday. Neither of them has to work this morning.

"Hey." He wraps an arm around Eddie, presses a kiss to the back of his head, and steals for a piece of bacon off the plate by the stove. "How was your run?"

"Good," Eddie says.

He takes a seat at the counter and lays his hand on top of the notebook. "I have something for
you."

"Okay."

He clears his throat.

Eddie's amused when he turns around properly to raise his eyebrows at Richie. "Yes?"

"Sorry," Richie says. "I wanted to be sure I had your attention. This."

Eddie's eyes drop to the notebook, and look up again at Richie in surprise. "Your diary?" he says. "I get to read your diary?"

"It's a journal."

"My bad." He smiles. "I get to read your journal?"

"I'm told I need to learn to communicate. This is apparently the way to do it. I have written my feelings for your perusal. For the record, I didn't know you would be reading them when I wrote them down. My therapist is sneaky like that."

"Noted," Eddie says. "Have I told you how much I appreciate you going to therapy, and taking it seriously?"

"I'm done with therapy, technically."

"Right."

He blows out a breath. "Well, I'm going to take a shower. See you later."

It occurs to him as soon as he steps under the spray of the shower that Eddie might not read the journal immediately. He's in the middle of making two omelets at once. There's no reason for Richie to hide in the shower right now. If he stays in the shower for a while, will Eddie get bored and read the journal and that'll be that? Richie needs him to get it over with.

He hears the door of the bathroom open.

It's probably Bev in search of more toilet paper to take to her bathroom.

He hears the shuffle of clothes, though, and, after a minute, the curtain of the shower is pulled back enough for Eddie to step in. Before Richie can say anything, Eddie hugs him. The water rushes down over the both of them, and they just stand there like that.

Richie runs a hand up Eddie's smooth, slick back.

"I read it," Eddie says, soft.

Oh.

He pulls away from Richie to get a hold of the shampoo. "Here," he says. Richie bends his head, and Eddie soaps up Richie's hair, massaging in the shampoo, and combing his fingers in Richie's hair, helping him rinse it out.

Richie tugs Eddie in after to kiss him.

"I love you." Eddie leans his forehead against Richie's. "I love you, I love you, I love you."
"Wow," Richie says. "You liked the joke about the llama that much?"

"I've thought about it, too, you know."

"What?"

He pushes some of Richie's wet hair out of his face. "Marriage and kids and all of that straight, storybook stuff." He meets Richie's gaze with such open, honest softness. "One of the guys in GSA called you my husband once in an email. It was a joke, I think. But they all started doing it, and they still do it, and I love it so much. It's how I think of you in my head. I want that, Rich. I want everything with you."

Richie swallows. "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you about getting fired. I don't know why I didn't. I just... sometimes, it's like it doesn't even occur to me that I should, that I'm allowed to. And it's not that I don't love you, or—"

"I know."

"I really, really love you." There's the burn of tears in his eyes.

"I know." Eddie smiles. "I've never doubted it. I... Honey, you're the only person in my life I've always known loves me. You make me feel loved, and—and important, and actually worth something. And you know I love you, right? 'Cause I do. I love you, Richie."

Richie takes Eddie's face in his hands, and kisses him.

"I have a lot more to say about what you wrote," Eddie says. "I love dogs, too. And I hate Republicans!"

"It's like we were made for each other, babe."

They kiss and kiss and kiss.

They wash Eddie's hair, and Eddie is patient about it, holding Richie's hips, and keeping his eyes squeezed shut while Richie makes a Mohawk out of his soft, soapy hair.

Eddie uses his loofa on Richie, and he's thorough, stretching to scrub the tops of Richie's shoulders, and kneeling to scrub Richie's thighs and calves and feet. He stares at the top of Eddie's head. It's never something Richie would actually say, but he loves when they shower like this, and Eddie just wordlessly takes over, washing him with a kind of care that overwhelms him.

"Hey."

Eddie rises up again, pecking a kiss to Richie's lips. "What?" He starts to rinse the loofa.

"I like when you do that."

The smile breaks softly across Eddie's face, and Richie can't help but think he's beautiful in that moment, gazing at Richie with cheeks pink from the heat of the shower and eyelashes stuck together and water dripping down his nose.

They kiss.
By the time they get out of the shower, their fingers are prunes, and the omelets have surely gone
cold in the kitchen, and, impossibly, Richie is more in love with Eddie than ever.

---

It seems almost like they turn a corner at thirty. They're settled. Sure of themselves. They've got
careers they love, and money to spend. It's like they're living their lives the way they were meant
to.

(Richie's dad loved to say that college was the best damn time of his life. "Enjoy it, buddy!" he said, clapping Richie's shoulder at the airport before Richie flew to L.A. with Eddie to start at UCLA. "It never gets better than this!" And it might have been the best damn time of his life, but it wasn't of Richie's. Richie liked college just fine, of course.

But, honestly, this is the time in his life that he knows he'll always think about with a smile, and remember, gosh, I was happy, and nothing will ever be able to take that away.)

His life these days is basically the beat of that Electric Light Orchestra song. *Mister blue sky is living here today, hey hey!* He's got the world's greatest puppy, and he's a beloved local comedian, and he's got a stellar best friend.

And he's got his Eds.

(He wonders, once, if there was ever a time his dad loved his mom as much as Richie loves Eddie. He doubts it. He can't imagine that anyone loves anyone as much as Richie loves Eddie.)

---

Over the years, Eddie has proven he's the best at big, grand birthday surprises. He has a knack for it. But the year they turn thirty, Richie goes for the gold.

The moment he learns one of the Freeway Series games that year is actually on May 19, he knows he has to surprise Eddie with tickets. Eddie will get to watch the Dodgers play the Angels on his birthday. And, of course, Richie has money these days, and he buys the best, most expensive tickets he can.

Eddie notices immediately.

"Rich, what the fuck?" He's sitting at the table in the kitchen with an assortment of mail in front of him. "Have you lost your credit card? You need to report that shit. We have to cancel it."

"What? No. I haven't lost it."

"You haven't lost it?"

He hits pause on his game to look at Eddie. "No."

"Okay." He gets to his feet. "Then why does your bank statement say your Citi card payment was over nine hundred dollars?" He waves a paper at Richie. "You never use your credit card for anything. We had a whole big talk about how you need to buy more with your Visa to improve your credit, and you still didn't start buying more with it."

"Well," Richie hedges, "I— I decided to listen to you."

Eddie literally puts a hand on his hip.
"I listen!"

He narrows his eyes. "What did you buy? Clearly, it was something you didn't want me to know you bought."

"I'm getting the feeling you don't trust me, and, frankly, Eds, I'm offended."

"You make stupid, outrageous purchases pretty much daily. You're never ashamed of them, though. You never try to hide them."

"Exactly!"

Eddie just stares at him.

He throws up his hands. "It's your present, okay? It's your surprise birthday present."

Eddie blinks. "Oh." He breaks into a smile. "Okay. That's fine then."

"It was supposed to be a surprise," Richie grouses.

"It still is!"

Thankfully, Eddie doesn't push to learn what exactly the surprise is. Richie would've harassed him relentlessly. Eddie likes surprises, and is excited for Richie's big surprise.

Richie doesn't actually wait until his birthday to tell him about the tickets, though.

Eddie's mother's birthday is a week before his own, which means Eddie is flying to Portland, Maine the weekend right before his birthday, and his mood visibly sours over the course of the week leading up to it. He does it every year, but he dreads it every year regardless. He packs his things with a pout, ranting about how it's going to be really, particularly awful this year because one of his aunts was hospitalized in February, and Eddie didn't come to visit, and his mother won't forgive him for it, and Richie just breaks.

"Babe, you just have to get through this weekend," he says, sitting on the bed by Eddie's suitcase, "and then it's your birthday, and you know what we're doing on your birthday?"

"I thought it was a surprise?"

"It is a surprise." He kicks Eddie's calf. "Do you want to know what it is?"

Eddie bites his lip. "Yes."

He takes Eddie's hands, intertwining their fingers. "I got us tickets to see the Dodgers play the Angels." He grins.

"What?" Eddie's whole face fucking lights up. "Seriously?"

"In the dugout."

"Rich!" His eyes go wide. "Seriously?!" He kisses Richie quickly. "In the dugout? I want to see the tickets! Can I see the tickets?" He rocks on the balls of his feet in pure, jittery excitement while he watches Richie gets the tickets from where they're stashed in his old, spare glasses case, and he takes them from Richie like they're fragile. "They are really in the dugout!" he exclaims. "And you got one for Bev, too!"
"Obviously," Richie says, grinning.

"I'm going to where my Eric Gagne jersey." He goes to his dresser with the tickets in hand. "He's done for the season because of his back, you know, but . . . " He continues to ramble, and Richie has to stifle a laugh when Eddie finds the jersey and pulls it on like he's going to the game right now.

"Happy Birthday, babe."

Eddie still has to spend the weekend in Maine with his mother, but at least he has something to look forward to when it's over.

And when the time comes, the game is amazing.

The Dodgers cream the Angels.

Eddie is yelling and cheering and jumping to his feet throughout the game. It's infectious. Richie finds himself getting invested in the game, too, cheering and whistling and heckling, and, at the bottom of the fifth, he actually gets everyone in the dugout to do the wave.

They don't want to go home when the game is over, so they go to the batting cages.

That's when they discover that Richie can't hit a ball worth a damn.

"Bend your knees," Eddie says.

"I am."

"Relax your shoulders."

"You look like you're constipated," Bev says, taking a picture on her phone.

The ball sails past Richie's swing.

"You have to lower the bat," Eddie says. "You're swinging way too high. You need to relax."

"Relax?"

"Yes."

"I'm getting shot at. By balls! There are balls flying right at me!"

"I thought you liked balls," Bev says.

Another balls wizzes past Richie.

"These aren't my kind of balls, Ginger Spice."

"Just—" Eddie places Richie's hands correctly on the bat. "Okay, and turn like this." He positions Richie exactly and presses in against his back, covering Richie's hands with his hands. "And you just swing like this." He goes through the motion with Richie. "Got it?"

They swing together at the next ball that comes at them, and hit it.

"Yes!" He thrusts a fist in the air.

Eddie turns his face into Richie's back, and Richie can feel his smile.
He's pretty fucking proud of himself. He nailed Eddie's thirtieth. He'd say on a scale of 1 to 10 from worst birthday present to best, he has managed at least a twelve.

---

Bev's presents for Eddie that year are nothing to laugh at either.

She gets him a home spa experience.

It's a bunch of the stuff from Bed, Bath, & Beyond she thought he'd like: fancy, expensive massage oil and green facial goop and one of those tiny hot tubs for your feet, and, also, these special lotion gloves that go along with, like, oven mitts that are actually little ovens to heat your hands.

"Bev, I love you," Eddie says, hugging the hand oven gloves to his chest.

She laughs. "I love you, too." Her eyes are shining with the words, with how much she means them.

---

It's easy over time to forget that Bev hasn't always been with them, that there were years when they'd forgotten her existence, and she was living a whole other life apart from them.

The idea just seems so wrong to Richie.

And it isn't like they talk about it.

She'll mention things in passing once in a while, though, and Richie will be startled every time by the strangeness of Bev in Chicago, of Bev by herself, of Bev with a man who hurt her.

That's definitely the thing they never talk about the most.

Well, they talk about it once.

It happens after the watch Fried Green Tomatoes, because Bev finished the book, and she wants to see the movie. She complains a lot about the fact that they turned the romance into a friendship, because, you know, homophobia. It seems like she's enjoying the movie, though, and Richie doesn't think twice about the moments when she goes especially quiet.

The credits start rolling, and that's when she says it. "Tom beat me." She keeps her gaze on the screen.

"I hate Tom," Eddie says.

She smiles, and looks at her lap. "Yeah, I . . ." She clears her throat. "Sorry. I don't mean to be me maudlin, or. Never mind. Just. Thanks for watching the movie with me, guys. I should get to bed."

She leaves the room.

Richie shares a look with Eddie. What the hell? She can't just expect them to ignore that confession.

Thankfully, she hasn't actually closed the door of her bedroom.

Richie knocks softly on the doorframe.

"Come in," she says, a lilt of amusement in her voice.
There's something about Bev's room. It's her. It smells like her perfume, and she's covered the walls in simple pencil sketches of jackets and coats and dresses with long, swirling skirts, and it's full of soft, familiar clutter: records in stacks on the ground and scarves thrown haphazardly on the back of her chair and pictures of all of them together tucked into the frame of the mirror.

She's lying on the bed like she fell onto it, her legs dangling off.

They sit on either side of her.

"You don't have to tell us," Eddie says, hesitant. "But you can if you want. Don't feel like you have to keep it to yourself."

"It wasn't as bad as you probably think."

"He hit you." Richie knows he shouldn't get angry right now, but the anger is choking him. "I want to turn him into barbeque."

"You saved me, you know," she says, turning her head to look at him. "And I'm grateful, but I—I sometimes wish I hadn't needed to be saved by somebody. I wish I could have saved myself."

"Bev." Eddie reaches out like he's going to touch her, then seems to think better of it. "You chose to leave. You."

"Yeah, but . . ."

"Believe me, I know that's not easy."

She swallows. "He attacked me that night. The night we caught up, I mean. I came home late. And I guess he heard our voices from the apartment, and he went to the window, and he saw us, and as soon as I got in, he attacked me. He threw me into the dresser, and he. . . It was actually the first time he hurt me. He'd been mean, but he'd never physically hurt me. That night, though, he beat me. Literally. He used his belt. And, after, I just got into bed with him, and went to sleep like it was normal. I—what if I hadn't run into you, Richie? What if I'd had nowhere to go? What if I'd just stayed in that bed and woken up in the morning and gone to work and stayed?"

"You didn't," Eddie says, taking her hand.

She sighs. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to lay this on you guys."

"It's okay," he assures. "It's what friends are for."

Richie wants to say something, too. He wants to find the words that will fix everything. But he's only good with words when they don't matter.

His eyes fall on her poem.

It's written on the worn yellow back of a postcard. Richie's always been more a fan of Dr. Seuss than of, like, Emily Dickinson, but he knows Bev loves that stupid little poem. She told him once that she doesn't remember where she found it, but she's always liked it, has always felt like it was meant for her.

*My heart burns there, too*, it reads.

("When I was younger, I used to think that was what love was," she told him. "I wanted to be loved like that. Sometimes, I still do.")
"Hey," he says, shifting on the bed to face her fully. "I wrote a poem for you."

She raises an eyebrow. "Really?"

He clears his throat.

"This should be interesting," Eddie says dryly.

"You've got red hair,
And I'm a bear.
If you're Tiger, I'm Pooh,
And I love you."

She snorts.

"I don't get it." Eddie's brow furrows. "You're a bear metaphorically? Like—you're a bear to work with? Or—?"

"You wouldn't understand, Eds. You don't have the heart of a poet."

"Clearly."

"I liked it." Bev grins.

He grins, too.

"Come on, Pooh," she says, tugging on his arm, and he moves to lie on the bed with her. "Piglet, too."

Eddie makes a noise of protest at the name, but he lies down with them.

They never talk about Tom again.

Why would they?

There are things Richie wonders about. How long was Bev with Tom? Did she leave him a note when she left? Does she think he tried to find her? None of the questions are ultimately that important, though.

Tom is out of the picture.

Now the picture is just of Bev in L.A. Flourishing. She's got a job, and she's got friends. And, on Friday, she is going on a date with a woman who frequents the bookshop. It's a really good picture.

---

Richie is pretty fucking content with his picture, too.

---

He's at the park with Queeny when there's a wolf whistle behind him. "Hey, good lookin'." He grins, and turns to see Eddie striding over to him.

"I swear," Richie says, "it's like I have to beat the men back with a stick."
Eddie just smiles, and he rises to his tiptoes for a kiss.

He's in scrubs, and he's got a pale, tired face. He had to cover a shift last night, meaning he's already been working for over twelve hours, and he's got another five hours in front of him. It isn't often these days that he's got to work double shifts, but it happens.

He greets Queeny with a laugh when she runs up to him. "Hi, baby," he coos. "How's my girl? He's my good, good girl?" He takes the ball from Richie to toss it for her.

"Can I interest you in a tasty chicken salad?" Richie says, lifting the box.

Eddie's eyes shine. "Have I ever told you that I love you?" He takes a fork from Richie, too. "I really, really love you." He's already eating when Queeny comes racing back with the ball in her mouth. "God, this is good," he says, speaking with a mouthful of salad. He's gotten really good at shoveling in food.

Richie throws the ball for Queeny again, and she's off like a shot.

"Thanks for bringing me lunch."

"For you?" Richie steals a piece of chicken from Eddie's salad, dodging the poke of Eddie's fork, and popping it happily into his mouth. "Anything."

---

In May, the picture gets better, and he'll never forget a single detail of the day it happens.

---

Bev isn't working that morning. She's at home, and Richie is, too, and they've had the news on for over an hour just in case the court announces their decision early. Bev calls him over to the couch when it's about to happen.

They stare at the screen in disbelief after it's announced.

"Rich," she breathes.

"I know."

"Richie." She starts smacking his thigh. "Richie!"

He laughs.

He didn't really think it would happen, but it did. The court ruled against the ban. In the state of California, same sex marriage is legal.

He surges to his feet. "Yes!" He starts running around the apartment, hands in the air, and yelling. "Yes! Yes! YES!" He runs to Bev, and hauls her off the couch, spinning her around.

---

He can't just wait for Eddie to get home from work. He can't. He knows he should use the afternoon to prepare some big, fancy moment, but he's already so antsy in anticipation, and it's only been half an hour.

"I'm going to the hospital," he announces.
"Now?" Bev says.

He nods. "Now." He's already at the basket of shoes to grab his sneakers.

"What about everything we've been talking about? What about the plan? What about the dinner with the candles and the flowers and the romance?"

"Bev." He gestures at himself. "Do I look like a romantic to you?"

She assesses him.

He's got on purple cargo shorts that he bought because they were purple and a t-shirt from the beach that says *ask me about our sex on the beach special* and a pair of socks that don't match because one of the socks is Bev's.

"You're right," she says. "We'll stick to your strengths. Spontaneity. Charm. Enthusiasm."

"Exactly!" He points a finger at her. "Wish me luck."

"You got this!"

He tugs on his sneakers, and he's out the door. He is doing this right fucking now. He makes it almost to the elevator before turning on his heel to return to apartment.

Bev jumps when he bursts in again.

"*Should* it be romantic?"

She blinks. "Can you put on the red plaid shirt that he said made you look like the Brawny Paper Towel guy? He liked that. And it's romantic to dress in clothes you know he likes." She smiles.

"You're killing it," Richie says, passing her to go to the bedroom. "You're killing it!"

It turns out the red plaid shirt is in the laundry right now.

He picks his short-sleeve, button up with the green fern pattern that Eddie got him because he says Richie looks good in green.

He returns to the kitchen to find that Bev is waiting with a comb.

"How does Eddie usually like your hair?" she asks.

"Unclear."

"How's that unclear?"

"Once in college it started to get so long I could put it in a ponytail, and I did, and he was just, like, *if you don't get a haircut soon, I'm going to attack you at night with a pair of scissors, and it will NOT be pretty.* But I cut it really short right after college 'cause, like, it was the style, and he was, like, *looks great, honey,* but it started to grow out again, and I said I was going to get it cut again, and he was, like, *don't you dare touch it.* So, I guess he likes a nice, shaggy medium? It's never actually a conversation we've had, though."

She puts a hand on her hip. "*I meant* how does he like it styled?"

"Oh." He shrugs. "Casual?"
She combs his hair, frowns, and ruffles it up again. "I don't know why I thought we needed to fix your hair." She tosses the comb over her shoulder.

"Me, neither."

"Okay." She smiles. "I think we're good."

"Should I bring a flower, or something?" he asks. "I was thinking I should bring a flower."

"That'd be a nice, romantic touch. You could get a bouquet from Nancy's. I always think the flowers in the window look pretty."

He flaps a hand. "No. I don't have time for Nancy's."

"I'm sorry," she says, "do you have a flower lying around the apartment?"

"Well, no."

"You . . . could bring a candle?"

"I could bring a candle!" he exclaims.

She grins.

He leaves finally with a candle in hand. "Get your man, Tozier!" Bev says. He gives her a thumbs up, and he's gone for real, getting to the elevator this time, and imagining the moment in his head.

At the hospital, he spots someone he knows almost immediately.

"Amanda!"

"Hey, Richie." She smiles. "You having lunch with Eddie?"

"No, ah—actually, I need to talk to him. Can you page him? It's important. It's an emergency. I need to talk to him like now, like ASAP."

She nods. "Of course."

She must take him seriously, because he sees Eddie coming down the hall soon after. "Eds!" he yells. His heart suddenly starts pounding wildly against his ribs, because this is happening.

"What's the matter?" Eddie asks.

"We need to talk."

"Is everything okay?" He's concerned. "Is it something with Bev?"

Richie rolls on the balls of his feet. "We need a place to talk! Is there a place that's private? Bev is fine, I promise." He's so full of energy he could run laps right now.

Eddie takes Richie into a small, empty room with a pair of beds, a table, and a worn, pillowed couch.

"Did you watch the news?" Richie asks.

"The news?" Eddie's eyes go wide. "Shit." He glances at his watch. "They announced it, didn't they? I've been so busy. What was the decision?"
Richie grins.

"Yeah?" Eddie grabs Richie's hands. "They ruled for gay marriage?" His smile turns quizzical.
"Wait, why do you have a candle?"

"I'm glad you asked." Richie gets Bev's lighter from his pocket.

"You can't light that in here."

"Shh." He lights his candle, and sets it on the table.

"Rich . . ."

Richie gets down on one knee.

Eddie's eyes widen.

"Eddie Kaspbrak, you are the light of my life."

"Wait!" Eddie surges forward to cover Richie's mouth. "I was going to propose to you! I've been preparing a speech for weeks!"

Richie grins against Eddie's palm.

"I've got it written down, but I don't have the paper with me. Damn it! Just. Stop laughing at me!"

He grins. "I— I love you, okay? That's how it started. I love you so much. I can't even describe it. I love myself more because you love me. I can be me because you love me, and I have you, and I know you love me. And I think about how different my life would have been if you weren't in it, and— um, fuck, you're really brave, and—"

Riche tugs Eddie's hand off his mouth. "Eddie, will you marry me?"

"Yes." He nods. "Yes."

Richie grabs Eddie's face to kiss him before he's even properly back on his feet, and they stumble, clutching at each other desperately, and kissing.

"Yes," Eddie murmurs again, because he can't seem to stop saying it, "yes, yes, yes."

They're going to get married.

Eddie pulls away from him to catch his eye. For a moment, they hold each other's gaze. And then Eddie starts to kiss Richie's face, to kiss his cheeks and chin and nose and eyebrows and forehead.

Richie hugs him still closer, laughing, and lifting him off his feet a little.

"I can't wait to tell people you proposed at eleven in the morning in an on-call room at the hospital in your purple cargo shorts."

"Hey! I brought a candle!"

Eddie brushes the hair back from Richie's face. "My mistake," he says. "It was movie worthy romance." And he's looking at Richie with such warm, happy love, Richie just wants to hold him closer and kiss him more and love him forever, and well. He plans to.

---
He pushes Eddie against the door, kissing him, and snaking his hands up under Eddie scrub top, grazing his hands over Eddie's abs and hip and back, and dripping his hands down under the waistband of his pants to palm his ass.

"We shouldn't," Eddie says, breathless.

Richie grins, and he drags his mouth down Eddie's neck before he drops to his knees.

Eddie's hand fumbles with the doorknob, locking it.

Richie gets to work right away, licking his lips, and taking Eddie in his mouth, bobbing his head, and coating Eddie's dick in spit. He pulls back just to swirl his tongue around the head, sucking, and starting to bob again while Eddie grows harder in his mouth. He loosens his jaw, and he takes Eddie all the way into his mouth, feeling the head of Eddie's dick bump the back of his throat, and humming.

Eddie's hand smacks flat against the door.

He looks up to meet Eddie's gaze.

Eddie's pupils are blown and his cheeks are flushed and lips are parted with want. He's a sight. And Richie is the only person who's ever going to see him like that.

Eddie twists a hand in Richie's hair, tugging.

Richie pulls back, sliding his mouth off Eddie's dick slowly, and holding Eddie's dark, lusty gave throughout, tilting his head, and opening his mouth as wide as he can.

"Fuck," Eddie says, tightening his hand in Richie's hair. "I'm going to fuck you tonight." He pushes his dick right back into Richie's mouth. "I'm going to get you on your knees, sweetheart, and I'm going to fuck you 'til you can't fucking walk." He starts to fuck Richie's mouth. "I love you. I love fucking your smart mouth, and—" He squeezes his eyes shut then, and presses his head back against the door, and starts to buck into Richie's mouth wildly. "I love it. I love you. It's always been you, you hear me? You're it for me. You're it. You're mine. Fuck, Richie, fuck."

Spit drips off Richie's chin, and he rubs the heel of his hand over his crotch.

"Rich, fuck, I'm gonna—Richie, I'm coming, I'm—fuckfuckfuck—" He opens his eyes, and he holds Richie's gaze when he comes in Richie's mouth.

Richie pulls his mouth off after he's swallowed every fucking drop.

Eddie's just-fucked, blissed-out gaze is intoxicating.

Richie pushes to his feet, wiping at his mouth with his arm, and unbuttoning his shorts to get his hand in them, starting to pump his dick with a dry, desperate hand, grinning, crowding Eddie against the door, and pressing his nose into Eddie's flushed, sweaty cheek.

Eddie yanks at his arm. "I got it." He licks his palm in the most obscene way, and shoves his hand into Richie's pants, starting to jack him off.

"I can't believe we're getting it on at the hospital," Richie says.

"Believe it."

"I can't believe my fiancé just fucked my mouth at his workplace."
Eddie just grins.

And like he jinxed it, the door suddenly rattles.

Eddie slaps a hand to Richie's mouth before Richie can say a word, but he doesn't stop jerking him off. He keeps it up, and he leans in, mouthing at Richie's pulse, sinking his teeth in just the way that Richie likes, and Richie is coming in a matter of seconds.

It's a good thing purple cargo hides large, damp cum stains.

Eddie pulls his hand out swiftly, and, with a weirdly hot efficiency, he pulls up his pants, uses the giant, pump hand sanitizer on the table, and blows the candle out, too, waving the smoke away quickly.

If Richie weren't already so fucking in love with him, that would have done the trick.

*I love you,* he mouths.

Eddie smiles, and turns, breathing in deeply, and opening the door.

The coast is clear, thankfully.

Richie hugs Eddie from behind. "Get out of here before we *do* get caught," Eddie says. Richie kisses the back of his head, and does what his fiancé tells him.

---

He is going to text Bev when he leaves the hospital, only to discover that she's texted him several times already.

*how did it go?*

*have you asked him yet?!!*

*richie!!!*

*shit, he didn't say no, did he? you guys have talked about this before, right? he's expecting you to ask him?*

*riCHARD!!!!!!*

He grins when he texts her back to apologize for missing her texts, but he was busy, and he is happy to tell her now that he just blew his fiancé at the hospital and got a handjob in thanks, and he's never not going to get horny at the smell of a peach candle again, and, also, she is going to be the best fucking man at his wedding.

---

Richie thinks Bev wants to "have a talk" with them a few weeks later because she's planning on moving out of the apartment.

She's in her first real, serious relationship since she came to L.A., and while the woman is kind of a bore, Richie knows Bev likes her a lot, and she stays at her apartment more often than not these days, and it just seems like the easy, natural progression of their relationship.

He just hopes Bev doesn't feel like she *has* to leave just because they're tying the knot.
"I have some news," Bev starts.

They're seated around the table in the kitchen.

"What's up?" Eddie asks.

"I . . . got offered a job. In fashion."

"Oh, my God."

"Bev!" Eddie is already on his feet to hug her. "That's great!"

She laughs. "Thanks. I wasn't expecting it. You know I've been submitting my designs to—to everywhere, and just waiting to see if I ever got a call back, and—I did." She shrugs.

"This is your news?" Richie says, grinning.

She hesitates. "There's a catch. The job is, um. The job's in New York. New York City."

Oh.

She doesn't wait for them to respond to that. "I need you guys to tell me to take it," she says. "I have a week to decide, although I wouldn't actually start until August. I—I know I should take it, but the idea of leaving is . . ." She shakes her head.

"Bev," Eddie says, soft.

"Tell me that I can't let this opportunity pass me by. Tell me to take it. Tell me that no matter what happens, we'll stay in touch and this won't change anything, and we'll always be—"

"Family?" Eddie reaches forward to take Bev's hands. "Bev, of course. That'll never change! No matter where you go in the world, you'll have us."

"I know," she says, teary-eyed.

"You have to take it."

"I know." She looks past Eddie to meet Richie's gaze.

He hasn't said anything since she dropped the bomb. It's amazing that she got a job, and he's sure the job is amazing, and he wants to support her. But. He doesn't want her to leave. He feels suddenly, irrationally terrified of the idea that if she leaves, she'll forget about them.

"The job is with this woman who started a business for herself," she explains, "and it's been really, really successful, and she's looking to hire someone new, to give a chance to someone, and she picked me."

"Well, obviously," Richie says. "She had to pick you. You're the best."

She smiles. "Thanks, Trashmouth." She surges forward suddenly to hug the both of them at once.

Richie leans into the hug, closing his eyes, and pressing his face into her neck.

She's actually crying when she pulls away, laughing a little, and wiping at her cheeks. "Sorry," she says.
"What about your girlfriend?" Richie asks.

"I think we're splitting up. I don't know. I like her, but I don't think it's in the cards."

She shrugs. "It isn't leaving her that'll break my heart."

It's quiet.

"Tell us more about the job!" Eddie says. Under the table, he lays a hand on Richie's knee. "Who's the designer? Do we know her? And you'll be drawing up actual fashion designs for her?"

Bev starts gushing about the job.

She's animated while she talks, and Richie stares at her, trying to listen, and trying to be excited, thinking please, please don't leave.

---

He brings it up when they're watching *Lost*.

Eddie is slumped on the sofa with Richie's feet in his lap, and the apartment is dark around them, and the woman in the commercial on TV is acting like she's about to make sweet love to a jar of Ragu.

"We should have spaghetti for dinner tomorrow," Eddie says.

"I don't want Bev to leave," Richie says.

It's like he can feel Eddie's gaze turn to him. He swallows, and he turns his head to meet Eddie's gaze. Eddie's got his hands in the little oven gloves that Bev gave him. He uses them almost every night, because it helps with how dry his hands always are. "Me, neither," he says, quiet. In the glow of the TV, his expression looks especially sad. He feels the same way Richie does.

"I just . . ."

"I know," Eddie says, and he takes one of his hands out of the oven, and places his damp, warm palm on Richie's calf.

The show is back, and Richie forces his gaze to the TV again.

---

Richie is surprised when he sees Eddie in the theater after the show on Friday. Eddie usually comes to the sketch comedy shows on Saturday. Richie frowns when he takes in Eddie's tense posture.

"Is something the matter?" he asks, walking up the aisle.

"No, it's . . ." He bites his lip. "Sit." Eddie directs Richie into one of the seats, and he sits with him, turning, and knocking his knees into Richie's thigh. "I have an idea. It's been percolating for a couple of weeks. It's kind of crazy."

"I love ideas," Richie says. "I like to have 'em. I like to hear 'em."

"We can't ask Bev to stay in L.A. with us."
He frowns. "Right."

"But who's to say we can't go with her to New York? Before you say anything, hear me out! There are plenty of hospitals in New York City that need nurses. I won't have trouble finding a job. And, yeah, I like the job I have, but you know there are things about it I would change. I could go for something new. Plus, New York has a huge comedy scene for you to explore! I know your name is known in L.A., and you've got a setup that you like, but you've never been afraid of brand new terrain. And you could audition for SNL! You used to talk about that." He pauses. "What do you think?"

"You . . . want to leave L.A.?"

"I love it here," Eddie says. "But I think I'd love New York, too."

Richie is stunned. Like. The idea of going with Bev to New York hadn't even occurred to him.

"And, Rich, you want to be famous. You've always wanted to be famous. You didn't always plan on being a comedian, but you've always wanted to be an entertainer, and you've always wanted to be famous. Like, really, really famous. And things have stalled in L.A."

"Eddie, if you think I'm not happy—"

"I know you're happy. But if my job didn't keep me in L.A., you would have done much more by now than get your picture up on the wall at the Funnybone, star in an L.A. comedy sketch show, and occasionally get recognized on the street. You've settled. We're, like, co-dependent, so you've had to settle. You could get on TV in New York. You could get on SNL! You'd be amazing at it!"

Richie sighs. "Here's ze ting, mon amour," he starts, taking Eddie's hand.

"Nope." Eddie shakes his head. "Cut the voice. We're having a talk. I want the truth."

That's a thing they got from Richie's therapist.

If Eddie says I want the truth, Richie has to do his best to give it to him.

"I—" He pushes his hand through his hair. "Yeah, I used to talk about SNL. But, babe, you really think I could get on SNL?"

"Yes."

"Eddie, come on."

Eddie cups Richie's face in his hand. "Yes, Richie," he says. "I do."

"I am famous in L.A. If we go to New York, and I try, and I—I can't to do this again, can't make it there like I made it here, or can't make it bigger, but I try—"

"You will, though," Eddie says. "Sweetheart, you will. I've known since I was ten that you were going to be some big celebrity some day. And even if things don't work out at first, I'll be there. And Bev will be there, too."

"Have you talked to her about this?"

He shakes his head. "I figured we had to talk about it first. We don't have to, but it's something to think about it. I think it could be good for us." He smiles.
Richie leans forward, needing to get a hold of Eddie. It's awkward to hug with an armrest between them, but he doesn't care. "I love you," he murmurs. He presses his face into Eddie's neck.

"I love you, too," Eddie says.

They decide to get drinks at the bar just down the street, because there's a lot they have to discuss.

---

The courthouse is a mob of couples the day in June when the state actually starts to issue the licenses.

It'll probably be a mob of couples for weeks, though.

They aren't going to come back later. They're in suits that cost a lot of money, Darryl is down from San Francisco, and Bev has cut her hair into a cute, new bob. They're done waiting.

Once they get in front of a judge, it happens in the blink of an eye.

The judge reads the basic, generic vows. They put the rings on each other's fingers. And when they're told to kiss, they kiss, and that's that.

They're married.

They return to the apartment to discover that Bev's set up a surprise wedding reception. There are strings of pink Christmas lights haphazardly strung up everywhere. There's a giant wedding cake. There are dozens of balloons nearly blocking the ceiling from view. And, most importantly, the place is overflowing with people, with friends from college and a crowd from the hospital and all of the folks in the sketch comedy group.

"You were just supposed to get a cake!" Eddie says.

She grins. "Oops."

The party lasts well into the night, and, mostly, it's a lot of drunk, loud revelry.

They have a first dance together. Richie smears cake all over Eddie's face, offering to lick it clean, and, in retaliation, Eddie shoves Richie's whole face into the cake. There are speeches.

By the end of the night, they are a mess in the best possibly way.

Eddie's got his tie around his head, and Richie's got a split straight down the seat of his pants from when he tried to do a split, and, in a nearly empty apartment, they continue to dance to the playlist of love pop songs that Bev made for them.

"Hey, hey, hey," Eddie says, grabbing at Richie's shoulder to pull him close. "Richie. Richie. Richie, Richie, Richie." His breath is hot in Richie's face. "Want to know a secret?"

"Yes!"

"Richie, you're my husband."

He grins. "That isn't a secret." He snakes his hands down around Eddie's waist to squeeze his ass. "I'm going to tell everybody. HEY! I'm Eddie Kaspbrak's husband!"

Eddie giggles madly. "I'm Richie Tozier's husband!" he yells.
From where she's sprawled on the sofa with her head in her hand, Bev says, "Congratulations."

Eddie sags happily into Richie.

That's when The Twist comes on the playlist, and they start hopping around wildly. "You look like bunnies on cocaine," Bev says. But she grins when Eddie twists his way over to her, and she takes his hand, and she dances with them.

They're way too drunk to have sex that night.

It's cool.

They can twist the whole night away. They're married. They'll be together their whole fucking lives.

---

Bev pokes her chicken with her fork like she thinks Richie might be trying to poison her.

"That's my renowned lemongrass chicken," Richie says.

She makes a noise of disinterest. She broke up with her girlfriend that afternoon, and she hasn't given them the details of the conversation, but Richie is going to assume it didn't go well. She's been sour since she returned to the apartment.

"Well, I have some news," Eddie says, cheerful. "I gave my two weeks notice at work."

Bev's gaze snaps to him. "You quit your job?"

"I did." He nods.

"What? Why?" She looks at Richie. "Did you know about this?"

He takes a sip of his wine. "I did."

"I don't actually have another job lined up, which is risky, I know, but I have some leads that are promising, and an interview, actually, and, well, Richie makes bank these days, and with my immense financial prowess, we've saved up a pretty nice cushion, so—"

"Hold on." Bev puts down her fork. "Back up. Why did you quit your job?"

"We don't want you to leave," Richie says.

She frowns.

"But since you have to leave, we've decided we have to leave with you. We're coming to New York with you. I hope that's cool, because Eddie's already quit his job."

"You're coming to New York with me?" She gapes.

"Surprise?" Eddie says.

"Guys, you—you can't uproot your whole lives just because of me."

He smiles. "But that's the thing. We can. They're our lives."

"Besides," Richie says, "New York is where it's at. I'm told it has hospitals, comedy, and fashion."
He grins. "What more could we ask for?"

"You're serious?" She looks between them. "You're really planning on doing this?"

"Is that okay with you?" Eddie asks.

"I . . ." She laughs. "Of course it's okay with me. Is that a joke? If you guys moved to New York with me, that would . . ." She shakes her head. "But, wait, you just got married."

"So?"

"It isn't legal in New York!"

"I researched that, actually," Eddie says, breezy. "It's illegal for same sex couples to marry in New York, but they respect marriage licenses from elsewhere. We're married." He says it firmly. "Nothing can take that away now."

She bites her lip. "This is happening?"

"Yes."

She glances at Richie. "It's not something you're talking about. It's happening?"

He grins. "You can take it to the bank, Pippi Longstocking."

Bev shoves her chair back with a laugh. "Guys!" She hooks an arm around Richie's neck, hugging him, and smacking a kiss to his cheek. "I love you." She starts towards Eddie, and he's already on his feet. "I love you, I love you, I love you!" She hugs him tightly.

"Now we've just got to find a place to live in New York City," Eddie says.

"Jobs, too," Richie says.

"And we've got to pack. That is going to be a nightmare. Richie's a hoarder, you know."

He gasps. "I'm a hoarder?"

"You have more stuff than anyone I've ever met."

"We have stacks of newspapers that are months old because you won't let me throw them out until you've read them! It's how I'm going to die. I'm going to sneeze, and a stack of newspapers is going to come tumbling down on top of me."

"Really? Your spindly little arms couldn't knock down a stack of toothpicks if you tried, but your sneeze is almighty?"

"Aw." Bev presses her hands to her heart. "Here I've been thinking I was going to have to live without this."

"Never," Richie says.

He means it.

He'd admitted to Eddie that he's nervous about going to New York, and he knows they've got money, but they don't have so much money that it isn't going to be kind of hellish to find a nice apartment where Queeny is allowed, and he's going to miss L.A. a lot.
They've got to stick together, though. That's the way it's supposed to be. Together, they're going to take New York by storm.

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tbc.
Chapter Notes

Couple of things!

1) This is once again just a series of scenes in their lives that I've strung together. JSYK. Also, it gets kind of depressing in the middle, because, well, dogs don't live forever and other such things. But, overall, I'd say it's more fluff than anything else.

2) Thought I would remind you before you start that this fic takes places in the 27 years in between. That said, I decided what I would write for an epilogue if I wrote an epilogue, so that'll probably be added at some point.

Also, sorry for the typos!

He is starfishing on the floor when Eddie kicks him in the stomach. "Oof." He opens one eye to look at his husband.

"I thought you were going to unpack the kitchen." Eddie's got his hands on his hips. "You're the one who uses the kitchen the most. You know where things should go. I've managed to unpack the bathroom, and all of our DVDs, and put away the stuff we're keeping in the closets." He raises his eyebrows. "What have you done in that time?"

"I melted," Richie says. It isn't his fault. The landlord had promised he'd have the central air fixed before they moved in, and it isn't. "Pity me. The floor is the only place where I can be cool."

"You've never been cool a day in your life," Eddie says.

He grins. "You're right." He licks his finger, touches it to his chest, and makes a loud sizzling noise.

Eddie is unimpressed. "If I have to unpack in this heat, you do, too."

"I unpacked my clothes this morning!"

"I did, too."

"We make a really great team."

Eddie just narrows his eyes at Richie.

"Also." He tilts his head. "I don't know how you expect me to concentrate when we're living in Satan's armpit, and you're flouncing around like that."

Both of them had stripped off most of their clothes earlier that day, and Richie had catcalled his husband at the time, but it wasn't like he'd never seen Eddie's sans most of his clothes. Now, though? He's in only his shorts, and they're an old, flimsy yellow mesh pair from college that make his ass look divine, and his bare, beautiful chest is glowing with sweat, and his hair is a sweaty, disheveled tangle, and it's a sight.
"You know I'm easy to distract," Richie says.

"I know that you've spent the last hour just lying on the floor in your underwear despite promising you'd unpack the kitchen."

He sighs. "Fine." He sits up with a groan.

"I've got every window open," Eddie says, "and it's already cooler outside than it was. You'll be fine."

"If I die of heatstroke, write it was Spaghetti's fault on my tombstone."

"Gladly."

Richie heaves himself to his feet.

"Here's an idea," Eddie says. "Since you're apparently five today, why don't I offer you some motivation? I'm going to take Queeny out. And when I get back, I'm going to take a shower. And if you've unpacked the kitchen by the time I'm done, you can have a treat."

"What's the treat?"

Eddie steps close. "What do you want it to be?" He looks at Richie though his eyelashes.

Well, fuck. "I love you," Richie says, fervent.

Eddie smirks. "You better." He steps away from Richie, and starts out of the kitchen. "Unpack," he says.

"Yes, sir!"

The kitchen in their fancy new apartment is actually much bigger than the kitchen they had in L.A., so it won't be tough to fit the buttloads of kitchenware they've collected over the years. He steals the fan that Eddie set up in the bedroom, pulls up Spotify on his phone, and gets to work. They've got nine boxes marked for the kitchen, and since it was Richie's job to pack them, they're a mess, but he starts remembering where he put shit while he works, and it isn't taking half as long as he feared it would.

He hears the front door open when Eddie gets back with Queeny.

She trots into the kitchen. "Hey, girl," he greets. She ignores him in favor of lapping up water by the loud, messy tongueful.

Eddie must head straight to take a shower.

After he's unpacked the last of the boxes, he thinks about hijacking Eddie's shower. It's going on seven, though. He decides to start on dinner. He's a chef, and a man of a restraint. He's taking the noodles off the stove when Eddie ambles into the kitchen in his underwear.

He pauses, and his gaze rakes the kitchen, assessing the stack of newly empty boxes, and seeing that the kitchen is all in order.

"Impressed?" Richie grins.

"Congratulations," Eddie says. "I wasn't sure you'd be able to do it."
"Hey." Richie points a spoon at him. "I always exceed expectations when sexual favors are promised."

Eddie approaches Richie with a smile. "So." He wraps his arms around Richie's neck. "What's it going to be?" Even after only half an hour in the sun with Queeny, his freckles are darker.

"I'm going to be honest," Richie says, palming his ass. "I'm overwhelmed at my options."

"Is that so?"

He starts to peck little, exaggerated kisses to Eddie's freckles. "I could bend you over the counter. Or sit you on the table Bull Durham style. And we've already established how lovely the floor is." He sneaks his hands into the back of Eddie's gray briefs.

Eddie's arms slip off Richie's neck.

Richie feels Eddie's smile against his neck before Eddie's teeth graze his pulse.

Eddie's mouth moves slowly lower, trailing soft, wet kisses down Richie's chest. Eddie sinks to his knees, tugging Richie's boxers down with him. He noses at the crease of Richie's hip, ignoring Richie's erection, and brushing his hands up the backs of Richie's thighs teasingly, looking up.

He's a **tease**.

"How do you want me?" he asks.

Richie bends suddenly, hooking his hand under Eddie's arms, and hauling him up, making him laugh. He drops him on the table, and gets to work on tugging off his underwear, kissing him eagerly, and putting a hand on his chest, forcing his back to the tabletop, and telling him to bend his knees.

He sinks to **his** knees, parting Eddie's cheeks, and licking a stripe up his crack.

He's going to fuck Eddie with his tongue until his man is **begging** for his dick. He grapples for the lube He might have gotten a bottle from the bedroom while the water for the noodles was boiling, because he **prepares**.

That's the moment that Bev chooses to **saunter** in.

"Oh, my God!"

"Bev!"

"Bev?!!"

"Bev is here!"

Richie spins around to block Eddie from her view, only to realize **his** dick is glaring at her now, and he covers his junk with his hands, or tries to.

"Hello, dear!" Richie says.

She's got a hand clapped over her eyes. "I—" Her mouth opens, and closes.

"You're home early! I'm making vegetarian lasagna for dinner."
She laughs. "Oh. My. God." She turns, and walks into a wall. "Carry on! I'm, ah, I'm going to go to the store real quick, and buy a bottle of bleach for my eyes." She manages to escape the kitchen.

Richie turns around to look at Eddie.

Their eyes meet.

Both of them start laughing at the exact same time, and Richie hugs Eddie to his chest, kissing him sloppily.

"Hey." Bev's head pops back into the room.

"Bev!"

"Relax," she says, "my eyes are closed very tightly. I wanted to ask—are you making veggie lasagna? 'Cause I had to skip lunch, and I'm starved, and if you're not, I'm going to order a pizza, but—"

"It'll be ready in 45 minutes," Eddie says, amused.

Richie sighs loudly.

It looks like he'll have to fuck his husband on the table tomorrow.

It's okay.

They dress, and Bev is convinced to open her eyes.

They eat the lasagna in front of the TV, all of them on the sofa, drinking "sangria" that Bev made by mixing Mountain Dew with cheap red wine, and watching Hellboy on DVD, and it's actually a pretty good night.

---

Eddie learns about Twitter from one of the guys who was in the GSA with him, and is, of course, immediately on board.

Over the years, he's stayed in touch with most of his friends from the club, and it's led to a lot of phases. He was really into chain email forwards for a time. He has a MySpace. Recently, his friends have started putting a lot of pictures of those cats with bad grammar in their emails.

(Richie will admit that he himself is pretty into YouTube. There's some funny shit on there. He made a channel for himself when they were still back in L.A., and he posted clips from some of his old, taped comedy routines, and, also, he got really into jump scaring Eddie while Bev filmed, and those videos still make him cry with laughter when he watches them.)

"I think I'm going to get a Twitter," Eddie says, sitting on the sofa with his laptop.

"Is that a bird?" Richie says. "If we're getting a bird, we should get a parrot. I would be hilarious with a parrot."

"It's a popular microblogging platform."

Richie actually glances up from where he's trying to brush Queeny's teeth. "It's a what?" Queeny tries wiggling away while he's distracted, but this isn't his first grooming rodeo.
"It's a site where you post updates about your life, and people can follow you, and you can follow other people. Steve made himself one last month. He says it's actually a really great way to keep in touch with people."

"I thought that's what email was for," Richie says.

Eddie just sighs. "Sometimes I forgot I'm married to a fucking senior citizen."

"We can't all be young and hip and cool like you, Eds. That's why I keep you around. That, and your spry, svelte body."

Eddie eyes him over the screen. "Do you know what my first update is going to be?" He's typing without even fucking looking at the keyboard.

"Still married to the sexiest man alive?"

"Nope."

"Getting my ass reamed tonight by the man of my dreams?"

"No."

"Am having a dick for dessert?"

"My husband is a turd," Eddie says, typing.

"Shucks, cutie." He waves a hand at Eddie in a show of bashfulness. "You know just how to make me blush."

Of every hip, new Internet thing the GSA has introduced to Eddie, his favorite is Twitter. In the weeks that follow, he posts "updates" constantly. Richie likes it, too, because it's easy to hack, and, boy, does @epkasbrak have some praise for Richie's balls when that happens.

---

Richie is invited to audition for Upright Citizens Brigade in October. One of the guys in UCB was in the sketch comedy group with Richie in L.A., and when they meet for dinner to catch up, he's eager to offer an invitation to Richie. It's exactly the opportunity that Richie's been hoping for. It was founded by former SNL cast members. He auditions, and he is invited to join the group.

It isn't Saturday Night Live, but UCB is pretty big league.

To celebrate, the three of them see their first Broadway show together.

Richie chooses Avenue Q.

It's awesome. Richie follows Eddie around for weeks after, singing If You Were Gay to him. It just doesn't get old.

"If you were gay / That'd be okay. / I mean 'cause, hey, / I'd like you anyway. / Because you see, / If it were me, / I would feel free / To say that I was gay / But I'm not gay!"

"This is why I wanted to see The Lion King," Eddie says, sighing.

"If you were gay," Bev sings, "I'd shout hooray!"
Richie starts performing with UCB in February, and it's way more intense than anything he's done before now, but he loves it.

It's takes a while for Eddie to find a job, but that's only because he wants to "explore his options."

He considers private practice pretty seriously, and applies to a position, gets the job, and ends up turning it down. He talks about going back to school, because he thinks he would like being a psychiatrist, and decides to table the idea for now. He researches a couple of local free clinics that are hiring, and he waffles for days over whether he ought to apply.

(He would really love to help people in that capacity, but it would be a major pay cut, but they don't really need to worry about money, but he's not sure he would be happy in that kind of environment, but he's in a position where he should appreciate the opportunity to challenge himself.

Richie tries offering his opinion, but Eddie isn't impressed.

"I swear, Richie, if you tell me one more time to follow my heart, I'm going to punch you in the dick.")

In the end, he takes a job at a hospital.

It's what he knows, and it's what he likes, and, actually, it is something new for him, because the position is for an ER nurse.

His job has never been easy, but being an ER nurse is on a whole other level.

He loves it.

Bev's new job is hectic, too. Her hours are insane to the point that they go days without actually seeing her despite the fact that she lives with them. She's happy, though.

She's doing what she wants to do.

They do still have time to hang out just the three of them, of course.

They'll spend lazy Sundays together, going to the park with Queeny or shopping for a dishwasher that does more than spit on the dishes or marathoning a bunch of eighties horror movies.

The three of them have a spa day together for Bev's birthday.

Also, none of them work Tuesday nights.

They start to make a point of keeping that night free, of making it their "roommates" night, a night for the three of them to try some new, fun restaurant, to drink, and catch up, to gush about their jobs, and complain about their coworkers.

---

Eddie starts posting reviews of every restaurant they try on Twitter. He manages to describe each restaurant in less than 140 characters, and his updates are actually fairly funny, and, after a couple of months, he starts to gain a kind of following on Twitter. The more followers he gets, the more seriously he takes his "job."

*Greedy Dragon Chinese. clean. 10/10 would bathe in noodle soup. spicy means spicy. will deepthroat spring rolls in my dreams. worth the $$$.*
Richie has Bev make him a Twitter just so he can reply to that post.

@epkasbrak I've got a spring roll for you, babe.

That's it.

That's his one post.

He thinks about posting more now that he's got a Twitter, but that one update says everything he will ever need the world to know.

---

There are lots of really great things about that first year in NYC. They're happy. But, their first, full summer in the city, they're hit with a couple of curveballs.

Three, actually.

In the span of a month, they have to attend three funerals.

The first is for Richie's grandfather.

It isn't totally out of nowhere. He was sick for a while. Still, it's a punch to the gut.

They go to Maine for the funeral, and Richie's grandmother shakes with silent, suppressed sobs throughout the service, and since his dad is useless, it's up to Richie to hold her, to comfort her. It's rough. He has to stick around Maine for a week after that, because she is going to move in with Richie's parents, and Richie is the one who helps her pack up her things.

Next is Casey.

Her death is a shock. She was at UCLA with them, was in improv with Richie, and was probably one of his closest college friends. Her funeral is really, really hard to get through.

Richie cries in the taxi on the way back to the hotel.

It's only three days after her funeral that Eddie gets the call.

This is the one that hurts the most.

Mr. K wasn't exactly old, but she had never been very healthy, and she'd been having problems with her heart the last few years.

That doesn't mean Eddie was expecting to learn his mother had suffered a heart attack in the middle of the night, was found in the morning, and had been dead for hours at that point.

They have to fly back to Maine again.

Eddie is forced to arrange the funeral, because his aunts are incapable. Once they get through that, there's still more they have to deal with. He's got to sort through Mrs. K's finances, to start, and when Richie tries to help, one of Eddie's aunts calls him a gold digging fag.

"Say that again," Eddie says, calm, "and I will leave this house, and I won't ever be back."

"Edward."
"I've put up with shit from all of you this week because I know you loved my mother, and her death has been hard on you. But there's a line. And if you think I'll let you talk to my husband like that, you are as deluded as my mother was before she died alone, unloved, and forgotten in her bed."

"Eddie!"

The look on his face leaves no room for argument.

They leave Maine that night.

Suffice to say, the whole fucking month of July, 2009, sucks. By the time it's over, Richie feels exhausted in a way he never has before. He's never even really had to think about death before, and, suddenly, it was punching him repeatedly in the face.

---

It's late when they get home at last, and as soon as they walk in, Eddie says he needs a shower, and he makes a beeline for the bathroom.

Richie starts unpacking their suitcases. It isn't that much of a chore; most of their clothes go straight from the suitcases into the washer, the rest of the shit is easy to put away, too, and he shoves the suitcases into the back of the closet. He's done in a matter of minutes.

He texts Bev to ask where she is.

busy ;) she replies. how's my baby boy doing?

Bev had come to Maine for the funeral, but she'd had to return before them for work. he's happy to be home, I think, he texts. He hears the shower turn off, and he opens a bottle of wine, heading to the bedroom.

Eddie is pulling on briefs.

"I figured you could use a nightcap," Richie says.

Eddie smiles softly at him. "Have I ever told you that I love you?"

He hands the bottle to Eddie. "Bev is out for the night." He strips to his boxers, tossing his clothes in the direction of the laundry, and climbing onto the bed where Eddie is waiting.

"Do you know what's weird?" Eddie takes a drink straight from the bottle.

"That pickles are basically rotten cucumbers?"

"You love pickles."

He grins. "I didn't say I had a problem with it." He takes the bottle that Eddie passes him. "It's weird, though." The wine is a rich red that he knows will put him to sleep.

"The idea of going out doesn't feel appealing to me at all," Eddie says.

"It's been a long, shitty couple of weeks."

"That, and just—in general. I swear I used to like going out. But now it seems like such a chore. I'm turning into a boring old man. I just want to spend my night at home with you."
Richie hands Eddie the bottle. "That's because I bring the party to you," he says.

"Seriously, though."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah. Do you—like, do you still want to go have wild crazy nights on the town?"

He thinks about it. "Well, yeah," he admits. "I do. But I'm just as happy just sitting around in my undies with you." He shrugs. "I'm always happiest when I'm with you." It might sound like a load of sap, but it's true.

Eddie lays back against the pillows. "Me, too." He smiles.

"What are you thinking about?"

"What?"

"You're doing that thing," Richie says. "That face. You make that face when you're thinking about the way to say something."

Eddie is amused. "I do?"

"Yup." He rolls onto his belly, trapping one of Eddie's legs under his arm, and smacking a kiss to Eddie's knee before he uses an elbow to prop his head up, to look at Eddie. "So." He grins. "What are you thinking about?"

Eddie bits his lip, and seems to decide to go for it. "I'm thinking about kids."

He blinks. "Like—"

"Like what it'll look like when we have kids," Eddie says.

Oh.

"I don't mean that I want a kid right now, or anything. I just think we're getting to the point where we—where I, at least, might be ready. And I've just been thinking about the details at lot more. Like. Would we adopt a baby, or foster? What would we name a baby? Do we just want to have just one?" He shrugs. "I guess everything with my mom has made me think about it more."

"I figured we'd have more than one," Richie says. "I always wanted a sibling."

"Me, too."

It's quiet. Eddie offers Richie the bottle of wine, and Richie shifts to sit up, to accept it, and take a swig. "And as far as names go, I figured that was easy." He scoots to sit by Eddie.

"Easy? Why? What did you have in mind?"

"Constantine."

Eddie's brow furrows just slightly. "That is surprisingly . . ."

"It's unisex!"

"Well, I wouldn't say it's—" Eddie's face changes when he cottons on. "No. No way. No! We are
not naming a child after Hellblazer, Richie." He glares.

"He's iconic!"

"They would take the child away from us!"

"Fine." Richie sighs. "I would agree to Rorschach."

"Nope."

"Magneto?"

"No."

"Spawn."

Eddie takes the bottle of wine from him.

"Come on! He would be the coolest kid in fucking existence!"

"He would be bullied relentlessly."

"Luigi?"

"Seriously?" Eddie's voice rises in pitch. "Do you want our child to get swirlies in the toilet every fucking day of seventh grade?"

"Well, fine," Richie says. "I don't hear you piping in with any great ideas."

"That's because I don't know if I want to have a child with you anymore. Now that I know you're going to hate our child, I have to reconsider. I can't believe you suggested Spawn with a straight face. Spawn! Spawn, Richie! Spawn!"

"I know you're upset. But the more you say it, the more I like it." He grins.

Eddie shoves Richie, and Richie just darts away from him, laughing, and grabs Eddie's hands to lurch in again, to slobber a kiss on his neck, and they nearly spill what's left of the wine in the tussle that follows.

Richie winds up flat on his back with Eddie on his thighs.

"You're a brat," Eddie says.

"I'm a brat?"

"I try to have a serious, adult conversation with you, and you rile me up on purpose." He glares. "Brat." There's no heat in his words, though, and something like affection is warm in his gaze. "Seriously," he says, pinching Richie's stomach. "What would you want to name a baby?"

"What would you want to name a baby?" Richie asks.

"I don't know about a boy," he admits.

"What about a girl?"

"If we got a baby," Eddie says, "and we got to name her, and she was a girl, I think—I think I'd want to name her after my grandma." He licks at his lips. "My dad's mom, I mean."
"She was the lady with the blue hair, right?"

He smiles. "I think it was supposed to be gray. It was dyed." He bites his lip. "She died when I was pretty young. I was old enough to remember her, but I was still pretty young. I just—she's the only relative I can ever remember really just—really loving." He swallows, and seems suddenly small and sad and wistful.

"Tell me about her," Richie says.

"She was, well, my mom said she was trailer park trash, and she did live in a trailer and have, like, four husbands, but she was fun. She loved baseball. I remember I'd sit on her lap, and we'd listen to it on the radio, and she'd cover my ears before she'd say all these swear words, but I could always hear." He smiles. "And I remember she had this bright orange lipstick, and there was this one time when I told her I liked it, so she put it on me. My mom lost it when she saw me. Lost it. She screamed at my grandma that I wasn't some trashy trailer park tranny, and my grandma just laughed in her face. I must've been, like, five. Six. She used to call my mother a goblin."

He grins. "You know, I think I would have liked your granny."

"She would have loved you." He pauses. "I wonder, sometimes, if she had lived longer, whether she would have intervened when my mom started to mess with my head. I think she would have. I think she would have called my mom on her bullshit long before I did."

"Okay," Richie says.

"What?"

"If we get a girl, let's name her after your grandma."

Eddie is amused. "I haven't even told you what her name is, though."

He shrugs. "If you like it, I like it."

Eddie leans over to place the wine on the bedside table. His movements are deliberate. He bends and presses a soft, sure kiss to Richie's belly, and to his chest, and he takes Richie's face in his hands before he kisses him with sweet, wine-stained lips.

Richie rolls them over until they're on their sides, and they kiss lazily, tipsy and tired and in love.

"I love you," Eddie murmurs. "I love you so, so much."

"I love you, too." He brushes the hair out of Eddie's face. "You are the sprinkles to my vanilla ice cream."

It makes Eddie smile, but there's something else hiding in his gaze. "Rich." His nose brushes Richie's. "Can you tell me the truth?" He looks at Richie like he's afraid to hear the answer.

"Tell you the truth about what?"

"If I had..." He bites his lip. "Do you think I could have saved her?"

Richie doesn't understand. "Who?"

"My mother. If I'd stayed in Maine, could I have helped her? Gotten her to therapy? If I'd gotten her help, we maybe could have had a relationship, and I could have gotten her to eat healthier, and exercise. And—"
"Babe."

"I don't know." He covers his eyes with his hand. "I'm being stupid. I've just been thinking about it. I just feel bad." He wipes at his cheeks, blinking really quickly.

Richie's heart seizes when he realizes Eddie's crying.

"Hey," Richie says. "Hey, hey, hey."

"I should hate her, right? My mother. I should hate her for what she put me through. And I have hated her. I've hated her for years. But now that she's dead, I just feel like shit."

"She was your mom." Richie rubs his back. "Even if you hated her, you couldn't help but love her."

"If I loved her, why did I just abandon her?"

"You didn't. She forced you away. That's on her, Eds."

Eddie just shakes his head. "This last few weeks with her funeral, and with my aunts, and—and being in Maine, and thinking about growing up, it's made me think about when we have kids, and then I think to myself that I can't, that I'd mess it up. I was a shitty son, and I can't just pretend I wouldn't be a shitty dad, too. I mean, I think I'd be good. I want to think—" He hicoughs.

Richie tugs him in closer. "You weren't a shitty son. She was toxic, and you got yourself away from that. That has nothing to do with the kind of dad you'd be." He can feel Eddie's tears on his neck.

Eddie doesn't say anything, but he clings to Richie.

"And you're allowed to feel bad that she's dead. That doesn't mean you should have done anything differently when she was alive. It just means that it feels bad when people die." He presses his lips to the top of Eddie's head. "You were the best son you could be with a mom like that. You were a better son than I would've been. And you're a fucking amazing husband and friend and nurse, and when we have a kid named Spawn, you're going to be a fucking amazing dad, too."

Eddie shakes against him with a snort of laughter.

"I love you," Richie says, emphatic.

Eddie tilts his head up to look at Richie. "Don't ever leave me, okay? I mean it. You can't ever leave me ever. Even when we're old and decrepit and playing fucking checkers at the home, I get to die first. Okay?" His eyelashes are stuck together with tears.

"Okay." He leans his forehead against Eddie's. "I promise."

They lie like that for a while.

Eddie wipes occasionally at his eyes, and Richie rubs his back and strokes his hair and murmurs more suggestions for names that make Eddie laugh and huff and shove at his chest.

Eventually, Eddie mumbles about brushing his teeth, and they get out of bed to go to the bathroom.

It's past two in the morning when they switch off the lights.

He thinks he'll be holding Eddie tonight, but Eddie curls around him as soon as they're under the sheets, hugging his back, and that's the last thing Richie remember before he's asleep.
That fall Eddie decides that he's going to run a marathon. He's run plenty of races over the years, sure, and Richie took cheerleading from the sidelines to a whole new level when Eddie ran a half in L.A. He's never talked about tackling *the beast*, though.

"I think if I taking training seriously, I can do it," he says.

"I believe in you," Richie says.

"You know the first person who ran a marathon died at the end," Bev says.

Eddie is unconcerned. "He didn't have my strict training regime." He turns the screen of his laptop so Bev can see the overly detailed, color-coded schedule he's made for himself. "I've got the discipline to keep it. Also, I'm in the shape of my life right now. I'll put myself on a good training diet, too." He makes grabby hands when Richie takes a carton of milk from the fridge.

"You realize you're stuffing your face with weirdly giant Oreos right now?"

"Hey!" His cheek bulges with an Oreo. "My husband made these Oreos especially for me."

"It's my own, original recipe," Richie says. "Combine the cream of five regular, puny Oreos to make one giant, superior Oreo. Repeat."

Bev puts her chin in her palm. "You should go on one of those baking shows."

"I have the talent."

"Obviously."

Eddie takes the glass of milk that Richie hands him, and tilts his cheek up for a kiss.

The marathon he plans to run isn't until May, so he really does have plenty of time to train, and, of course, he does take it super seriously. He runs a half in January, and *kills* it. By the time the marathon rolls around, he's more than ready for it.

Richie is, too.

He's wearing a Beverly Marsh Original. It involves a lot of spandex, and the bulkiness of the plate makes just walking around kind of struggle, but it's worth it. He's the best looking plate of spaghetti you've ever seen.

He has a sign, too. RUN, SPAGHETTI, RUN! He decorates it with pictures of meatballs he found on the Internet.

He plans his route for the run so that he can pop out of nowhere to cheer on Eddie at seven different times over the course of the run. One of them doesn't work the way that he'd hoped, but, still, that's six times he gets to cheer, wave his sign, and dance in a suit of spaghetti while Eddie flips him off, running by.

Richie is there, too, when Eddie crosses the finish.

He can't help but feel a surge of pride. He knows it's Eddie's accomplishment, but it's pride *for* Eddie. He ran a marathon. Your average Joe can't just fucking *run a marathon*. Eddie's kind of amazing.
He shakes his head at Richie when he sees him.

"I brought a bag for you to upchuck in," Richie says, holding up a bag from Kroger with a grin.

Eddie takes Richie's face in his hands to drag him down for a kiss.

Bev snaps their picture.

They end up framing the photo for the mantel. After all, they want to remember the moment. It isn't every day a guy successfully runs a marathon.

---

The day of the audition, Richie wears an old, Gin Blossom t-shirt with a hole in the collar. It's one of the shirts that Eddie sleeps in, which means it smells like Eddie, and that means it's as close as Richie can get to bringing Eddie to the audition with him. His jeans are clean, at least, and the short-sleeve, button up Hawaiian print he wears on top of the t-shirt is one of his favorites.

He is going to audition for SNL.

It happened.

He got an invitation.

He'll be given ten minutes to show his stuff, and if they like him, he'll be offered a spot on next season's cast.

"I can't believe it's happening," Eddie says, making them omelets.

"You're going to do Charlie Sheen?" Bev asks.

He nods. "For my impression, I think so. I don't know which characters I want to do, but I'm going to wing it. See what comes to me in the moment." He's always been good under pressure.

"I kind of want to take off work." Eddie hands Richie a plate. "Go with you, and sit in the lobby."

"That would be very soccer mom of you," Bev says, amused.

"It's called being supportive."

"Go to work," Richie says. "Both of you. I'll meet you guys for drinks tonight, and I'll tell you all about it."

He's actually a lot less nervous than he thought he'd be. He knows he's funny. And, yeah, this is SNL, and he should most definitely be nervous, but he can't help but feel confident that he's going to rock it.

He's Richie fucking Tozier, okay?

Eddie gives him a kiss before he heads to work. "I love you, and I support you."

"Thanks, Mom."

Eddie rolls his eyes.

Three hours later, Richie is standing in front of the camera at 30 Rock.
For a character, he chooses one of his best, most practiced characters, "politician who is definitely a sexual predator trying to convince the press that he is not a sexual predator." He does his impression of Charlie Sheen. And, inspired, he fills up the rest of his time being an angry soccer mom who's also a mail order bride from Russia.

He thinks he's done, but they ask him for more of his voices.

"I'm told that's your specialty."

He grins. He can do voices 'til the cows come home.

By the time he leaves, he's feeling pretty good about himself. He texts Eddie that it went fucking great! He got real, bent over belly laughs from the producers.

He's got time to kill that afternoon, so he takes Queeny for a walk, and he plays Call of Duty, and he brings Bev coffee just to get a look at the woman at her office that she's got the hots for.

He isn't expecting them to call him back that evening.

He's late for drinks.

He sees them through the window when he gets there. Bev is drinking a Cosmo, because that's her drink, and she's running a hand through Eddie's soft poof of hair, and Eddie is laughing at something she's saying, nursing a glass of wine, and scrunching his nose up playfully in response to whatever she's doing with his hair. Richie's heart swells up in his chest until it feels too big to fit.

He goes in, and throws an arm around Eddie's shoulders, lugging him in for a loud, wet kiss on the cheek.

"There you are," Bev says, smiling.

"I come with news."

"News?" Eddie's eyes start wildly searching Richie's face. "What's the news?"

He grins.

Eddie grabs Richie's arm. "What's the news?"

"I already got the call," he says. "I impressed them that much."

"Does that mean . . . ?"

"Yup."

"Rich!" Bev laughs.

Eddie's grip on his arm tightens. "You're going to be on Saturday Night Live? Seriously?"

"Seriously, I am going to be on Saturday Night Live."

Eddie grabs Richie in a hug, and Bev puts her hands to her mouth to whoop, and Richie kisses Eddie, pulling him into his chest, and turning him around on the stool, dipping him dramatically.

"Brody!" Bev says, flagging the bartender. "We're going to need a bottle of champagne!"
He decides to post a video to YouTube in which Bev interviews him. After all, the world has questions. And, honestly, the Buzzfeed article titled *SEVEN THINGS YOU DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT RICH TOZIER* is lacking in the real good shit.

Number two is just that he's from Maine. What the fuck? If you're going to describe him in only seven facts, pick a better fact than that.

It's because of SNL, of course, that Richie's name explodes.

He's basically an unknown at the start, having never acted in movies, or made any appearances on late night TV. He's popular, though. His ignorant, sex-obsessed American tourist character in particular is a hit, and reviews are eager to praise his ridiculous, raunchy voices, and when he plays Robert Gibbs in a sketch, it's called "the best performance of the night" and, also, "his portrayal of the White House Press Secretary reveals the range of SNL's previously unknown newcomer," which, yes, he's hilarious, it's true.

(Things aren't *totally* smooth sailing with SNL.

He keeps getting kind of really in trouble with the producers for improvising during filming, but he's trying to reel that impulse in.

It isn't like the audience knows about any of that, though.)

Anyway.

People on the Internet magically discover his old, forgotten YouTube account, and they start bombarding him with requests for new videos, and he can't help but give the people what they want.

He has no idea what questions Bev has prepared for the interview, but that's what makes it fun.

It turns out she has a *range* of questions.

"If you could only eat one flavor of Popsicle for the rest of your life, what would it be?"

"You can save one endangered species. Choose. The rest will definitely die."

"If you had to make a living by playing a sport, what sport would be most likely to keep you from immediate, abject poverty?"

"How do you feel about the Pope?"

"If you were a musical instrument, which musical instrument would you be?"

"You were fired from radio for having a boyfriend. If you could talk to the man who fired you now, what would you say to him? Please answer with a visual."

"What's your favorite Shania Twain song, and why?"

That's probably his favorite of the night.

"May I answer in song?" he asks.

She bites her lip to suppress a grin. "Please." She nods at him with the most serious face she can
muster.

He clears his throat. "Don't wantcha for the weekend, don't wantcha for a night," he sings. "I'm only interested if I can have you for life, yeah. / Uh, I know I sound serious; and baby, I am, / You're a fine piece of real estate, and I'm gonna get me some land." He moves to his feet.

Bev takes the camera that's set up, following his movements.

"I'm gonna getcha while I gotcha in sight, I'm gonna getcha." He points at Eddie. "I'm gonna getcha if it takes all night, yeah, you can betcha."

Bev pans the camera to Eddie. He smiles, and sticks his middle fingers up.

After Richie's performance, he's kind of out of breath.

Bev starts right back up again, though. "Who was that man standing there?" Bev asks. She sets the camera back on the tripod.

"That was my husband."

"How much would you say your husband loves you?"

"Well, Bev." He crosses his legs. "Since I'm the only person who's ever sucked his dick, I feel pretty confident when I say he loves me a lot."

She doesn't try hiding her grin.

That's the end of the interview. It's less than ten minutes in total. They post the video that afternoon.

It blows up overnight.

"I still can't believe you just knew the lyrics of Gonna Getcha You off the top of your head," Eddie says, reading the comments on the video over Richie's shoulder.

"You know I possess photographic hearing."

"Stop! Scroll up again. What the fuck?" He points at a comment. "I am not a twink!"

"Babe. You really think that, don't you?"

Eddie is indignant. "I'm not! I am a man in my mid-thirties, and—"

"You're wearing argyle right now," Richie says.

"What's the matter with argyle? It's professional! What about what you're wearing?" He waves a hand at Richie. "You look like you're fucking sixteen! Look at you! Your fly is unzipped right now!"

"First, I'm in the comfort of my home." Richie ticks off a finger. "Second, I have an awareness of how to dress fashionably. I just choose to ignore it, because I don't need to catch any fish when I've already got you on the hook. You're the one who doesn't actually know how to dress. Third, being a twink is more than what you wear."

"I am not—"
"It's who you are, cutie."

Eddie crosses his arms. "If you ever want to have sex with me again, you will say that I am not a twink."

"Okay." Richie can see that Eddie's serious. "Don't get your panties in a bunch."

"Say it."

"Eds, you are not a twink." He winks.

"Don't you fucking wink at me."

"Okay, okay, okay!" He holds up his hands. "I'll say it again, and I won't wink this time. Eds, you are not a twink." He winks.

"That's it!" Eddie starts walking away from Richie. "We're never having sex again."

"Wait!" He trips out of the chair, running after Eddie, and slamming into his back, hugging him from behind. "You, Edward Spahgedward, are an ugly old man who could never, ever be mistaken for a twink." He presses a row of kisses to his cheek. "Better?"

"Nope."

"Do you want me to tell the masses on the Internet, too?" He squashes his nose into Eddie's cheek. "I will."

"Didn't Tony tell you not to talk to people on the Internet?"

"I do what I want."

Bev chooses that moment to wander into the kitchen from her bedroom with bleary eyes. "Morning, boys." Her voice is flat, and she makes a beeline for the coffee that Eddie made earlier.

"Beverly," Richie says, "I want you to know that Eddie is not a twink."

"Cool." She pours a mug for herself. "I'm glad I asked."

"Aw." Richie rests his cheek on top of Eddie's head. "I love when my two favorite human beings are being little grumpy goblins together."

"I am not a twink," Eddie says.

Bev tilts her head at Eddie in sympathy. "Sweetie."

"I'm not!"

"If you want," Richie says, "we can role play later, and I'll be the twink."

Eddie elbows Richie in the ribs.

He makes more YouTube videos after that. He gets an idea for some funny shit, films it, and shares it with the world. And the world is ready to watch, because he's Richie fuckin' Tozier, and he's on SNL, and he's hilarious. Who wouldn't want to watch Richie with chopsticks in his nose telling vaguely sexual ocean jokes in the voice of a walrus while Eddie snorts into his beef lo mien? In a month, he's got millions of followers.
He knows he's made it big, though, when he's invited to be on *The Graham Norton Show*. He gets the call from Tony, and he doesn't quite believe it. "Wait, why?" he says. He isn't promoting a movie right now, or anything, and he isn't that big of a name by himself.

"I don't know," Tony says. "You're a celebrity. Who gives a shit?"

The producers at SNL say it would be really good press, so they're going to pay for his airfare to England, for his hotel.

He's a celebrity.

He's going to appear on a talk show with a handful of other famous people, because *he's a celebrity*.

---

They decide to turn Richie's appearance on the show into a vacation. Eddie takes three weeks off work, and they fly to Europe for the first time together. After they're done in England, they're going to go to France, Germany, and Austria.

(It takes a while to come to a decision about where they would go.

Neither of them knows anything about Europe, and "going to Amsterdam just to smoke pot legally is *not* how we're spending our honeymoon, Richie," and, in the end, they write down six different plans, put each scrap of paper in a hat, and make Bev pick a plan at random.

For a week, Eddie is unbearably, indecently *smug* that his first, favorite plan got picked. Still. Richie is excited.)

The trip has to start in London, of course, because that's where *The Graham Norton Show* is taping.

Richie is star-struck when he sees who's on the show that night with him. His first talk show appearance is alongside Julie Walters, Justin Timberlake, and Will Smith. He is going to share the stage with the Fresh Prince of Bel-Air. He texts a blurry stalker picture of Will Smith to Eddie *immediately*, because this is the best thing ever. He manages to calm down before they actually starting filming, thankfully.

Conversation flows easily. Richie has a chance to tell Will Smith that he's a fan. He proves to Julie Walters that he can, in fact, do a sultry pirate voice. He's having a really good time. The show doesn't actually focus on Richie until they start talking about hidden talents, though.

"Now, Rich, what about you?" Graham says, turning to Richie. "What are *your* hidden talents?"

"I don't have any hidden talents."

"You don't have *any* hidden talents?" Graham asks.

"Here's the thing, Graham," Richie says. "If I have a talent, I don't hide it."

That draws a laugh from the audience.

"That's fair," Graham says. "That's fair. But, you know, I thought you might say that, which is why I called your husband, and I—"
"You called my husband?" Richie asks.


"That is my husband."

There's laughter again from the audience.

"Now!" Graham makes a show of shuffling his cards. "He gave me a number of suggestions. Number one." He looks at Richie. "Karate. Would you care to demonstrate?"

"I—no," Richie says, laughing. "No, I can't. I have no hidden karate talents. I promise." He has a feeling he knows where this is going, and he looks at the audience like he'll be able to find where Eddie is seated.

"No?" Graham says. "Okay. What about painting?"

"Painting?"

"You can paint?" Julie Walter asks.

"I'm told that he can paint a masterpiece in under ten minutes. That's a quote. He can paint a masterpiece in under ten minutes." Before Richie has a chance to protest, Graham is turning in his chair to press a button, to make an easel slowly rise out of some hidden panel in the ground. "I'm sure everyone would love to see that."

"Sorry," Richie says, shaking his head. "I have absolutely zero artistic talent. Zero. You've been lied to."

"Oh." Graham just blinks at him. "But, well." He looks at his card. "But you are secretly quite good at dancing, is that right?"

"No! I'm a—I'm a really terrible dancer."

"Wait," says Justin Timberlake, "is this actually a list of things you're terrible at?"

"I think it is!"

"Calligraphy," Graham says, reading off his card, and Richie just covers his face with his hands, laughing, and shaking his head. "No? No, you are terrible at calligraphy, too?"

"I have a question," says Julie Walters. "Does—now, Rich, answer me honestly—does your husband like you?"

Everyone in the audience is laughing at him now.

"Here's the thing," Richie starts.

"I don't think he does," Graham says. "I don't think he likes you at all."


That earns a roar of laughter from everyone.
"He did list off one more talent," Graham says. "Let's cross our fingers, everyone. He told me that you write song parodies, and you can perform them when requested. Is that . . . ?" He raises his eyebrows at Richie.

"That, actually, is true."

Graham throws his hands up triumphantly. "Finally," he says.

"Can you sing?" Will Smith asks.

"I . . . yes. Technically. I think I can. Eddie would probably say I can't, which I guess is how this ended up on the list."

"Well, now you have to perform for us," Graham says. "Oh, and look at that! I have a microphone for you! What song are you going to perform for us? It has to be funny. That's your thing, right? You're funny."

"Is that my thing?"

"That is your thing," Graham says, nodding.

Richie rises to his feet. "I'll try not to disappoint." He buttons his jacket, heading for the makeshift little stage that's suddenly been lit up, that has a microphone waiting for him. "Do you know the song Like a G6? Can you play the music for that?"

"Oh, this is going to be good," Graham says. "I can already tell. I'm going to like this."

It does actually go off pretty well.

Richie remembers about halfway into singing his parody about rocking a fanny pack at the beach that things get dirty in the middle, and he tries to come up with new, cleaner lyrics on the spot, ends up laughing while struggling to sing, and humming his way through a part of it, but that just makes everyone laugh more.

"That was beautiful," Graham says.

Richie sits back on the sofa beside Julie Walters. "It's dedicated to my husband."

"He's here tonight, isn't he?" He points his cards at the audience, and a light is thrown on where Eddie sits smugly in the crowd. "Everyone say hello to Eddie!"

Richie grins, and shakes his head at the sneaky little bastard.

Eddie just blows him a kiss, and Richie makes a show of catching it, of holding it over his heart.

The rest of the show isn't focused on Richie, and he's more than okay with that. He gets in a few more good jokes. The moment it's over, he shakes a lot of hands as quickly as he can, and he makes his way to where Eddie waits.

"Eddie Spaghetti," he says, approaching him. "The sun in my sky. Is there something you might have forgotten to tell your husband?"

Eddie taps his chin thoughtfully. "Hmm, well, now that you mention it, did I tell you that Graham Norton's people called me a couple of weeks ago?" He grins. "I swear I meant to tell you." His eyes are bright, are happy, and Richie is so in love with him in that moment, he's stupid with it.
He sweeps a hand into Eddie's neat, perfectly styled hair. "Calligraphy?"

"Some could argue your handwriting is art," Eddie says. He put his hands on Richie's waist, threading his fingers into the belt loops of Richie's dark, fitted trousers. "They certainly aren't going to argue it's legitimate, legible writing."

"Karate?"

"You took that self-defense class with Bev. Remember? You could have learned karate in that."

"I can paint a masterpiece in under a minute?"

"Now, in my defense, that one is on you." Eddie grins. "You were the one who claimed at fifteen that you could paint a picture with your cum in the length of time it took you to bust a nut."

"I don't remember that."

"I do," Eddie says. "It was nasty. It stuck with me."

Richie has to kiss him at that, because Eddie is still so pleased with himself, but his nose is wrinkled in disgust, too, and, oh, right, he's dressed to the nines, is wearing a snug, tailored suit that makes him look so good it's a crime, and he just pulled such a good one over Richie, and Richie has to kiss him, okay? It's a slow, dirty kiss, admittedly.

That's why he's surprised after when they break apart, and Eddie says "I'm proud of you" in a voice that's soft and warm and loving, pressing his forehead to Richie's.

"Because I bagged a catch like you?"

"For everything." He rubs his nose gently against Richie's. "For everything you've accomplished. For how hard you've worked. For everything, Rich."

"I couldn't have gotten this far without you."

"Bullshit."

Richie runs a hand down Eddie's back, and up again. "I'm serious. I could have gotten pretty far, sure. I know I'm fucking hilarious. This far, though?" He shakes his head.

"Well, okay," Eddie says. "You're welcome."

There are a lot of things to do in London. They have time; they'll be here for the next three days. For their first night, Richie's got plans.

Eddie takes over, of course.

The door of their hotel room shuts behind them, and he wraps Richie's tie around his first, leading Richie towards the bed.

Richie grins.

Eddie sits, and with a tug on Richie's tie, pulls Richie down with him. Richie plants his knees on the bed to hug Eddie's hips, and takes Eddie's face in his hands, kissing him. Eddie tugs again on the tie, tightening it. "You aren't coming until I say," he breathes. He catches Richie's gaze, and
holds it, reaching a hand to palm Richie's dick though his pants.

"Yes, sir," Richie says, smirking.

Eddie grins back at him before he slides his hand out of the tangle of Richie's tie, and starts to undo the buckle of Richie's belt instead.

Richie shrugs off his jacket, and loosens his tie enough to discard it, too, and ends up rolling off Eddie, and onto his back, trying to shimmy out of his trousers. Eddie stands again, moving to yank off Richie's dress shoes, and help him with his trousers, with his boxers. The moment they're off, Richie dips off the bed to land on his knees, and he starts pulling down Eddie's trousers, mouthing at Eddie's dick though his underwear.

Eddie's hand skates through Richie's hair, pushing his head into his crotch.

Richie's always been about that ass.

Eddie, though? Eddie loves Richie's mouth best.

Richie grips Eddie's thighs, tonguing at Eddie's clothed erection while Eddie finishes getting undressed, tossing his jacket and his tie and his nice, fitted blue button-up. Eddie pushes Richie away finally, and toes off his shoes, stepping out of his trousers, and taking his underwear off, too, and Richie uses the opportunity to yank off his own button-up, and he surges up to wrap his arms around his husband, to kiss him.

"Get the lube," Eddie says.

Richie stumbles toward their suitcases.

He's back at the bed in a matter of seconds, and Eddie is waiting, sitting, and stroking his dick.

"Who's getting dicked down this evening?" he asks.

He takes the lube from Richie, and tosses it down the bed. "That's for me to know." He turns to crawl to the center of the bed, and Richie follows eagerly, only to end up pinned back against the mattress with a lapful of Eddie.

He grins.

Eddie just climbs on top of him, sliding his hands up Richie's chest, and gripping his shoulders, kissing him. Richie palms Eddie's thighs greedily, and squeezes Eddie's ass, rolling his hips, and sliding his dick up between Eddie's cheeks. Eddie's lips trail across Richie's jawline, and he mouths at his neck, at his collarbone; Richie bucks against Eddie's ass when Eddie sinks his teeth into Richie's collarbone, tonguing at the sensitive, singing skin after, and sucking, leaving a mark.

Richie's hand paws at the silky hotel sheets in search of the lube.

Eddie trails kisses further down his chest to flatten his tongue to Richie's nipple.

"I'm going to fuck you 'til you can't fucking walk," Richie says, finding the bottle, and flipping the lid up with his thumb. "I'll have to push you around in a shopping cart tomorrow." He's ready to flip them over, but he can't.

Eddie isn't going to budge.

Richie can work with that, though.
Eddie's teeth graze his chest before he leans up, kissing Richie's pulse and his jaw and his mouth.

Richie can feel the hitch of Eddie's breath when he brushes his finger over Eddie's hole. He grins, and teases at the hole, canting his hips inadvertently when Eddie's hands push roughly into Richie’s hair, twist, and pull. He gives Eddie what he wants, and sinks a finger into him.

Eddie ruts against Richie's stomach while Richie fingers him, rocking back against Richie's hand when Richie curls his finger, and adds a second.

"You're desperate for it, aren't you?" Richie squeezes lube into his palm to coat his dick. "Is that what you were thinking about at the show? How you were going ride me after? How that's your secret talent?"

"Nope," Eddie says, rising up.

Richie's eyebrows fly up, and he opens his mouth.

Eddie covers his mouth. "I was thinking about fucking you, because you want to know what your real hidden talent it? The thing only I know? How fucking good you take it." He grins, and moves off Richie.

"You're serious," Richie says, breathless.

Eddie's whole chest is flushed with color, and his dick is hard and red and leaking, bobbing eagerly against his stomach, and he picks up the bottle of lube with a grin.

Richie rolls over.

He doesn't even have the chance to push his ass up, because Eddie grabs his hips, and drags his ass up himself, bending, and biting.

"Fuck, Eds!"

In answer, Eddie rubs his thumb against Richie's rim. "Desperate, Rich?" He bends, pressing his mouth to the knots of Richie's curved spine, and slides a hand around his hip to stroke Richie's dick.

"I—"

Eddie presses his finger into Richie's ass.

He chokes.

"There was a lot I wanted to say to Graham Norton's people when they called," Eddie says, starting to fuck Richie with his finger. "I couldn't, though. I couldn't tell them how good you fuck me, or what it's like when I'm fucking you, when I'm buried in your ass." He slides another finger in, scissoring. "And people might think they know how good you are with your mouth, but they have no fucking idea."

Richie just presses his forehead to his forearm.

Eddie is stroking his dick at a painfully slow, tantalizing pace, and three of his fingers are slowly stretching Richie's ass, and it feels so, so good, but it isn't enough.

"Babe," he says. "I need—"
"What?"

"I need it faster. I need you to fuck me. I need—"

"You need my dick in your ass?"

"Please."

Eddie's fingers pull away from Richie. "Remember." He kisses Richie's back. "You come when I say." He strokes Richie's thigh, and the blunt, swollen head of his dick brushes Richie's hole.

"Fuck, I love you," Richie says, fisting a hand in the sheets. "Come on. Fuck, Eds, please, I—"

Eddie pushes fully into him.

"Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck. Fuck!"

"I love you, too." Eddie's hands tighten on his hips. "I love you, Richie." He starts to fuck him in hard, full trusts, and every single stroke hits right fucking there, because they know what they're doing and know what angle works perfectly, and they know how to make each other fall apart in a matter of minutes. "I love you, I love you, I love you."

Richie's dick throbs, and he wants to touch it desperately, needs to.

Eddie's thrusts quicken.

"Eds, I—"

"Nope," he breathes. "I say."

Eddie comes untouched this way constantly, and he likes to, wants to, but Richie can't, and he doesn't want to; his dick is begging for something to stroke it, a hand or a tongue or an ass.

Eddie's hands bruise Richie's hips, and his voice gets snagged with soft, desperate grunts, and he fucking lifts Richie's ass with the force of his thrusts.

"Eddie, babe, Eds, please—" he babbles. "Please, I—"

Eddie comes with one last, hard thrust.

Richie can't help but reach for his dick, figuring it's allowed, and Eddie fucking slaps his hand away from it. "Eds—!" But he can't even get a word in before Eddie is pulling out of him, and manhandling him, forcing him onto his back.

Eddie throws a leg over Richie's thighs, straddling him, and gripping his dick.

"Yes, thank you, Jesus, I—"

He thinks Eddie is just to jerk him off; he isn't expecting Eddie to swirl his tongue around the head of Richie's dick.

"Fuck."

Eddie sucks him down suddenly, and Richie grabs Eddie's hair, and swears again when Eddie glances up, meeting his gaze. It's the hottest fighting sight Richie's ever fucking seen. He pulls off until only Richie nearly slips out of his mouth, and he loosens his jaw, and Richie can read the look
on his face, the permission.

"I love you," Richie says, bucking his hips, and Eddie takes it, lets it happen.

He lets Richie fuck his mouth.

Richie pushes his head back against the pillows at how fucking good it feels. He isn't going to last too long, because he's already so close, and he can't even think about anything but thrusting up, but fucking into Eddie's warm, wet mouth. He tightens his grip in Eddie's hair, and comes so hard it makes him see fucking stars.

He's aware of Eddie pressing a sloppy kiss to his hip before he climbs off Richie, dropping to lie on his back.

They lie there like that together, staring at the ceiling, and catching their breath. That was really, really fucking good.

"I don't think I can move for the rest of the night," Eddie says.

"I love you," Richie says.

Eddie laughs softly. "I know."

They order room service that night, because neither of them is interested in leaving the hotel.

They take a bath in the big, Jacuzzi bath, though, and watch old episodes of The Graham Norton Show on YouTube, and, lying in bed, they look at good, fun restaurants they could get breakfast at tomorrow to kick off their great, grand, overdue European honeymoon.

---

(There's an older, dorky guy on one of the tours in Austria who's obsessed with birds, wearing a pair of binoculars, and asking the guide endlessly about birds despite the fact that it's a Sound of Music tour. Richie has the time of his life with him. He talks to the guy, making up weird bird facts that has the guy wrinkling his nose in disbelief, and flipping through his book of birds for verification.

He doesn't know why, but it fucking tickles Richie to mess with a big bird nerd.)

---

Bev sits them down not long after they return from vacation. "Okay, so." She says that she loves them, and she loves living with them, and she's so, so glad they came to New York City with her. "But now that my relationship with Stephanie is becoming more serious, I'm thinking about moving in with her. We've talked about it. I know it's a big step, but I really think we're ready for it, and I want to try it." She seems so anxious in that moment, chewing on her lip, and waiting for a reaction, sitting so awkwardly, her hands on her knees.

"I think that's amazing," Eddie says.

"Yeah?"

He smiles. "If it's what you want, it's what we want, too. Stephanie is nice."

"Nice?" Richie says. "I think you mean Stephanie is—"
Eddie slaps his hand over Richie's mouth. "Nice," he repeats. "And we love her. And, more importantly, we love you, and we support you, and we're happy that you're happy." He gives Bev a bright, encouraging look.

She laughs. "I love you guys. Seriously, though. You won't miss me too much?" She raises her eyebrows.

"We'll miss you way too much," Eddie says.

"But it's not like you're getting rid of us," Richie says. "We're like lint. You'll have to burn the sweater to the ground if you want to get rid of us."

"Good to know." She smiles.

Three weeks later, they help her move. She doesn't have too much stuff, and they hire movers for the afternoon, so it really isn't much of a chore. But after they're done, they go for dinner to celebrate, and open a bottle of champagne, and Stephanie doesn't even annoy Richie as much as usual.

---

The timing is good, actually, because Richie's started thinking more about whether they're ready for a kid.

It turns out Eddie's been thinking about it, too.

They're walking Queeny together when he mentions it. "Hey, so. I've been thinking maybe we're ready to think more seriously about kids," he says. "And I know your career is going really well right now, and throwing a kid into the mix will kind of force you to hit the brakes a little, so I understand if you want to put it off. I don't want you to resent the kid. Or me. But I figured it was something we could talk about." He shrugs, and finally actually looks at Richie.

"The truth?" Richie says, trying to keep from smiling too widely.

"Definitely." Eddie nods firmly. "The truth."

"I've been thinking about it, too." He grins. "Let's do it, Eds. My career can survive a tap on the brakes. Let's do it."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously."

They walk quietly for a minute, exchanging big, stupid grins.

"So." They have to stop to let Queeny do her business. "What, ah." He sucks his teeth. "What happens now?"

---

After a bit of debate, they decide to foster. The plan is eventually to adopt, of course. This is a way to ease into having a kid, though.

They have to apply, and once the application is accepted, they have to participate in a whole, elaborate home study, and it includes, like, training for parenting and talking about discipline and discussing the mental, emotional, and physical needs of children, and there's background checks
they have to pass, too.

It's a process.

Eddie starts reading different parenting books. It's awesome. He totally blows away the lady from social services when he starts to discuss his philosophy of parenting.

"Children are people, too," he says, "and they deserve respect. If there's a rule we want a child to follow, we'll explain why we have that rule. You wouldn't just tell an adult they have to do something because you said so. You'd explain why the rule is in place. You'd give them that respect."

They are approved to foster.

It's happening.

They're really going to become somebody's parents.

They don't put down a preference for age. They talk about it some, because Eddie kind of wants a baby, and Richie thinks it'd be easier to start with a teenager, and, actually, the majority of kids in the system are in the middle age range. They decide they'll just have to see who needs a home.

---

Richie gets Eddie's text when he's at the studio. call ASAP. He excuses himself quickly, escaping to the quiet, empty hallway to make the call.

"I need you to come to the hospital," Eddie says, foregoing a greeting.

"What?" He frowns. "Why?"

What's the matter?

Eddie was working an early shift today; he should be home by now.

"I don't want you to worry. I'm fine. But there's a baby that needs a foster home. She's here, and social services people are here, too, and I—I might have said that I could take her. But I know we need to talk about it first."

He rubs his forehead. "There's a baby at the hospital right now?"

"She's only nine days old," Eddie says, "and she's premature. I helped deliver her. I told you about it. Remember? This woman was brought into the ER for an overdose last Tuesday, and Dr. Wiley had to perform an immediate emergency caesarean. I helped."

"Yeah," Richie says. "I remember. You said she was tiny."

"She was. She is. The mother's heart failed, though. We were able to save the baby, but the mom? She died on the table." He pauses. "She never even gave the baby a name."

"You told me that, too," Richie says, soft. "And there isn't any other family?"

"They haven't been able to find any. They were able to locate some friends, but none of them knows who the father is. And there don't seem to be any relatives. And I was talking to the social services woman, and I mentioned that I'm certified to foster, and . . ."
"And you want to take her," he says.

"Yeah. I do."

"Do you really think—fuck, do you really think we could handle that?" Eddie is talking about a tiny infant baby. Like. He wants them to take a fresh fucking baby. "I don't . . . I don't know anything about babies, Eds."

"We'd figure it out," Eddie says. "I mean, I won't lie to you. It'd be rough. She's premature, and she has NAS. Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome, I mean. And she's already doing better, but she'll probably have symptoms of withdrawal for at least another month. And they haven't been able to find any family, but they could, and they would take her from us if they did. We'd have to be prepared for that."

Richie is hesitant.

"She doesn't even have a name, Richie," Eddie says, soft. "She doesn't have anything." It's obvious Eddie's already got his heart set on this.

"Do I have to make a decision right now?" he asks.

"She is going to have to stay in the hospital for at least another week. But. Why don't you come down to the hospital to meet her? And you can say no after. I know I'm asking a lot. I just . . . I helped to bring her into the world, Rich. I—I'm attached. I just want you to think about it."

"Okay." He nods. "Let me finish up with something here, and I'll be by in, like, an hour."

"That'll work," Eddie says. "You can text me when you get here."

"Okay."

"I love you."

"I love you, too." He hangs up.

For a moment, he stands here stupidly. Eddie just dumped a load on him, okay? He ends up going to the hospital sooner than he'd said. He can't focus on work now. It's Thursday, so it's a good day for Richie to take off early anyway.

Could they handle a baby? Probably. He knows Eddie could handle a baby. He could handle any age. He's great at taking care of people.

I'd be shit, he thinks.

But.

He'd love her, and he'd tell her that every single day, and he'd support her, and he'd be interested in everything she was interested in, and if she got scared or lonely or confused, he'd help her through it.

She's a baby, though, he thinks.

Can he parent a baby?

At the hospital, Eddie takes Richie to the NICU.
He wasn’t lying about the baby being tiny. He thinks his sneaker might actually be bigger. He stares at her in her little, heated incubator. She's tiny and pink and wrinkly. She's a little baby shrimp, he thinks.

"She's cute," he says.

"Here." Eddie gives Richie hand sanitizer. "You can reach in through those holes."

It makes him feel kind of weird just sticking his hands into holes in the incubator to touch her. Her skin is really, really soft. And when he brushes his fingers against her cheek, she turns into the touch. She's got soft, downy fuzz on her shoulders, he notices, and he can almost fit her whole little head in his hand.

"She's doing really great," Eddie says. "The doctors were nervous for a couple of days, but it seems like she's just about out of the woods. She's sleeping and eating and growing."

He clears his throat. "Good."

"Can you tell me what you're thinking?" Eddie asks.

He sighs. "I'm thinking . . . I had a Snickers for breakfast. But you can't feed a baby a Snickers for breakfast. I'm thinking if you trust this kid with me, I'm going to fuck it up." He tears his gaze from the baby to look at Eddie. "But I know you want her, and—and, fuck, I want her, too, because, like, she's got nobody, and I'm better than nobody, and you're going to be a super awesome dad, but you just have to know that I'm not going to be any good at it at least when she's little like this, and you can't hate me for that. Okay? I'll try, but . . ." He shakes his head.

"Richie." Eddie smiles softly. "I love you. You're crazy, though. You know that? You're going to be a super awesome dad, too, because you're going to care so much, and you're going to try so hard, and that's going to be enough. Trust me."

"You say that now, but I know nothing about babies."

"I'm not exactly a baby whisperer. Neither of us knows what we're doing. But we can figure it out."

Richie looks back at the baby again. She smacks her lips. He strokes a finger down her little bare arm, touching her hand, her fingers, her palm, and he smiles inadvertently when she clutches at his finger with a tiny vice grip.

"Sweetheart?"

He swallows. "Okay," he says.

"Okay?"

He looks at Eddie. "Okay." He's still scared out of his mind. He wasn't kidding about Eddie having to take charge with her at the start. He won't deny Eddie this, though.

He won't deny himself this.

"I'm in," he says.

"You're sure?" Eddie asks. "Do you want to sleep on it? I don't want you to say yes just because you know it's what I want."

"Nah." He smiles. "I'm good. My mom's going to flip, by the way. I haven't end told her that we
were planning to foster. She always wanted a girl, you know. She'll be psyched."

"I'm sure." There's a smile in Eddie's voice. "Okay, then." He touches a hand to Richie's back. "I'll get Sharon. From social services. I'll be right back." He leans up, kissing Richie's cheek. "I love you. Have I told you that? I really, really love you, Richie Tozier."

"I'm very lovable, it's true."

It isn't until Eddie leaves the room that Richie leans in closer to the incubator.

"Hey, kid," he says. "I guess we're doing this, huh? I'm . . . fuck, I don't know. Shit. Don't tell anyone I just said fuck."

It's like she hears him, because she opens her eyes.

He swallows.

She is looking at him.

"Hey." He rubs his thumb over her belly. "So. What should we call me? We can't do Papa. It makes it sounds like I'm a bear, or, like, from Little House on the Prairie. Eds has got to be dad, though. I'll be . . . Pop? That's not so bad. Pops. What do you think? Think you can live with it?"

She turns her face into his palm. He takes that for a yes. She's a very agreeable baby.

Eddie returns again with the social services woman in tow.

Sharon is a blonde, middle-aged woman with circles of exhaustion under her eyes, but she smiles when she shakes Richie's hand, and she explains everything clearly. She's the caseworker for the baby, which means she is the point of contact for the state, and she'll be checking in with Richie, Eddie, and the baby continually over the days, weeks, and months to come. The baby is being put temporarily in their care, though in the eyes of the law she will remain, ultimately, a ward of the state. If family isn't found in the year to come, they can start the process of adoption, and, should they choose to do so, she will help them with every step of the process.

There's paperwork they have to complete, too.

"You'll need to pick a name for her, too," Sharon says. "First, middle, and last." She smiles.

"Really?" Richie says. "We get to—we get to choose? Surname, too?"

"She's got to have a name on her birth certificate. Can't wait six months for that. Now, of course, the birth certificate will have her mother's name listed under parents, but your names can replace it if in the future if you choose to adopt her."

"But she can have our surname?"

"It's up to you." Her phone starts buzzing on her hip. "Why don't you get started on the forms?" She gets to her feet. "I'll be back in a couple of minute if you have any questions."

It's quiet.

"I figured with fostering, we wouldn't get to pick a name," Eddie says.

"Me, too," Richie says.
They look together at the baby in her incubator.

"You want to name her after your grandmother?" he asks.


"For what?" Richie blinks. "Wait, for her?"

"Sharon said we could pick her surname, too," Eddie says, amused.

"Yeah," Richie says, "but I assumed when we had kids we'd use Kaspbrak."

Eddie's eyes widen. "Really?"

"Yeah."

"I assumed we'd use Tozier," Eddie says.

Richie is honestly slightly floored. "We could use both?" he suggests. "Hyphenate it?" It isn't the best idea ever, but it's an option. He can't believe they've never talked about this.

"No." Eddie shakes his head. "That would just make her life more complicated."

"So . . . ?"

"Let's use Tozier."

"How about rock, paper, scissors?" Richie says. "If I win, we use Kaspbrak. If you win, we use Tozier."

They try it. It doesn't work, because they both choose scissors.

They discuss doing a thumb war, but Eddie refuses, because he insists it wouldn't be a fair contest when Richie's got giant ass thumbs.

In the end, they play pick-a-number. Richie chooses eight, and Eddie chooses seven. He would. Richie texts Bev to pick a number from one to ten, and it takes her a minute to reply, but she doesn't ask questions when she does. She's a good sport like that.

nine, she texts.

Richie pumps a fist in the air. "I win."

Eddie just sighs. "You're sure? You really want her to have my name?"

"Positive," he says.

Eddie is hesitant, but he fills in the form with neat, block letters.

FRANCES SHIRLEY KASPBRAK

This is real. It's happening. Eddie is completing the paperwork for them to foster an infant. And if things go the way they want, they'll adopt her. This is happening.
They're going to have a baby.

Richie goes to look at her in the incubator. "I've got some big news, kid. Ready? You've got a name now." She flails an arm in answer, and he smiles. "Frances Shirley Kaspbrak," he says. "What do you think? You're named after some awesome old ladies. We're going to call you Francie for short, though. We're a family that's big on nicknames. How's that sound?" His heart beats faster just standing there looking at her.

She is going to be their baby.

Francie.

His phone buzzes softly in his pocket.

*why?* Bev asks.

He grins. *we had to pick a surname for the baby,* he replies.

She sends him several texts back.

*baby?*

*where did you get a baby?*

*is it actually a cat?*

*what the fuck? is this a real baby? did you STEAL A BABY?!*

Richie!

"Why are you grinning over there?" Eddie asks.

He looks up. "I'm happy."

Eddie smiles softly. "Sit," he says, and he gets to his feet. Richie isn't sure what Eddie wants, but he sits. "Unbutton your shirt." He frowns, and he starts to unbutton his shirt, and that's when he realizes.

"Eds, wait."

Eddie is opening the incubator.

He panics. "Can you do that?" he asks. "Can she breathe if you—?"

"She can breathe on her own," Eddie says. "She has apnea on occasion, but she's breathing just fine right now. The incubator is mostly to keep her warm, and you can do that." He's got her in his arms, and he's heading for Richie with her. "It's good for her, actually."

"What if I hold her too tight?"

"Don't."

"That isn't really the reassurance I need, babe."

Eddie just places her in Richie's arms, and he shapes Richie's arms to hold her. Richie is frozen. She is lying pressed against him, her cheek on his chest.
Richie's hand spans her whole back.

Eddie unfolds a blanket from a stack and drapes it over her back, tucking it under her sides.

"Is she okay?" Richie asks.

"She's great. She's with her dad."

"I thought—I thought you'd be Dad, and I'd be, like, Pops, or something." He drops his gaze to look at the baby. "Right, Francie?"

"Okay." Eddie smiles again. "She's with her pops."

Sharon returns finally.

Eddie does actually have a couple of questions about the forms, and she answers them easily while Richie sits with Francie. It takes him a while to relax, to let the tension out of his shoulders. But once he does, it's kind of nice to sit there with her, and look at her, feel her soft little puffs of breath.

"That's it," Sharon says, rising to her feet. "Congratulations. You're now officially foster parents."

Somehow, the words manage to startle Richie.

It's like the waves of what's happening keep coming, and they keep taking him by surprise. They are now officially foster parents. It occurs to him that it's been all of two hours since he got Eddie's text to call him ASAP, and, in that time, he's become a parent.

"You doing okay over there?" Eddie asks.

"I think I'm in shock? But. It's good?" He raises his eyebrows. "I think."

Eddie just smiles.

They end up spending the rest of the afternoon in the hospital with Francie, and the evening, too, and they have to go home eventually, but they'll be back to see her again tomorrow.

---

She is released from the hospital on a Wednesday. They are ready for her. Eddie has gotten paternity leave, and Richie has another three weeks of filming SNL before the season is over, but they gave him this week off, and they have stocked the apartment with everything they need for a baby.

There's only one small, minor issue.

Neither of them have any idea how the fuck to care for a small, breakable human baby.

They try to give her a bath when they get home, and they've got that little mesh tub thingamabob that sits in the sink to keep her safe, but her skin is slippery, and she's got a lot of limbs that flail, and she can't even fucking hold her head up by herself.

"Careful," Eddie says. "Careful! You don't want to get water in her ear!"

"You told me to clean her ears!"

"I told you to clean behind her ears. Here. Give me the washcloth, and I'll do it."
They manage to give her a bath without killing her.

The days that follow are an *experience*.

Changing her diaper isn't difficult, although she'll produce a hurricane of poop on occasion, and Eddie will gag while he's wiping the poop that's exploded up along her back, and, admittedly, wiping is challenging at times, because girls parts have lots of, like, creases, but practice makes perfect.

They get good at swaddling, too, which is an *art*, and isn't easily done, thank you very much.

But even while they start getting more confident about caring for her, they have to deal with the fact that having a baby is *exhausting*.

She needs their attention, like, 24/7.

In the hospital, she was fussy a lot, would get fevers, and *shake*, and it was scary. But by the time they were allowed to take her home, she was better. She was healthier, and the symptoms of withdrawal were almost completely gone.

Still.

Eddie says she's *particular*.

She isn't a very good eater, and they have to coax her into it, which means giving her a bottle can take half an hour. She isn't colicky, exactly, but she cries pretty easily, and she cries a lot. And, of course, she can't sleep for more than a couple of hours at a time, which means they can't sleep for more than couple of hours at a time.

They start taking turns by night, so only one of them is exhausted each morning.

After Richie goes back to work, Eddie starts doing it almost every night. He doesn't have anything to do in the day that he needs to be fully rested for, although, of course, it takes a toll on him, and he becomes permanently irritable. Richie comes home more than once to find that Francie is napping in her Rock-N-Play, and Eddie is napping on the sofa.

It isn't long before they switch.

Eddie has to return to work, and Richie is done with work for the summer, and he becomes the primary nighttime caretaker.

The best, of course, is when Bev comes to babysit, and she stays the night.

"What's the plan for tonight?" she asks, tugging her shoes off by the door. "You guys going to have a night on the town? Come back when you're tipsy, and get a little frisky?" She grins. "I can spend the night in the nursery with Francie if you want to have some wild kitchen sex."


"What?"

"We'll be sleeping if you need us," Eddie says. "Please don't need us. Please."

She presses her lips together to reign in her amusement.

They get, like, a solid nine hours of sleep. It's heavenly. And, yeah, when they wake up, they get a
little bit frisky in the dark of their bedroom, because Bev can handle the baby for a little while longer.

Before they know it, it's been a month.

They have cared for a baby for a month. They have given her bottles for a month, changed her successfully for a month, woken up every few hours with her for a month. She's putting on weight like a pro, growing, becoming a happy, healthy baby. She's thriving. Richie is pretty fucking pleased with himself, with his family.

---

There is something about the way she watches Richie when he gives her a bottle. He holds her with her head in the crook of his arm, and she sucks on her bottle, and she *stares*, and her gaze is always so bright, so steady. It's like she can't look away from him.

He can't ever seem to look away either.

"Hey, baby," he says. "Hey."

He doesn't think anybody's ever stared at him that closely, that keenly.

"Do you want to hear a joke?" he asks. "How do you get Pikachu on a bus? You *poke-him-on.*" He smiles. "Get it?"

She stares.

He strokes a finger against her soft pink cheek, and he holds her gaze, and he thinks she's a wonder.

---

His parents have never visited them in New York City, but they come at last in June to meet the baby.

Maggie is madly in love with her from the start. "Oh, my," she says. "You are a little *doll* baby, aren't you? Yes. You are *beautiful.* Yes. Yes. Yes." She fawns over her endlessly.

His gran is there, too.

She tears up when she tells Richie how touched she was that they gave the baby her name. "I cry every time I think about it!" She blows her nose on a handkerchief. "I'm so proud of my boys. This sweet girl is blessed, you know, to have such good, kind young men for parents. Oh, I wish Ray could be here!" She sniffs, and pats Eddie's cheek, and announces that she is making her meatloaf for dinner that night.

Went asks Richie to put ESPN on TV, because he wants to watch Wimbledon.

They stay for a long, *long* week.

"I'm going to cherish these memories of all of us together," says his gran.

Right.

He is going to cherish the arguments with his mother about her *need* to drown his baby in blankets.

"You don't want her to catch a cold," she says. She acts like they live in the Arctic fucking Circle
with the number of blankets she pulls out of her ass to pile on top of Francie. "I want my grandbaby sleeping snugly."

"You aren't supposed to cover a baby as little as Francie," Richie says. "It's—"

"Hush."

"I'm serious!"

"I put blankets on you, and you survived."

He scoffs. "I'm a cockroach. You could have nuked me, and I'd have survived. I can survive anything." He reaches to tug the blanket away from Francie.

She smacks him. "Don't make me get my bug spray," she says, pointing a finger at him.

He is most definitely going to cherish watching tennis with his dad, though.

"Surname is Kaspbrak, huh?" Went says, taking the beer that Richie hands him. "Does that mean you're the woman of the house?" He grins.

"There isn't a woman, Dad," Richie says. "That's why it's gay."

His gran, at least, is easy.

She sits around the apartment, drinking a lot of water with lemon, and telling Richie how much she misses his grandfather.

He is more than happy when the cab to the airport arrives on Sunday.

"I want you to send me more pictures of her," Maggie says, standing on the curb, and searching in her purse for something. "You don't send me enough. You know I check my email every day."

"I will."

She puts her sunglasses on Richie, and fixes her lipstick using her reflection in the lens.

"You're coming up again for Christmas, right?" he says.

"Right." She takes her sunglasses back from him. "Listen, dear. I know I don't say it a lot, but I'm going to say it now. I'm very proud of you. You've made a career for yourself, and it seems like you're a good husband, and you're going to be a good dad. You seem happy, and I'm glad." She smiles.

"Yeah." He blinks. "Thanks."

"I'll call you when the plane touches down in Tampa."

"Yeah."

She squeezes his arm, and turns, because his gran is already in the cab, and his dad has loaded up the trunk with their suitcases, and it's time for them to leave.

"I love you, too!" he blurts.

She glances at him, smiles, and climbs into the cab.
Up in the apartment, everything is quiet. Eddie is warming up a bottle of formula for Francie while she waits in her Rock-N-Play with a pacifier. He smiles at her, and heads for Eddie.

He needs a hug.

And when he presses his face into Eddie's cheek, he can feel the shape of Eddie's smile, and, yeah, he is happy.

---

By the end of the summer, Francie is able to sleep for hours at a time until she's nearly sleeping through the night.

The timing is perfect, because Richie returns to work in September.

They decide to hire a nanny to watch Francie during the weekdays. Richie is weirdly anxious about it, but the girl they hire is great. She graduated from NYU in May, is taking a year off to study for the MCAT, and is more than willing to follow Eddie's ridiculously specific instructions for everything.

It's great to return to work, to spend his day with grown people again, and make them laugh, to get in front of the camera.

He's always really eager to make it home at the end of the day, though.

The older Francie gets, the more fun she is.

She gets to the age when she likes to play with them.

She likes to look at Richie, and at every funny face he makes, she squeals and coos and smiles. She likes to play peekaboo with them. She likes it when they sing. She likes to play with her toes by herself, and to have them play with her toes. She likes to sit on Richie's chest, and poke at his glasses and pull on his nose and stick her fingers in his mouth, and when he sticks his finger in her mouth, she giggles.

She's got the cutest fucking giggle in the world.

Queeny is hesitant to bestow her affection on Francie at first, but she warms to her over time. Of course, Francie loves Queeny from the start. She likes to sit with Queeny, and babble to her, and Queeny is patient when Francie plays with her ears or grips her paw or tugs a little too hard on her fur, although they are trying to teach her what it means to pet. Once Francie starts eating solid foods, Queeny is eager to help her clean up after every meal. Francie giggles madly while Queeny licks her hands and slobbers on her face and noses at her neck. She's never, ever scared. Francie knows Queeny loves her.

The older Francie gets, the more aware of things she becomes.

Darryl visits them in November.

Eddie gives Francie to him to hold, and he smiles at her, and says, "hello, Francie!" in a soft, sweet voice.

She eyes him, and turns her head to look at Eddie. Richie has to smile at the look of who is this? on her face. She's calm, though, until Eddie starts to walk into the kitchen. Her bottom lip starts to tremble. She looks around wildly, discovers Richie sitting on the sofa, and bursts into tears.
"Hey!" he says, getting to his feet. "Hey, Buddy. It's okay."

She doesn't stop crying until he takes her from Darryl. Immediately, she calms. She sits on his hip without a problem, and her suddenly calm demeanor is strange to look at when she's got pink, tear-stained cheeks, too.

"What's the matter?" Eddie asks.

"She was upset at my cruelty," Richie says. "I was forcing her to sit in the arms of a stranger when I was in the room, and aware of the situation."

"She loves her pops," Darryl says, smiling.

She does.

She's old enough that knows her parents, and she loves them.

She knows her auntie Bev, too, and she is comfortable with the nanny, but, at the end of the day, she is definitely most attached to the two of them.

By Christmas, she's a person with opinions.

She scrunches up her face when they give her avocado, and pushes it out with her tongue, letting it drip down her chin. She has a bear that's her favorite, that she must have when she goes to sleep at night, or nobody is going to sleep. She says "mik" whenever she wants something. "It means object of my desire," Richie says, showing a picture of her to some of the stagehands at work, "and it could be her bear, Eddie, me, Bev, a paperclip that catches the light, or, you know, an actual refreshing glass of milk." She loves to clap, and she gets upset when they don't clap with her. She decides she doesn't like having her diaper changed regularly, and she'll fight them with everything she's got, kicking her legs and rolling and trying to wiggle her way to freedom, and Richie has to throw a leg over her torso to trap her in place.

She can do more than just wiggle, too.

She is starting to crawl, although at the moment she is mostly just dragging her back legs behind her.

She'll learn to use her knees.

She's a fucking baby savant, okay?

She likes to read, to turn the pages of the books, and point at things in the pictures the way that Eddie does when he reads to her.

They take her outside to play in the snow in January. She loves it. She discovers that she can eat the snow, and insists on feeding them snow, too, and it's clear how much Eddie loves her when he allows her to shove dirty chunks of snow into his mouth for half an hour.

It seems like every day she is changing, and learning, is capable of more and more and more.

She knows her name, and responds to it. She blows spit bubbles when she sees Richie blow spit bubbles. She starts babbling real words, and she isn't assigning any meaning to them, but she will be soon.

By the end of winter, they are betting on when she is going to walk, and Richie is confident it'll be
before she turns one.

---

The day's pitch meeting runs late, and he comes home to discover Eddie cooking. He pauses in the doorway of the kitchen. Francie is sitting on his hip, and she's babbling, and Eddie is stirring a pot of pasta, listening, and interjecting on occasion. "Is that so?" he says. She rocks in his arms.

"Hey," Richie says, announcing his presence.

She spots Richie over Eddie's shoulder. "Pop-ppy!" she says, pointing.

He grins.

"Hey, hun," Eddie says.

Richie wraps an arm around him from behind, pressing a kiss to the back of his head and leaning in to blow a raspberry into Francie's cheek.

---

He isn't expecting it. He'd forgotten. She'd been with them for months, and it seemed completely laughable to imagine she wasn't fully, legally their baby. They meet monthly with Sharon, of course. He's aware they haven't officially adopted her.

They are going to, though.

He assumes that's why Sharon wants to meet with them on Thursday.

It isn't.

"I have some news for you," she says, sitting in their kitchen at eleven in the morning. "I know that you were hoping to adopt. But the state was able to locate a relative, and she is applying for custody."

"What?" Richie's stunned.

"I know this is a shock. I'm here to answer any questions you have. You're going to be contacted by the guardian ad litem that's assigned to Francie. Now, of course, there is a chance that the judge will decide it's in Francie's best interest to stay with you at the recommendation of the G.A.L., but I want to warn you that often the goal of everyone in situations like this is to place the child with their family."

"We're her family," Eddie says.

"I know."

Richie feels like he's taken a punch to the stomach. "Who's the relative?" he demands. "And where the fuck have they been for the last fucking year?" They can't really just take her, can they? Somebody who doesn't even know her can't just take her.

"Grandma," Sharon says. "She hadn't even known her daughter was pregnant."

"Why did it take this long to find her?" Eddie asks.

"She was estranged from her daughter, and she was actually in prison at the time of the birth."
"Prison?"

"Credit card fraud, I believe."

Eddie sits back from the table, pushing his hands into his hair, and shaking his head. "This is unbelievable." He looks at Richie.

"If she was in prison, we've got to be more fit to be her parents."

"You would think," Sharon says. "Her crime wasn't violent, though, and she's got a job, and sheis family."

"This is unbelievable."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Kaspbrak. I am. I think that the two of you are absolutely amazing parents. And the judge may agree that Grandma is unfit. He'll take into consideration that she was in prison, that she missed the whole first year of Francie's life."

"She's got my name," Eddie says. "Kaspbrak. She belongs to us. Her name is Francie Kaspbrak."

She shakes her head. "Names don't matter."

Eddie shoves his chair back from the table and walks away, heading for the stairs. Francie is upstairs. He'll calm down when he's with her, because she has that affect on him.

Richie, though?

He thinks he might be in shock.

"Do you want to hear more about what the process looks like?"

"I, um." He blinks. "Can we hire a lawyer?"

"Can you fight for custody?"

"Yes."

She sighs. "I'm afraid foster parents can't petition the court for custody. There are options. You have a voice in everything that's going to happen, because she has been in your care for nearly a year. But, ultimately, the decision is out of your hands." She gives him a small, closed-mouth smile in sympathy.

"Okay." He rubs the back of his neck. "Tell me about what happens next."

The weeks that follow are some of the worst in his life.

They are kept up to date on everything that's happening, are notified of hearings, and meet with the guardian ad litem. They're helpless, though. They don't have a voice, because, in the eyes of the law, they are temporary, stand-in parents, are babysitters, are a pair of guys who don't have any real claim on the baby they named, and cared for, and love.

And when the judge grants the grandma full custody of Francie, there's nothing they can do about it.

The last night they have her, they don't really put her to sleep when they should. They've got her on a really good sleep schedule now, but they just can't put her to bed with the knowledge that they
lose her as soon as she wakes up in the morning. She is clearly getting sleepy, but they keep her with them on the floor of the nursery, and they play with her.

Eddie makes her bear give her kisses, and she giggles, kissing the bear right back.

"She'll be so confused," he says. "She won't . . . it's not like we can explain it to her. She won't know what's happening. She won't know where we are. She'll think we abandoned her."

"She'll forget about us," Richie says. "Eventually."

"I guess that's good." Eddie wipes at his cheek. "Hey, baby." He picks her up. "I've got you. It's going to be okay. It'll be okay."

Richie isn't sure if Eddie is talking to her, or to himself.

In the end, they have Francie sleep in their bed with them that night.

Neither of them really sleep, though.

In the morning, they have to drive Francie over an hour to drop her off with her grandmother.

"We can volunteer to babysit," Richie says, pulling off the highway.

"Great," Eddie says.

"Or we can go back to the apartment, pack our bags, and flee to Canada. Change our names. I think I'd look good with a mustache."

Eddie doesn't reply.

He risks a glance off the road to look at Eddie, and sees him staring out the window.

"I knew this could happen," Eddie says, low. "I knew. Back when we agreed to take her, I knew it could happen. I just . . . I didn't think it would. And the more time that passed, the more sure I was."

"Me, too."

Francie plays quietly in the back, mouthing at a set of big plastic keys.

Sharon is waiting at the trailer for them.

Grandma, too. Debbie Jo Cothron. They had met her once before at court. She is young for a grandmother. She is barefoot in that moment, smoking a cigarette, and standing in the doorway of the trailer with a hand on her hip.

Eddie holds Francie so tightly it makes her squirm.

There is paperwork, and he goes to fill it out on the hood of Sharon's car.

"Morning," Richie says, approaching his daughter's new, court-approved family.

"You're late," Debbie says.

"There was traffic." He shoves his hands in his pockets. "Sorry."

She nods.
"I wanted to let you know that we're—we're available to babysit. Whenever. We're pretty attached to her, you know?"

"You're on SNL, aren't you?"

He blinks. "Yeah. Yes."

"Why don't you just buy yourself a baby?"

"I . . ." He doesn't know how he's supposed to reply to that. "I think we are going to look into adoption, but we care a lot about Francie."

"Crystal."

"What?"

"I'm going to call her Crystal. Your show is shit, by the way. Used to be good. Now it's run by a pack of liberals. Every fucking joke is pushing an agenda. I don't waste my time with it now. It isn't funny."

"Gee," Richie says. "Thanks."

"You know, I didn't ask for this," she says, nasty. "I didn't ask for my junkie whore daughter to get herself knocked up then stick me with the kid."

He frowns. "If you don't want her, why did you tell the court you did?"

"She's my grandbaby. My blood. Can't have my own blood being raised by a pair of faggots."

He stares.

Eddie is heading their way with Francie.

Richie turns quickly to intercede, to stop them from getting close, and blocking them from the view of that old, homophobic white trash witch.

"I don't think I can let go of her," Eddie says, quiet.

Richie leans down to press a kiss to the top of Francie's head, and he lingers, breathing in her sweet baby smell. She pokes at his jaw. And when he looks at her, she smiles, and there's a look of expectation in her gaze. She is waiting for him to make a face at her, to entertain her with some silly noise. He makes a little farting noise. She giggles, and she tries to make it back. Richie just leans in close, and he showers kisses across her face, trying to ignore the burn of tears in his eyes.

"Can I have her now?" Debbie asks sharply.

They don't have a choice.

Eddie has to let go of Francie. He presses his face into Francie's. "I love you," he murmurs. "I love you, I love you, I love you." She just coos back at him. He glances at Richie, and he swallows, and he hands Francie over to the woman who's supposedly her family.

Francie is confused, looking at Eddie, and at Richie.

"Um, I have her bear," Eddie says. "It's her favorite." He takes it from the bag he packed for Francie. "Mr. Bear. I've packed some other stuff, too, like a—"
"Keep it. I can buy her toys."

"She really loves this bear, though."

To prove it, Francie reaches for the bear. She hasn't put up a fuss about being held by someone else, so that's good. Richie doesn't think he could take it if she started crying right now.

"Look, I appreciate what you've done for my grandbaby. But I've got her now, and I've got it covered. You can be on your way."

"If you need anything, give us a call," Richie says. "Please."

"Sure." She starts up the stairs of her trailer.

Richie suddenly wants to think of some good excuse to stop her. He wants to find the words to make her pause, to make her stay in the yard, and give them just a couple more minutes. No. That isn't what he wants. He wants to find the words to make her change her mind, to make her give them back their baby.

But those words don't exist.

She goes into the trailer, and the screen door thumps closed after her. For a split-second, it's quiet. They know the moment that Francie realizes this isn't what she wants, because the sound of crying drifts easily out of the trailer.

"Thanks for driving her here," Sharon says, like that'll distract them.

"She's homophobic, you know," Richie says. "Debbie."

"Unfortunately, terrible beliefs don't make someone unfit to parent in the eyes of the law. I'm sorry."

"You know, Sharon, I think you're great, but I kind of hate you right now."

She sighs. "I kind of hate me right now, too."

"Let's go," Eddie says. "Now."

They don't talk in the car. Richie makes it three streets before he pulls off the road, because he can't get on the highway right now. He needs a minute. He shifts into park, and he puts his arms on the steering wheel, burying his face in them. He can't believe that's it.

They'll probably never see her again.

Eddie touches his shoulder. He shifts, and Eddie pulls him into a hug. He hides his face in Eddie's neck, and they stay like that for a while, hugging with the console awkwardly between them.

---

They are contacted about fostering for adoption, but Eddie politely refuses. "For now," he says. Richie isn't going to argue with him.

They have a lot of time on their hands.

Suddenly, they can sleep in every fucking morning. They don't have a baby to change, to dress, to feed. In the morning, they're just responsible for getting up themselves. And when they get home
from work, they can do whatever they want. Their evenings are their own again.

It's miserable.

To make it worse, they have no idea how Francie is doing. They are completely cut off. Richie is tempted to call trashy, homophobic Debbie and ask, but he knows it's pointless; the woman would probably just throw a slur at him, and hang up.

They can't do anything but worry about her. Endlessly. Eddie has to get a whole new prescription for anxiety. Richie isn't doing much better. It's lucky it's summer, and he isn't forced to pretend he's happy on live TV every week.

Bev is around a lot in the weeks that follow, suggesting a lot of things for them to do.

"We never did anything for your birthday, Eddie," she says. "Do you want to me to get a cake? We can have some beers. I bet I can get my hands on some pot. It might be nice to have a night to hang out."

"Bev, I love you, but I don't really feel like celebrating right now."

"Yeah." She nods. "I get it."

They should probably get rid of Francie's stuff. They aren't getting a baby again. Even if they did it via an actual adoption agency, and there was no chance it would be taken from them, it would be too fucking hard to have a reminder of the baby they lost.

Richie thinks they'll foster a teenager.

In a few more years, they'll renew their certificate to foster, and they'll take in a teenager that needs them.

They end up putting all of her stuff in the nursery, and closing the door. They'll deal with it eventually. There's going to come a time when they won't feel so fucking awful. ---

There's this thing his mother likes to say whenever she has a shitty day. "When it rains, it pours." He doesn't know if it's comforting to her, or what.

It's true, though.

Richie thinks things can't possible get worse, and they do.

Queeny stops eating.

She's thirteen years old, and she's already got arthritis, and she hasn't been able to jump onto the bed on her own for months. They know she won't live forever. But, still, Richie isn't ready for anything to happen to her yet. They take her to the vet. And, after a slew of tests, the vet explains that she's got a tumor in her stomach.

They want to pay for surgery.

That isn't really an option, though, because the cancer is already far along, and it's metastasized.

The kindest thing they can do for her is put her to sleep.
They take her to the park. They try to play with her, but she doesn't have the energy. They sit with her in the sunshine, though, rubbing her belly, and talking to her. At home, they give her a bath. She's always liked having a bath. They use the hair dryer on her after, because she loves that, too, and her tail thumps happily against the floor while they dry her fur, combing it, and telling her what a good, good girl she is. They lift her onto the bed to sleep.

In the morning, they take her back to the vet.

Bev comes with them, because she loves Queeny, too, and Queeny loves her.

Richie almost changes his mind about going through with it. "She's in pain," Eddie says, soft. "She hasn't eaten in almost a week." He knows. That doesn't make it easier.

On a bench right outside the office, Richie cries until his head hurts.

He knows he shouldn't be crying in public like this, but he can't help it. Eddie is crying, too. It's lucky that Bev is there, because Richie doubts their ability to make it home on their own.

She gets them on their feet, and she gets them to the apartment. She orders Thai for them, and she sits on the sofa with them while they watch bad reality TV for hours, while they eat, and drink their way through a case of beer. She tells stories about Queeny that make them laugh.

"Remember that time she chewed up one of each of my shoes? It was like she had to get a taste of each. She pooped a buckle right after, remember?"

They get high, too.

They spend the night in a heap on the sofa.

Richie doesn't really want to sleep in their bed, because he's used to sleeping in a bed with Queeny at the foot, and he isn't ready not to.

---

It's a Sunday when Bev comes by the apartment with her duffel bag slung over her shoulder.

He rubs at his eyes. "What's up?" It's, like, the crack of dawn. He doesn't function correctly at this hour. It's summer, which means he isn't up until ungodly hours every Saturday night, but that doesn't mean he's ready to wake up at six a.m. with Eddie.

"I got in a fight with Stephanie."

"Shit."

She nods. "Can I stay here? Just for a while? Until we figure it out?"

"Sure." He frowns. "It was really that bad?"

"I'd rather not talk about it." She tugs off her shoes. "Why can't everyone just recognize that I'm right one hundred percent of the time?" She drops her duffle on the floor and flops onto the sofa, letting out a long, put upon sigh. "It would save us from this drama."

He finds some double fudge ice cream in the freeze.

Eddie returns from his run to find them eating from the carton while playing Mario Kart.
"We're mad at Stephanie," Richie says.

"I'm glad that's led to a nutritional breakfast," Eddie says.

Richie knows he shouldn't be happy that Bev is there. She's in a fight with her girlfriend, with the woman she loves, and lives with. He should feel awful about that, and he should be encouraging her to talk to Stephanie, to fix it.

It's really nice having her around again, though.

It was strange when she moved out, but they brought Francie home pretty soon after, and there was a brand new normal.

Now it feels kind of nice to go backwards in time a little.

She's been staying there for nearly a month when they learn what the fight was about.

Richie is pacing the apartment in his boxers at two in the afternoon, working on a brand new routine.

(Richie's career has always been important to him, but he kind of hasn't given a flying fuck this summer.

Tony's really gotten on his ass the last few weeks in particular about how he needs to "get out of this funk" and "remember he's a comedian" and "do something to keep your name from becoming a relic." It's been a while since he's done stand-up, because he didn't have time for anything but SNL when he had a baby at home, but he's got plenty of time right now. He's promised Tony that he would put together a routine, and when it's done, he would let Tony book him some gigs.)

He isn't prepared for Bev to storm into the apartment with a blotchy, telltale face.

She's been crying.

"What—?"

"I don't want to talk about it," she says, waving a hand at him, and making a beeline for the bathroom.

He waits a solid two minutes before knocking on the door of the bathroom.

"I'm peeing," she says.

"I'll keep my eyes closed." He waits for her to protest, and when she doesn't, he eases open the door. "Hey, Ms. Frizzle."

She is sitting on the edge of the sub. "Sorry. I don't like to cry in front of people."

"I know."

She wipes at her cheeks. "We broke up. Things have been strained, and we—we finally just had it out, and we broke up." She sniffs. "It's over."

He flips the lid of the toilet, and sits. "I'm sorry."

"Yeah." She looks at him with an almost wry expression. "You want to know the truth?"
"What?"

"We didn't really get in a fight before. I came to stay with you guys because I thought you needed me. Things have been so awful for you ever since you learned you were going to lose Francie, and I—I've felt helpless to do anything to help you. I thought the least I could do was be here."

"Bev," he says. He had no idea.

She shrugs. "Stephanie was annoyed, but I didn't really ask her opinion. I just did it. It's always been a problem between us, though. She's never liked how I just drop everything for you guys. This pushed it to a head. She said it wasn't my responsibility to babysit you guys, and I said that wasn't what this was about, and she just—" She shakes her head. "She doesn't get it. She said I loved you guys more than I love her. And I told her she couldn't do that. She couldn't make that comparison. I'm allowed to love more than one person. And you guys are my family. And she said—she actually told me to my face that, no, you aren't. That you were my friends, and there's a difference. Well, that's easy for her to say with her nice, nuclear family. She—she doesn't get it." She wipes at her cheeks again.

"I'm sorry," he says.

"She said I had to make a choice, so I made a choice."

He reaches for her hands. "Is it too soon to say that she can go fuck herself?"

She laughs.

"I know I should probably say that you shouldn't give up your girlfriend for us, but—"

"I'm not giving up you guys." She squeezes his hands. "I couldn't. Even if I wanted to, I couldn't. If the person I'm with can't understand how much I love my boys, I can't be with that person."

He lifts her hands to smack a kiss to her fingers.

It makes her smile. "C'mere." She rises to her feet, tugs him up, too, and hugs him.

"For the record," he says, "it does help to have you here."

"Good." She turns her face into his neck. "Because now that we've broken up, I was hoping to move back in."

"You were hoping?" He scoffs. "You say that like you think we'd let you leave."

She laughs.

He wants to entertain her, to make her laugh some more.

But she admits that she wants some time to herself, and he can respect that. He leaves her to take a shower. In the kitchen, he texts Eddie that Bev broke up with Stephanie, and she's moving back in.

is it wrong that I'm happy about that? he replies.

Richie gives him the full story that night while they're getting ready for bed.

"You know what's kind of fucked up?" Eddie says, climbing into bed. "I know Bev is upset, and I should be upset, too, but I—" He shakes his head. "It's kind of nice knowing how much Bev loves us, you know? And I never liked Stephanie."
"Stephanie was mean," Richie says.

"She was!"

"And she would always say that's funny when I made a joke. You know who says that when they hear a joke? People who don't think the joke was funny."

"Well, you don't have to worry about that anymore."

Richie pulls back the covers.

"Hey, um. Eddie is hesitant. "You know Marisol? At the hospital? She asked me how I was doing today, and she told me if I ever wanted to talk, she was there. And I—I realized that I haven't really talked about everything, because I haven't wanted to. But it made me think. When she asked, it made me think—have you been wanting to talk about it? Because we can."

"There's nothing to talk about," Richie says.

"Yeah."

"We can talk about our feelings if you want. I'll go first. I feel sad."

Eddie smiles softly.

Richie scoots closer, reaching for him, and touching his cheek. "What about you?" he asks. "How do you feel?"

"I feel . . ." He sighs. "I feel like I've been living with my head under water for two months. I feel like since we had to give her to that woman, I haven't been living. Life has just been happening."

"That's a good way to put it," Richie says, because that's how he's been feeling, too.

"I love you."

He strokes Eddie's cheek. "I love you, too."

They lean in together.

It's a soft, sweet kiss at first, but it deepens, and Eddie's tongue slides slowly over Richie's tongue, and, soon, Eddie is shifting in the bed to climb on top of Richie. They make out in a way they haven't in a long, long time. Eddie pushes his hands into Richie's hair, and Richie's hand slip under Eddie's t-shirt, skating up his back, and back down again.

(Back when there was a baby, a dog, and two busy, full time jobs, the new normal was rushed sex. They would exchange messy kisses, and undress as little as possible, and laugh breathlessly into each other's mouths while they groped each other, while they egged each other on as quickly as possible, because they needed the relief, and they didn't have much time.

In the nearly two months since they lost Francie, they haven't really done anything. They've kissed. They've hugged. They've cuddled on the sofa a lot.

They've had sad, desperate sex in the dark a couple of times.

This, though?
Richie has missed this more than he realized.

"How tired are you?" Eddie asks, trailing a line of kisses to Richie's jaw.

Richie dips his hands under the back of Eddie's boxers, and squeezes his ass. "I don't think I'm tired enough. Couldn't go to sleep if I tried. I think someone needs to tire me out." He feels Eddie smile against his neck.

"You sound like the start of a bad porno." He moves to get the lube in Richie's beside table.

"Shucks!" Richie says, using a breathy, high-pitched voice.

Eddie starts kissing his way down Richie's chest.

"I have to be at work early tomorrow, and I just can't get to sleep! I wish there was something I could do. Oh! Mr. Kaspbrak! What are you doing in here at this hour?"

"Well, baby," Eddie says, voice ridiculously deep, "I was coming home from the gym, and I heard you sighing in here."

"You go to the gym? Oh! I love a man who goes to the gym."

Eddie's teeth scrape against Richie's nipple.

"Mr. Kaspbrak, do you think you could help me get to sleep? The problem is I'm just so full of energy. What can I possibly do with all this energy I have?"

"You just lay there, baby," Eddie says, shifting to hook his thumbs in the waistband of Richie's boxers, and glancing up at Richie with a grin on his face, still using that ridiculous porn voice, "and I'll do all the work."

"Oh, Mr. Kaspbrak!"

Eddie kisses Richie roughly, and Richie tugs at Eddie's shirt, breaking the kiss to tug it off of him. They've got to get rid of his boxers, too, but they make quick work of it. Eddie squirts lube onto his hand, rising to his knees, and playing a hand on Richie's chest for balance, reaching behind himself to finger himself while Richie runs his palms up Eddie's chest, pinching his nipples, and making his breath hitch slightly.

Richie loves seeing Eddie like this.

He loves the way Eddie's back arches, and the look on his face, the way his eyes slip closed almost inadvertently and his mouth parts just slightly.

Richie reaches for Eddie's dick, and palms it, sliding his hand down slowly to the base, and up again, brushing his thumb at the head, and sliding his hand down again, curling his wrist, and cupping Eddie's balls.

"Okay," Eddie says, breathless. "You—" He grabs the lube again, and coats Richie's dick, pumping him.

"Come on," Richie says, patting Eddie's thigh. "Get on."

Eddie almost chokes on a snort. "Sometimes," he mutters. He shifts onto his knees, and he sinks down slowly onto Richie's dick.
"Fuck."

"How's that feel, baby?" Eddie asks, using his new porn voice.

"Oh, Mr. Kasprak!"

Eddie leans forward slightly with laughter, grasping at Richie's shoulders, and starting to move.

He meets Richie's gaze.

His cheeks are flushed, and his hair is sticking up in the back from where Richie tugged it when they were kissing, and his lips are red and plump and kissed. Richie has to reach up, to swipe his thumb over Eddie's lip, and when he pushes his thumb into Eddie's mouth, Eddie's tongue swirls around it, and he sucks.

"You are the hottest fucking thing," Richie says.

Sometimes, it hits Richie that Eddie could have hooked any number of hot, perfect men. And, somehow, he decided it was Richie he wanted. He fell in love with Richie, married Richie, wanted to share a life with Richie.

And, God, does it feel good when Eddie is riding him relentlessly like this.

"Have I ever told you—?" Eddie pants. "—how much I fucking love—" He grinds his hips. "—your dick?"

"It brings all the boys to the yard."

"No." He digs his fingers into Richie's shoulders. "You're mine."

"Yeah?"

"I own the yard. Got it? Trespassers will be shot."

He grins. "Mr. Kasprak."

Eddie is grinning, too, and panting, fucking himself roughly on Richie, and staring at Richie like he can't look away.

Richie just tightens his grip on Eddie's thighs, and keeps his gaze on Eddie, sees the flush spread down his chest, and the glassy, wild look grow in his gaze, and, fuck, his back arches slightly off the bed when Eddie's ass clenches tightly around him.

Eddie practically whines Richie's name, and starts to swear. "Fuck. Fuck, Richie, fuck. Fuck!" His whole fucking back arches, and he pulls at the hair on Richie's chest, and he comes.

Richie tilts his head back against the pillows, and moves his hands to guide Eddie's hips, starting to fuck up into him desperately. He doesn't take his eyes off him. And when Eddie opens his eyes to meet Richie's gaze again, he's panting, and his eyes are glazed, and he whimpers from the overstimulation, but he lets Richie use him, and he breathes, "now, baby," and that's when Richie comes, too.

Eddie eases himself off Richie with a wince. "I love you." He falls onto his back.

"Hey."
Eddie turns his face lazily towards Richie.

Richie cups Eddie's cheek, and kisses him sweetly, because he wants to and he can and he loves him, too.

They have to get up, to clean up.

In the bathroom, Eddie pulls Richie in a hug. "It's going to get better," he murmurs. Richie doesn't know if Eddie is talking to him, or to himself.

He's right, though.

They get more used to it every day. He doesn't know that he'll ever stop worrying about Francie, or missing his puppy. But it's going to get easier.

In the morning, Richie makes pancakes while Eddie makes eggs, bacon, and scrapple, because they've decided they need to welcome Bev home with a worthy breakfast feast.

He starts to sing "my Popsicle brings all the boys to the yard, and they're, like, it's better than yours" at the top of his lungs to wake up their new roommate. She's able to ignore it for nearly ten minutes. But, eventually, she shuffles in with her hair in a tangle, drool on her chin, and wearing Eddie's clothes for pajamas.

They eat on stools at the counter, and discuss what they're doing that day, and it's the best fucking start to a day Richie's had in months.

---

They clear the nursery that afternoon. It's time. They dismantle the crib, and they put her things in empty cardboard boxes that Bev picks up from the ABC store, and they load up Richie's car. He'll take the stuff to Goodwill. They shove the expensive, cushioned rocking chair into the corner of the room, because it was expensive, and they can find some other use for it.

They threw out their old, crappy desk when they turned the room into a nursery, but they can buy a new one.

Once they do, the room will be their office again.

Eddie doesn't pack Francie's bear.

Richie doesn't realize until he sees it sitting on Eddie's bureau later that night.

It's a silky soft, big brown bear with a cute blue bowtie. Eddie had picked it out for her on a whim. For months, it had been bigger than she was, and once she got older, she took to hugging it, and resting her cheek on top of the bear's fuzzy head.

It's just going to gather dust sitting on top of the bureau.

Richie leaves it there, and doesn't say anything to Eddie about wanting to keep the reminder of her.

---

He groans when he hears Eddie's phone start buzzing in the dark of the bedroom. He assumes it's his alarm, and if it's time for Eddie to get up, it'll be time for Richie to get up soon, too. He could have sworn he went to sleep, like, two minutes ago.
Eddie is talking.

Richie doesn't really process that fact.

But, suddenly, Eddie is shaking him. "Rich, wake up. Richie. We've got to get Francie."

"What?"

"That was Sharon on the phone. She needs us to pick up Francie. I don't know what happened, but they're taking her away from her grandmother. They need us to pick her up."

He almost doesn't believe it.

Eddie is scrambling to his feet, though, switching on a lamp, and heading to his bureau, getting a pair of jeans.

The clock by the bed says it's one in the morning.

"Rich!"

"I'm coming," he murmurs. "Shit." He kicks the covers off. "Is she okay? Did they say what happened? Is she—?"

"They didn't give me any details," Eddie says, pulling on a sweatshirt.

"Shit."

"But if that woman hurt her, I'll stab her eyes out with her own goddamn cigarettes." His hands are clenched into fists. "I swear, Richie, if she hurt her, I'm going to lose it."

Richie tugs a shirt over his head. "Let's just get her back."

The drive is the most tense, anxious hour of Richie's life. Neither of them really speaks. There's a part of Richie that desperately needs to know she's okay, and that's what his mind keeps circling back to, but, also, there's a part of him that can't help thinking, we get her back, we get her back, we get her back, and it floods his stomach with guilt.

He shouldn't be happy to learn her situation has gotten bad enough that the state has to take her from it.

"Do you think she's forgotten us by now?" Eddie asks.

"Probably."

"Yeah." He clears his throat. "It's been over two months since she saw us last."

It's quiet.

Richie's panic sours to brand new heights when they get to the trailer.

There are three police cars circling the trailer with their lights flashing quietly. What the fuck? People are talking to the police, and neighbors are standing outside their trailers openly gaping at what's going on.

What is going on?
"Mr. Kaspbrak!" It's Sharon. "Mr. Tozier. Thanks for coming so quickly. I appreciate it."

She's got Francie in her arms.

Once Richie sees that, it's basically the only fucking thing he can see.

She's big.

Eddie takes Francie from Sharon as soon as he reaches her. She might not remember him, but she doesn't protest when he takes her. He holds her against his chest, running a hand gently over her soft, dark cap of hair. "Hey, baby," he breathes. "Hey." He looks like he might be about to cry.

She doesn't look like she's been hurt, thankfully.

Richie steps closer, and leans in, touching her back with his hand, and pressing his nose into her hair.

She smells like some awful, sickening cocktail of cigarettes, piss, and spit-up.

Over her head, he holds Eddie's gaze. It's okay. They're going to take her home, and they're going to clean her up, and they're going to put her to sleep in a nice, clean bed.

Eddie's gaze moves to Sharon. "Do we get to know what happened?"

She sighs. "Police got a call from a neighbor around eleven. Domestic. It seems Ms. Cothron got into a fight with her boyfriend, and stabbed him with a steak knife."

"She stabbed him?" Richie says, incredulous.

"That's what I'm told." She pushes a hand through her hair. "He was taken to the hospital before I got here. The police are talking with neighbors right now. From what I've gathered, this isn't the first fight the couple has had."

"What about Francie?" Eddie asks.

"It doesn't appear she's been hurt. I've looked her over. You should know the officers who responded to that initial call found her locked in the car." She nods her head at a beat up Volvo. "It's unclear how long she was there. She was dehydrated. I gave her some applesauce earlier, and that helped her calm down, too. They'll be an investigation, and we'll talk more about what happens next in the morning, but, if you're willing, I think she'll be in your care for a while."

He looks at Francie.

It's the middle of the night, and she's clearly been through hell, but she is quiet, is being the sweet, easy baby he remembers, letting Eddie cradle her to his chest, and chewing on the drawstring of his sweatshirt.

She's almost too quiet.

They found her locked in a car.

How long many times has she been neglected like that? Ignored? Forgotten?

"Is there paperwork?" Eddie asks, an edge to his voice.

"Yeah. Yes. Come on."
On the drive home again, Eddie sits in the back of the car with Francie. She sleeps a little. But by the time they get back to the apartment, she's awake, and she's fussy.

It isn't her fault.

"She's overtired," Eddie says.

They give her a bath, and she enjoys it, smiling, and smacking her hands on the water.

It's obvious that she's exhausted, though. They put that pink, sweet-smelling lotion on her, and they dress her in one of Bev's t-shirts, and they bring her into the dark of their bedroom with them, because they can't be bothered to make her sleep by herself.

It's not like they have a crib for her.

They'll worry about healthy sleeping habits some other night.

She falls asleep at last.

They don't. They can't. They lie there with her, talking in low, soft voices that won't disturb her.

Both of them are going to take off work for the next few days at least.

Bev wakes up around eight, and Richie leaves the bed to talk to her in the kitchen, to update her. She goes to the store to pick up supplies for them. The moment she's back, she takes Francie from their bed, saying she'll watch her, and telling them to get some sleep.

"You don't have to work?" Richie asks.

"Nope." Bev brushes her hand over Francie's hair. "Get some sleep."

In the quiet after Bev leaves with Francie, Eddie closes the gap between them on the bed, and Richie hugs Eddie to his chest, closing his eyes, and breathing in deeply.

The edges of the curtain over the window are glowing with sunlight, but the room remains mostly filled with dark, sleepy shadows.

"We can't let them take her again," Eddie says.

Richie doesn't have an answer for that. He kisses the top of Eddie's head. They need to get some sleep. And when they wake up, they'll figure out how to keep her. They will. They'll do whatever they need to do to make sure nobody can take her again.

---

He shuffles out of the bedroom with a yawn around one in the afternoon, rubbing his eyes, and making a list of things they need to do in his head.

He stops when he sees them.

They're on the floor in front of the sofa. Bev is sitting with her back to the couch, singing in a soft, warm voice, and Francie is sitting on her lap, smiling, and looking at Bev with wide, adoring eyes.

"I'm not sleepy and there is no place I'm going to. / Hey! Mr. Tambourine Man, play a song for me, / In the jingle jangle morning I'll come followin' you."
Francie rocks forward.

"Though you might hear laughing, spinning, swinging madly across the sun," Bev sings, "it's not aimed at anyone."

Francie reaches to touch Bev's mouth, and Bev kisses her tiny little fist, and Francie giggles softly in delight. She moves her mouth like she's singing, too. Bev presses in closer, scrunching up her nose, and nuzzling Francie's, singing into her cheek, and making Francie giggle.

Richie goes quietly back into the bedroom to wake up Eddie, because their baby is home, and it's time to enjoy it.

---

They have no idea how long they'll have Francie. Her placement with them is temporary. Her grandmother is released from jail on bail, but she is facing assault charges, and child protective services is charging her with neglect, too, due to the fact that, among other things, neighbors told CPS she would leave Francie in the car on a near daily basis.

Richie isn't going to focus on that.

They have her back right now, and they are going to do their best by her right now.

She's grown a lot in the months she was gone. She is bigger, and much more alert. She is less of a baby with every passing day.

But.

She doesn't play with them the way she used to, is quieter, and fussier.

"That woman fucked with her head," Eddie says, furious.

They're going to make up for it.

To start, they take a lot of time off work to stay at home with her.

SNL is back, and Richie isn't about to quit his job, but his involvement is honestly as minimal as possible for a couple of months. Everyone is okay with it, because they know the situation. His co-workers are more than willing to pick up slack for him, actually, and he can't even articulate how grateful he is to them for that. It's the same at the hospital for Eddie. He's used up most of his vacation time already, but he's got a few days left, and he uses sick days, adding up to nearly three weeks at home with Francie, and everyone at the hospital is understanding.

Both of them just need to be at home with their baby right now.

They spoil her, too.

They pick her up whenever she wants, carrying her around endlessly throughout the day, and they shower her with toys, and they set up the crib again, but they take to having her sleep with them, which isn't healthy, and they know that, but they just can't fucking help it.

She sleeps better when she's with them.

And if she could be taken away again, they've got to give her everything they can while they have her.
It works. She starts to behave more like her old self again.

They talk to her a lot, too.

"We missed you, Francie," Eddie says. "Do you remember your name? Francie. Can you say that? Can you say your name? Can you say Francie?"

She clutches her bear. "Francie," she says.

"That's right! You got it! You know your name!"

She giggles.

"I'm Daddy. Do you remember, Francie? Do you remember your daddy?"

The more they talk to her, the more she seems to talk, too. She babbles, of course, but she talks, too, says real, actual words. She picks them up quickly, learning by listening to them.

She says "up" when she wants to pick them up, because every time he picks her up Eddie says "up, up, up!" She learns again that Eddie is "dada" and Richie is "poppy" and Bev is "auntie." She says "hug" when they hold her, because Richie always sings "hug!" when he hugs her, and she starts to sing it, too.

She says "no" and "yes" and "apple" and "pink" and "mine" and "bear" and "clap."

She learns new words every day.

She learns what a kiss is, because Richie blows her kisses constantly, and she likes to blow him kisses, too.

She gets very attached to them again very quickly, and it's unhealthy in a way: the instant that neither of them are within in her sight, she screams, and even if one of them is able to return, it takes a while to calm her down.

The doctor says there's most likely some unconscious part of her that remembers having lost them before, and is afraid to lose them again.

She might, Richie thinks.

No.

He won't let it happen.

After a month with her, he's determined. If the state tries to take her again, they're going through with the plan to flee to Canada. She is safer, healthier, and happier with them.

In October, a judge finds Debbie Jo Cothron guilty of neglect.

She is granted weekly supervised visitation with Francie, however, and they will revisit her case after her trial for assault, and if she would like to regain custody, it's recommended she take an anger management class as well as a class on parenting. Richie highly doubts she's going to take any classes. She never even bothers to show up for a single weekly visit with Francie.

"I guess she decided getting her grandbaby away from us queers wasn't worth the trouble," Richie says.
"Good," Eddie says.

In December, a jury finds her guilty of assault.

Sharon calls with the news when they're waiting in line to meet Santa.

They don't actually get a picture with Santa. It doesn't have to do with Sharon's call. Richie tries to set her in Santa's lap, and she fists her hands in the sleeves of his shirt, and says, firmly, "no," and won't be persuaded to let go.

She is dolled up for a picture in a tights and pigtails and a little red, green, and white plaid dress that Bev made for her, but a picture isn't going to happen.

It's okay.

At home, Francie is more than happy to pose for a picture on Eddie's lap.

Eventually another permanency hearing is held. She's been back with the for eight months. The last time they were notified of a permanency hearing regarding their baby, they were told she wasn't their baby, and she was taken away from them. Her grandmother was charged with neglect, is now in prison for assault, and Frances Shirley Kaspbrak is their baby. The court agrees with them this time.

In the eyes of the law, she is best left happily in their care.

Three days later, she turns two years old, and they celebrate with pizza and cake and dancing to Queen in the kitchen.

---

They're playing puppies when Eddie gets home from work. The apartment is a wreck, because it's always a wreck. And, okay, Richie probably should have tried cleaning up some today since he had the day off, but he's been busy doing stuff like playing puppies.

"Hello!" Eddie says.

"Woof!"

"Did you just bark at me?" He comes into the kitchen. "Yes," he says. "You did just bark at me." He eyes the two of them on the floor in amusement.

"I'm a puppy!" Francie says, gleeful, and she sticks her tongue out slightly to pant.

"Woof!" Richie says.

"Woof, woof, woof!" Francie says.

Richie starts wiggling his butt like he's wagging his tail. Francie does, too, and it makes her giggle. She barks some more, wiggling her butt, and crawls her way to Eddie.

"Hello, puppy," Eddie says, squatting, and petting her head.

"We need something to eat!" Richie says.

"Oh, I bet I can do something about that." Eddie pretends to pour dog food into some imaginary bowls, and places the bowls on the ground in front of each of them. "Here we go!"
Richie makes loud, gross noises while he pretends to eat.

Francie is giggling, but she is pretending to eat, too, making silly noises in imitation of Richie.

They roll onto their backs when they're done, and bark at Eddie until he scratches their bellies, and they pretend to give him big, slobbery kisses in gratitude.

---

They are able to find a daycare for Francie that follows Eddie's philosophy of parenting, which means there is plenty of time for both of them to juggle their careers alongside having a toddler.

Things are busy, but they make it work.

Richie was sidetracked with Francie for a couple of month, but the cast was understanding, and he was able to focus on SNL again once things settled down with her.

And, in the spring, he develops a new comedy act at last.

Tony books him several gigs across the city. The shows get sold out immediately, which is awesome, and the reviews rave about his voices and his energy and his fun, vulgar humor, and he has to admit that it's fun to return to the stage, to perform in front of a dark, crowded audience of people who paid for the pleasure of listening to his jokes, and make them laugh.

He refuses to go on tour, though.

In October, he meets Amy Poehler when she's at 30 Rock.

Three months later, Richie films a small, silly role in an episode of Parks and Recreation. It's awesome. He plays a librarian from Eagleton, and he shares the screen with Amy Poehler, and he has a good time doing it.

Tony wants Richie to audition for more TV shows.

"Nope," Richie says.

He would love being on TV more in the future. Sometimes, he throws around ideas for TV shows with Eddie just for fun. There's no rush, though. He's got a family in New York, and friends, and a job he really, really loves. He is happy right where he is, thank you very much.

---

It happens when Francie wants to wipe her butt by herself. "Daddy lets me," she says. She is sitting on the toilet, swinging her legs, and looking at Richie innocently, holding on tightly to the miles of toilet paper she managed to unroll in the second before Richie intervened with a hand on the holder.

"Really?" He narrows his eyes.

"Yes."

"Your daddy lets you wipe yourself?" He finds that highly suspect. "It's messy, Sport. I don't want you to get poop on your hand. I don't think your daddy would like that."

"I will put the poop on the toilet paper," she says, matter-of-fact.
"How about you wipe when you go pee, and I'll—?"

"I can do it."

"I know you can do it, but—"

"Daddy lets me."

He considers. "Spaghetti!" he calls. "Is Francie allowed to wipe herself now? Spaghetti!"

"Spaghetti!"

He blinks at Francie in surprise.

She grins.

Eddie's head pops into the bathroom. "Did my daughter just call me spaghetti?"

"Daddy, I pooped!"

He smiles. "Does that make you happy?" He's very into asking her about her feelings these days. It's in a book, or something. He wants her to know her feelings are important.

"Yes!" she says.

"Can she wipe herself now?" Richie asks.

He shrugs. "Sure."

"Seriously? Sure? Why didn't I know that? What am I? The butler?"

Francie starts wiping herself, and she kind of uses a lot of toilet paper, makes too much of a mess, and is way too pleased with herself, but she gets the job done.

The point, however, is that she insists on calling her daddy by his best, oldest nickname for weeks after that.

To encourage it, Richie calls Eddie it right in front of her as often as possible.

"Goodbye, Spaghetti!" he says.

"Goodbye, Spaghetti!" Francie says, beaming.

Eddie sighs loudly. "I dislike this very much," he says, but he's been saying that since he was eight, and Richie knows better than to start believing him now.

---

It's a process that involves a lot of meetings and a lot of paperwork and a lot of days in court, but, finally, they are allowed to adopt their daughter.

Francie is four when it happens, when they officially, legally become her parents. Richie nearly tears up there in the courtroom. Relatives can't come out of the woodwork to take her away from them; the state isn't going to decide they aren't really her family.

They go for bagels to celebrate.
In the booth, Bev takes a picture of the three of them.

There is already a smear of cream cheese across Francie's cheek, but she's beaming, and she is wearing Eddie's new, expensive silk tie for a necklace, and she is sitting in between her parents, her real, actual, recognized-in-the-eyes-of-the-law parents.

---

Eddie becomes Twitter famous overnight. Sort of. He's always been fairly active on Twitter, but he becomes very active after they adopt Francie, and he isn't afraid of who with the state might see what he posts, and, suddenly, his follower count skyrockets.

It seems he has a lot to say to the world.

He continues to post clever, 140-character restaurant reviews, but, mostly, it seems his popularity is because he's political.

The rant that Bev says makes him famous is one on the lack of representation of bisexuality in the media.

After that happens, he becomes steadily known for going on angry, informational rants that span several tweets. He tends to rant mostly about LGBT issues, but he rants about the hypocrisy of certain political candidates, too, and the stupidity of anti-vaxxers is a particularly sore subject for him, and he writes fourteen tweets entirely in caps when he's ranting against trickle down economics. He's an angry gay gremlin, and people on the Internet are recognizing his brilliance.

One lady replies to his rant about anti-vaxxers with a reprimand in several long, patronizing tweets that say, essentially, he shouldn't be hateful just because he doesn't agree with someone's life choices, and he has no idea what it's like to receive the kind of hate she's faced.

Eddie doesn't usually reply when people try arguing with him.

Richie is sitting on the sofa with him when he replies to this lady, though.

*I'm a homosexual, Susan.*

"Susan?" Richie says. "Is that really her name?"

"It could be."

The tweet immediately blows up. It gets used in memes. Richie's never been more proud.

Richie is hesitant to delve into Twitter, because he's kind of scared of the Internet. He learned a while ago that people on the Internet are mean. He's got an account, though, and he likes to tweet the rare hilarious meme, and he's happy to promote SNL stuff.

And, usually, when people @ him, it's good, and he's happy to see it.

(Sometimes, it's terrible. If people want to be assholes, he can't stop them. If they don't think he's funny, fine. If the fact that he has a husband is offensive to someone, that someone can go to hell, and it's no skin off his nose. He just doesn't know why people feel the need to @ him in any of that.)

He gets a text from Eddie on Monday that says *your fans have found me on Twitter,* and he logs on quickly to see what's up. He's worried. But when he finds it, he can't stop grinning.
Some random woman Tweeted about the two of them last night.

*how did I not already know that gay twitter icon @epkaspbrak is married to @therealrichietozier?! hOW?!*

To his delight, he sees that Bev has retweeted it.

She's written *can confirm*, and added a picture from the night of their wedding, too, that shows Eddie sitting on the couch with his arm slung around Richie's shoulders, and Richie slumped against his chest, both of them with drunk, dopey smiles on their faces.

It's been retweeted like crazy.

Someone has retweeted it with the caption *that's love bitch*, and Richie "likes" that Tweet, because, yes, it fucking is.

He ends up changing his profile on Twitter. @therealrichietozier is *the dumbass on SNL, once ate twelve dill pickles in a row, married to a gay twitter icon*. He wants the world to know the most important facts about him.

---

Their lives aren't as exciting as they were once upon a time. It's okay. They know what they were getting into when they decided to adopt.

Most of the days are filled with work, and with their daughter.

They don't have to worry about money. Things are *good*. There is cooking and laundry and arguments over which way the toilet paper roll is supposed to face in the bathroom, because they've been debating that for going on twenty fucking years, and neither of them is about to give in now.

Richie wouldn't change a thing.

But, of course, there are some special nights when Bev babysits, and they get to act like they're horny, carefree kids again.

---

They're drunk when they stumble into the limo at the end of the night, because it's a *limo*, and they are leaving the *Emmys*, and it's been one of the coolest fucking nights of his *life*.

Richie was nominated for an *Emmy*.

He didn't win, but he couldn't care less at that moment.

The limo is spacious, but Richie automatically slides in right up against Eddie's side, gripping his knee, and grinning, and Eddie turns slightly to snake an arm under the back of Richie's suit jacket, to hug his back, and drop a kiss to his shoulder.

The car pulls out onto the road.

It's dark, but there are lines of pretty white lights in the back of the limo, making it possible for Richie to see the gleam of want in Eddie's glassy gaze. He glances at the front. The partition is up, giving the semblance of seclusion. His gaze darts back to Eddie. He surges in, and Eddie is ready for him, grabbing the back of his neck, and pulling Richie closer, twisting, and grinding on his
thigh, thrusting his tongue into Richie's mouth possessively.

Richie pushes Eddie's suit jacket off his shoulders.

He starts to shrug out of his own, but it's difficult when Eddie's pressed against him, lavishing wet, hot kisses to his neck, and fumbling to undo the buckle of Richie's belt.

He lifts his hips for Eddie to pull his pants past his hips, and his boxers, too, and they wind up tangled at his ankles while Eddie sinks to his knees, smoothing his hands up the insides of Richie's thighs, and spreading them open. He strokes a hand through Eddie's hair. Eddie's head bends, and Richie is forced to swallow a swear when Eddie swirls his tongue around the head of Richie's growing erection, bobbing his head, and taking Richie deeper into his mouth. He's a man on a mission. His fingertips dig painfully into Richie's thighs, and when Richie's dick slides over the roof of Eddie's mouth again, he knows he's going to come too quickly, and he shoves at Eddie's shoulders.

"What?" Eddie says, wiping his chin on his sleeve. "You want me to suck your balls?"

"Later. *Fuck. C'mere.*" He pulls Eddie up. "I want to fuck you is what I want."

Eddie's eyes glaze. "Yeah?"

Richie starts searching in the pockets of his jacket, and finds it quickly, showing the small, travel-sized bottle to Eddie.

"Did you *plan* this?" Eddie says, delighted.

He grins. "Did I *plan* to celebrate my nomination by fucking your ass? Yes, babe. Yes." He unbuttons Eddie's trousers, and they get them off together, laughing when they catch on Eddie's dress shoes, and giving up.

Eddie grabs Richie's travel lube before he can open it, grinning.

He preps himself while straddling Richie's lap, resting a hand on Richie's chest for balance, and leaning in, pressing his warm, flushed face into Richie's neck.

Richie feels every little hitch of his breath, and he can only grope Eddie's back and thighs and ass. It's way too much sitting there and *waiting*. He pushes a hand into Eddie's hair, tugging his head up, and kissing him desperately.

It doesn't take long for Eddie to stretch out himself; Richie had fucked him into the mattress right before they left for the awards that afternoon.

Eddie's reaches down to stroke Richie's dick. "How do you want me?" he murmurs, and he licks the bead of sweat that rolls down Richie's cheek. Both of them are burning up, but there's no time for undressing any further when Richie is about to *burst*.

"Close," Richie says.

Eddie nods eagerly. "Yeah." He turns in Richie's lap, scooting back eagerly in a way that makes Richie laugh.

"Lift up, babe."

Eddie grips the seat to rock up.
"That's my boy." Richie lines up his dick, and Eddie rocks down, taking Richie's length in one swift stroke like his ass was made for it. "Fuck, Eds."

Eddie doesn't wait to move his hips, and Richie holds his hip in a hand, resting the other on his stomach to hold him close, and thrusting up, meeting the roll of his hips. It's rough, and uncoordinated, because they're drunk and horny and riding in the back of limo, but it's good. Eddie's back curves, and Richie can't help but mouth at his neck, tonguing at Eddie's flushed, salty skin.

Eddie reaches back to grip a fistful of Richie's hair. "Rich," he whines. "I—fuck—"

"I got you," Richie says, swiping his thumb over the head of Eddie's dick, and starting to stroke it, jerking in time with his rough, erratic thrusts.

Eddie's hips grind against him desperately. "I love you," he gasps.

Richie comes first with a groan into Eddie's shoulders, and Eddie follows after, arching his back, and yanking at Richie's hair violently, covering Richie's hand on his dick with his other.

For a moment, both of them are a tangled, panting mess.

"I love you." Richie nuzzles his nose against the corner of Eddie's jaw. "Have I ever told you that?"

He can hear the smile in Eddie's voice. "You might have mentioned it." He huffs a laugh. "We're a mess. Seriously. We should have worn condoms just to make it easier to clean up." He shifts, and tugs his tie off, using it to try to mop up the cum on his shirt.

"We'll give the driver a really, really big tip," Richie says, unconcerned.

"I'm proud of you," Eddie says.

"I know." He pats Eddie's tummy. "I'm proud of me, too. I mean, I fuck you really well. I could win an award for it."

Eddie pulls off him with a little, huffing noise of discomfort. They pull up their pants. Eddie's face contorts with disgust, because, of course, he's the one who's got to deal with cum leaking out of his ass into his underwear, and, also, there's cum stains on his shirt.

"Cute, cute, cute," Richie says, pinching his cheek.

Eddie is drunker than he thought, because, in reply, he turns his head, and he kisses Richie's palm.

---

The older that Francie gets, the more they have to explain to her. Some of her questions, of course, are the stuff she's already been asking for years, the meaning of words, and why, why, why, and silly, fun things like what do trees think about. She starts to ask other, more complicated questions, though.

He overhears her ask Bev why she doesn't have a mother.

He's home early from work, and he was taking a nap, but he heads for the kitchen when he hears their voices, and he's about to step into sight when she asks.

He stops.
They made paper flowers today at school, she says, to give to their mothers for Mother's Day, and her teacher said she should just make a flower for a special, important person like her grandma, and she did, but she wants to know why she doesn't have a mother to make it for.

"Families are different," Bev says.

"Why?"

She sighs. "Families are . . . they're groups of people that really, really love each other. And since there are lot of different kinds of people in the world, there are lots of different kinds of families. Some families have a mom and a dad. But some families just have a mom. I grew up with just a dad. And some families have two mommies, and some have—well, they might have what's call a stepmom, or . . . and some families are made up of a daddy and a pops and an auntie." She smiles.

"But . . ."

Richie can practically hear Francie thinking about it.

"I want to have a mom," she says.

Richie's heart lurches.

"It's not about what you have, though," Bev says. "It's about who you have. And, baby, you have the two best dads in the world."

"I know."

"Would you want to trade your daddy for a mom? Or your pops? What's the name of that boy at school you like to play with? Aiden? Would you want to give your pops to Aiden, and you get Aiden's mom?"

"What do you mean give him Pops?"

"He wouldn't be your poppy anymore. He'd be Aiden's. And you'd get to have a mommy."

"No!" Francie says. "He's my poppy!"

"He is your poppy, you're right." There's a smile in Bev's voice. "You might not have a mommy, and lots of your friends do, and that might make you feel left out. I get it. But nobody's got your poppy, or your daddy. Right? And you wouldn't trade them for anything."

"Right," she says.

Richie yawns loudly, and steps into sight with a roll of his shoulders.

"Poppy!"

"Hey, Toots," he says.

She practically throws herself off the stool to get to him, throwing her arms around his waist. "You are my poppy," she says, like he'd tried to argue the point. Her chin juts into his belly when she tilts her head to look at him.

He smiles. "You are my Francie."

She starts to tell him about her day at preschool, and he glances at Bev, sees her smile, and can't
help but grin when she winks at him.

---

They're watching the Dodgers play the Nationals on TV when Bev gets home from her date.

It's the first day Bev's been on in ages.

(Richie worries sometimes about Bev.

He loves that she lives with them, of course. He loves that she likes spending time with Francie, and with them, too. He loves that she's a part of the family. He worries, though. She deserves the whole fucking world, and he worries that living in their apartment, babysitting their kid, and spending her evenings on the sofa with them isn't the whole fucking world.

She says she's happy. She is. She's gone into business for herself, and she's successful, which is awesome.

But.

Does she want to have a partner in life? Someone who knows her better that she knows herself? Does she want an Eddie of her own? She must. Or is that arrogant of him to assume that everyone wants what he has?

If she says she's happy, he should believe her.)

He's glad she said yes to a date. She told them the guy is great, and it's about time she finally got some.

But.

"9 p.m.?" Richie says. "Ouch. I take that to mean the date was, you know . . ." He makes a high pitched noise to imitate a missile firing, whistling, and dropping, exploding.

"It was . . ." She slumps onto the chair by the window. "Okay. Nice, I guess. But . . ." She tugs off her heals. "I realized I haven't been with a guy since Tom, which is weird, and Davonte is the opposite of Tom, which is great. But . . ."

"But . . . ?" Eddie says.

She sighs. "I don't know. Davonte is wonderful. He's cute. Funny. And he's a genuinely good, kind person. If people were movie tropes, he'd be a cartoon Disney princess. He recycles and volunteers and, like, strikes up conversations with lonely homeless people." She reaches for the Doritos. "And he likes me a lot."

"What's the problem?" Richie asks. "Boring? Ugly? Sweats a lot?"

She shakes her head. "No. I don't know."

"If you don't like him, you don't like him," Eddie says. "It is what it is. There isn't always a reason." He shrugs. "There are other nice fish in the sea."

"Oh?" She eyes him in amusement. "You have a lot of experience with dating?"

He sniffs. "If you're going to be a bully, I'll leave."
"I'm sorry." She smiles. "I guess—I just . . . I used to like going on dates. I liked meeting new people, and trying new things. Now it's a chore. And I don't see the point in it. I'm happy. I love my life. I have my job. I have a family. I have a vibrator."

"Get it, girl," Richie says.

She grins. "I guess my point is that as great as Davonte is, I just don't feel like trying to fit him into my life."

"I think that means he isn't the right person for you," Eddie says.

"It's work even when it's the right person. There's no such thing as soulmates, or some perfect person who was made for you, and who you don't even have to try with. Relationships take work. You wouldn't know about that, though, because your whole life is built around your person." Her gaze is gentle. "I mean, I don't mean to say you haven't dealt with shit, but—"

"But I literally can't remember a life without Rich." He nods. "I get it."

"I just think if I'm going to have a person, it's going to have to be someone really fucking special for me to put the effort in." She shifts to rest her head on the arm of the chair.

"You don't need a person," Richie says. "You've got persons. Us." She knows, right? She knows how much they love her?

"Exactly," she says.

"Ve stant vith you unteel end, comrade," he adds.

She laughs. "I love that you use the Russian to show affection now."

"Yes," Eddie says dryly, "because everyone knows how affectionate the Russian people are."

"I lof you, too, little lapsha deesh!" Before Eddie can stop him, he lunges, and he ignores Eddie's squawk of protest, pinning him easily to the sofa, and pepperling his face with loud, wet kisses. "Mwah, mwah, mwah!"

"If you guys are busy, I'm changing the channel."

"No!"

Richie blows a raspberry into his neck.

"I'll never understand why baseball is the one thing you can't be gay about." She changes the channel. "Baseball is boring."

---

There have been times when Francie's been mad at them. Sort of. She's thrown temper tantrums at least, dropping to the ground and screaming and making it clear that she is a toddler, and she is displeased.

She's never been purposefully mad at them before this, though.

It happens over the most ridiculous thing, too.

"Daddy," Francie chides playfully. "Those aren't yours!"
Eddie's got a plate of eggs in front of him, and he pauses in the middle of eating a bite, glancing at the eggs, and at Francie. "They aren't?" He frowns.

"No!" She giggles. "You're being silly! Poppy! Daddy is wearing your glasses!"

"Kiddo," Richie says, amused, "those are Daddy's glasses."

She's confused.

Eddie just sighs. "It's not my fault that the world is blurrier these days."

"But only Poppy wears extra eyes."

"I'm glad that's how we explained what glasses are," Eddie says, shooting a look at Richie, and Richie grins. "My eyes aren't working like they used to, baby," he explains. "That happens sometimes when you get old. I had to get some glasses to help me see better. I don't have to wear them all the time, but I have to wear them when I want to see things up close."

She seems to mull that over for a minute, eating a grape.

"Do you think they look good, baby?" Eddie asks.

"I do," Richie says, flipping his omelet. "I think they look great, Professor." He winks.

"I want to see better, too," Francie says.

"What?"

"I need some glasses, too, so I can see better."

"Francie." Eddie frowns softly. "You don't need to see better. You can see without any glasses, and that's good. Glasses are a really big hassle."

"What's a hassle?"

"It means they're annoying." Richie scrunches up his nose. "You have to have them on you all the time, and if you forget them, you can't see! And they get really dirty, so you have to clean them constantly. Plus, they got foggy when you take the dishes out of the dishwasher."

"I need some, though," she says, insistent.

"You want them," Eddie says. "But you don't need them."

"No." She frowns. "I need them."

She's mad at them for the rest of the morning, crossing her arms, and making a face, jerking away angrily when Richie tries to hug her before Eddie takes her to preschool.

Bev wanders in the kitchen just in time to see it, to watch Eddie herd Francie out of the house.

"I don't know what's going on," Bev says, sitting at the counter, "but that was hilarious."

"It's hilarious that my daughter won't let me hug her?"

"Nope." She takes the plate of eggs that Richie hands her. "It's hilarious that Francie isn't biologically Eddie's child, but that is literally the most Eddie thing I have ever seen anyone do ever."
Did you not see that? Did you not see that face? Did you not see that *attitude*?" She gestures. "It was like staring at a young, pig-tailed Eddie Kaspbrak."

"She's mad that we don't believe her when she says she *needs* glasses."

"Ah," Bev says, "to be young again, and envious of things like *glasses*. It's like when kids *want* braces. Then you hit puberty, and that special, stupid magic disappears."

He gets that she's just being a kid, and she'll get over it, but he hates that she's mad at him even for a childish, kind of funny reason. It makes him feel like a puppy that's been kicked. She is usually Richie's number one fan, and knowing she's mad at him is officially his new least favorite thing ever.

In the end, the solution is to play a game of hide-and-seek.

It's a special, "no glasses" edition.

Eddie isn't *blind*, but he plays along like he can't see anything, and walks right past Francie multiple times. Richie doesn't have to pretend, of course; he bumps into walls without even meaning to, and he definitely can't figure out where Francie's hiding. She thinks it's hilarious, and she's delighted that she's able to find them easily every single time, and they don't even manage to find her *once*.

Her parents *need* extra eyes.

She doesn't.

"Your eyes are already too powerful!" Richie says, and she laughs when he tosses her up, catches her, and swings her around.

---

At the end of the summer, they go down to Florida, and meet Richie's parents at the beach.

It's a week of relaxing, of playing in the sand with Francie, and taking a lot of videos of her shrieking with delight when the waves brush her ankles, of having big, fancy seafood dinners that Went insists on paying for, and touching the stingray at the aquarium.

Richie gets sunburned almost immediately, of course.

"It isn't my fault," he says.

"I *told* you to reapply," Eddie says, rubbing nice, big green globs of aloe on Richie's back.

"I have the flammability of a tissue."

Francie is upset to learn that Richie isn't allowed to come to the water with them that day, and she worries that the sun will burn her, too, despite the fact that Eddie has practically been bathing her in SPF 50 children's sunscreen thrice daily.

Richie tries to cheer her up. "What is black and white and red all over?" he asks.

"You?" Eddie says.

"A penguin with a sunburn!"
But, in the end, she insists that she wants to stay in the house with Richie.

Eddie says he's going to take the opportunity to read on the beach, that he hopes Richie feels badly about scaring their daughter, and that he'll see them at lunch, and he leaves with Maggie.

Richie uses the opportunity to teach his daughter the joys of gaming. She sits in his lap, and he narrates the game he's playing, and he has her press the buttons for him. He wishes he'd brought some old, easy Nintendo games that she could've actually played, but he'll remember that next time.

They do make their way to the beach that afternoon, though.

(He is kind of peeved that he can't make sweet beach love to Eddie because his whole gangly body is burned to a red, painful crisp, but, also, it isn't so bad to spend the nights just sprawled on the bed with aloe on his back, his head in Eddie's lap, and Netflix on the TV.)

Richie's never particularly loved vacationing with his parents, but this week is one for the books.

---

Francie starts kindergarten that September. She's excited. They've read her dozens of books about going to school, and she is awake at four in the morning, pounding on the door of their bedroom, and announcing it's today, it's today, it's today!

They walk her to school together.

(It's an artsy, fartsy school that Eddie picked. Richie's pretty sure she's going to sit on a lot of bean bag chairs, learn to meditate, and receive fucking stickers for grades. But since they live in the middle of the city, they can't exactly send her to regular public school.

And, obviously, Richie isn't about to send her to a school for Catholics, or some such shit.)

They take her picture in front of the school. She's gripping the straps of her brand new backpack, and beaming, wearing her sparkly pink jellies and her socks with the lacy white fringe and her green seersucker shorts that match The Very Hungry Caterpillar applique embroidered on her shirt. They are framing this picture for sure.

"I packed a surprise in your lunch," Richie says, squatting.

"Chocolate chip cookies?"

"Maybe."

"Brownies?"

"Maybe."

"Snickerdoodles?"

"Maybe."

She grins, and hugs her beloved Frozen lunchbox to her chest.

"We'll be here to pick you up as soon as school is over," Eddie says, fixing the bow of one of the little pink ribbons that hold her pigtails. "Got it?"
To be honest, they're more nervous about her starting than she is.

They have no reason to be.

She *loves* it.

She wants to talk about school for *hours* at the end of every day, sitting at the table while they eat dinner, and kicking her feet, talking about her teacher and the class's pet turtle and her friends and the dance they did in music that afternoon.

She loves circle and recess and library.

In art, they learn about drawing a portrait, and she comes home proudly one afternoon with a drawing in hand.

There's a giant red heart on the page, and, inside the heart, she's drawn a woman with a blue triangle dress that matches her blue, frighteningly high heels, very prominent ears, and a shock of bright red hair on her head.

"We had to draw someone we love!" Francie says, proud.

In a teacher's neat cursive, a sentence is written in quotations: *I love Aunt Bev because she is my best friend.*

Richie catches Bev looking at it again after Francie's gone to bed.

"Shut up," she says. "I just really love your kid, okay?"

They hang it on the fridge for a while before, eventually, they frame it, and hang it. "We have to," Richie says. "It's a Francie Kaspbrak *original*. It'll be worth millions some day!" But, of course, everyone knows that, actually, terrible kindergarten artwork is *priceless*.

---

There have been moments in his life when Richie's been speechless. It hasn't happened often, but it's happened. There have been moments when he's had a shock to his system that felt like a punch to the gut, and he'd been left dumbstruck.

He doesn't know that there's ever been a moment like this, though, a moment that leaves him shaken for hours.

It happens when he's on *Ellen* to promote his Netflix comedy special.

Things are going really well, because Ellen is great, and Richie is totally in his element.

"My husband is mad at me at the moment," he says.

"Really?"

He nods. "He has been for a while. Since about, ah." He hums in thought. "2003? That's when I discovered memes." He grins. "To this day, he still deletes every email I send him without even looking at it. He said I went, quote, *too far* with Rickrolling. It's not my fault I got him every time like three hundred times in a row."

He waves a hand in appreciation at the laughter of the audience.
"I have a feeling your husband has a lot of patience."

"He does."

"I love it," she says. "I love the two of you. I think you're adorable."

"I think we're adorable, too."

"You know the Internet agrees? I have proof. Have you seen this tweet?" She turns to screen, and it lights up with a picture. "It's adorable."

The picture was taken by paparazzi, and it's of the three of them on the street: he's in crocs and camo cargo pants and a t-shirt, and Francie is sitting on his hip, wearing a pair of sparkly star sunglasses, and eating ice cream, and Eddie, of course, is a model, is wearing Italian loafers and pale blue shorts and a nice yellow polo, and holding Richie's hand.

"This could be a frame stock photo," Ellen says. "I'd buy it."

"Wait, though," Richie says. "Wait. You know what this picture really shows?"

"What?"

"There is such a thing as marrying up, and my husband, Eddie, has successfully done it."

The audience laughs loudly at that.

"He married up?"

"Definitely. Come on, Ellen. Look." He gestures. "Look at how great I look in that photo."

She smiles. "Has anyone ever told you that you're very humble?"

"I tell myself that every day."

"I bet," she says. "Now you've known your husband since you were kids?"

He nods. "I have."

"You were adorable when you were kids, too, you know. I know. I have more proof."

The picture that comes up on the screen is older. "Oh, my God," Richie says. He must be fourteen, and he's wearing a gaudy Hawaiian print, and he's got his old, giant glasses, too, and braces, and Eddie is beside him with a t-shirt that's tucked into his shorts, with his hair styled too perfectly, and his fannypack on his waist at an angle, and a hand on his hip, looking thoroughly annoyed.

"I like the fanny pack," Ellen says, grinning.

"That's my Eddie," Richie says. "Can you believe we didn't know he was gay?"

"Really?"

"I don't remember when exactly we figured it out, but, seriously, look at that cutie. How could we have not known? That's four feet of pure gay cutie right there!"

She laughs. "Okay. So. The two of you were friends, and . . . what's the story? What happened next?"
"Well, Ellen." He sighs. "Things got gay."

She grins. "You were obviously very cool when you were kid."

"Obviously."

"You had a group of friends, though, and you had a name for yourselves? Right?"

He blinks.

"This will refresh your memory." She gestures. "This was the gang, wasn't it?" She is pleased with herself. "And what was it you called yourselves?"

It takes him a moment to reply.

The pictures that's filled the screen is another from when he was a kid, and must've been taken when he was a tween, but he doesn't even really look at himself in the picture. It's a picture of all of his friends, and he gapes at them, at Eddie, and at Bev, and at the rest of the boys. He looks at their soft, childish faces, and their names flood his mind, because he knows Stan's smirk, and Ben's sweet, guileless smile, Bill's stupid, homemade jorts, and the sound of Mike's deep laugh.

"I . . ."


He glances at her, and she is smiling, but there is something slightly concerned in her gaze.

It must be freaking her out that he's randomly gone catatonic on her.

"Yeah, um." He clears his throat. "I haven't thought about the ol' club in a while. You know what we called ourselves?" He wipes his palms on his trousers. "The Losers Club." He grins.

She is able to carry the conversation from there, thankfully.

His eyes keep straying by accident to the picture, and he's struck by another random memory every time. These are my friends, he thinks of smoking back behind the school with Ben, and he thinks of going to the Aladdin with Bill, and he thinks of that time at Mike's farm when they danced the Macarena.

When was the last time he thought about any of them?

After the show is over, he asks Ellen if he can have a copy of the photo.

"Sure," she says. "I'm sorry if it took you by a surprise. I should have warned you. My team got in touch with your mother, and she had the pictures."

"It's fine," he assures. "I just—I haven't seen a picture of all of them in a while. That's all." He smiles. "Really. It was fine. Sorry I sort of blanked on you for a second."

The memories keep coming back to him.

They aren't all completely good.

He's struck suddenly with a memory of Henry fucking Bowers. And, fuck, he'd forgotten half the shit that asshole had done to him, and to his friends. He wonders where Bowers is now, if he's still in Derry, and still a piece of shit.
At the hotel, he tries to search for Stan on Google.

He's shocked when it actually works.

There's a website for a fancy accounting firm in Atlanta that has a page for Stanley Uris, and when Richie sees the stilted, professional photo of the guy, he knows it's Stan.

Stan the man.

Stanny.

Stan "would fuck a bird if he could" Uris.

Richie is spending a couple of days in California at the moment. He flew here just for his appearance on Ellen. He did a show at the Funnybone last night for old time's sake, though, and he's meeting up with friends for drinks in a couple of hours, and his flight home again is Thursday.

His layover is actually in Atlanta.

He stares at the email that confirms his tickets like he thinks it might be a trick.

It's real, though.

On Thursday, he's going to be in Atlanta for over four hours.

The ringing of his phone makes him jump. "Hey, babe." He doesn't even let Eddie get a word in before he'd telling him about the show, and the picture, and the fact that Stan lives in Atlanta, Georgia.

"You're sure it's him?" Eddie asks.

"Positive."

"Wow. I haven't thought about anybody from Derry in years."

"Me, neither," he says.

He hears voices over the line. "Francie wants to say hi," Eddie says, a smile in his voice.

Richie is more than happy to say hi to Francie.

"Hey, Chicken."

He takes with her about her day for a couple of minutes, and he talks with Eddie again after that, but, eventually, he hangs up, and he is left in his quiet hotel room with thoughts of friends he used to have, and he can't stop thinking about the sandy-haired, middle-aged accountant in Atlanta, Georgia.

---

He calls the number that's listed on the website before he can talk himself out of it.

"I'm calling for Stan Uris," he says.

The nice, soft-spoken woman is happy to transfer him, and he waits on the edge of a thin hotel mattress, clutching his phone, and jiggling his leg, thinking wildly that maybe this isn't actually the
Stan he grew up with, and he's about to confuse some poor, random guy named Stan.

It's too late to back out now.

"This is Stan."

"Stan!" He clears his throat. "Hey! It's Rich. Tozier. Richie, I mean. We grew up together? In Derry? I used to call you Stan the Man, and you'd call me Trashmouth? I know this is kind of random of me to call you out of the blue like this."

It's quiet.

"Stan?"

"Shit," Stan says.

"Does that mean you remember me?"

"I—yes, I remember."

He grins. "I saw this picture of everybody from Derry, and it kind of punched me in the nuts. I hadn't thought about the gang in a while. I can't even remember the last time I talked to you or Bill or—or Mike. Or Ben. And I figured I'd see if I could Google you, and find out what you were up to, and I found your website. Saw your picture, and thought I'd give you a call." He pauses.

"Wow."

"And, ah, here's the thing. I'm out in California right now, but I actually live in New York, and I'm flying back tomorrow, and I've got a layover in Atlanta, and I thought, you know, it's fate . . ."

"I, um." He clears his throat. "I live pretty far from the airport."

Richie's heart sinks. "Oh. Sure."

"I bet I could use my lunch, though, and drive down there, and we could meet up for—coffee, maybe?"

"Fo' sho!" He winces. "Sorry."

"Do you have the details of your flight?" There's a smile in Stan's voice. "Let me give you my cell, actually, and you can text me the details of your layover."

Richie writes down Stan's number on hotel room paper. "I'll text you," he says.

"Okay." Stan clears his throat again. "I'm looking forward to it."

"Me, too."

There's a pause. "I'll see you tomorrow, Trashmouth."

Richie grins so hard it's a wonder his face doesn't split in two. "See you tomorrow, Staniel." He hangs up, and stares at nothing for a moment with the same stupid smile on his face.

---

There's a Starbucks in the airport. It's kind of a hassle for Richie, because he's got to leave his
terminal, and, after, he'll have to go through security to get in again. He's willing to make that sacrifice.

He sees Stan right away.

He's seated at a table by himself, holding a cup of coffee, and looking at his phone. Richie grins. He's wearing a suit with suspenders.

"Stan!"

Stan looks up, moving to his feet, and both of them just kind of scan each other for a minute. "Hey, Richie," Stan says, soft. There's a pause, and Richie laughs and surges in, hugging Stan, and clapping a hand to his back. Stan is skinny, and awkward, patting Richie's back like he isn't sure what to do with his hands. Richie suddenly recognizes the smell of his aftershave, because he's wearing the exact same stuff he started to wear when they were still back in Derry, and Richie's whole chest goes tight with affection.

"I'm going to order a coffee," Richie says. "You want anything to eat? Muffin, or something?"

"No," Stan says. "I'm fine. Thank you."

Three minutes later, they are seated at the table across from each other.

It's strange.

Richie can't stop just looking at Stan. He'd older. His face has grown slightly lined, and his hair is thinner, but he looks more comfortable in his skin.

He's staring at Richie in the same exact way, taking in everything that's changed.

"I, ah. I Googled you."

Richie grins. "What'd you learn?"

"You're famous. Apparently. I guess you're a comedian?" There's a smirk in his gaze.

"I'm a hit TV star, actually," Richie says. "I get fawned over constantly. It's because I'm hilarious. You remember. Sometimes I'd make you laugh so hard you'd fart."

"I don't remember that."

"That might have been me." He hums. "I might have made myself laugh so hard I farted."

Stan lips twitch with a smile. "I saw you were married, too. To Eddie."

"I am!" He holds up hand to show off his ring. "Tied the knot as soon as it was legal in good ol' Cali. Here. He takes his phone from his pocket, and swipes in quickly. He doesn't have to look for his picture. His background is a picture of Eddie in sunglasses. "There's my man."

"He looks really happy," Stan says.

"He is." He nods. "He's a nurse. We've got a kid, too! Francie." He pulls up a picture. "She's adopted. I know she looks like she's actually Eddie's 'cause, like, her skin is darker, and her hair is just like his. We got her when she was baby, though. We got to name her! It's after Eddie's grandmother." He knows he's rambling. He just wants to catch Stan up on everything. "She's in kindergarten."
"She's cute."

"What about you?" he asks. "You—" He nods at the ring on Stan's finger.

"Oh. Yes! Her name is Patty." Stan smiles. "We've been together since college. She's great. I can show you a picture if you want . . .?"

"Hit me!"

He flips through his phone for a minute before settling on a picture to show.

"Stan the man," Richie says, grinning. "She's a looker."

Stan rolls his eyes.

"What about kiddos?"


"Sure." He nods. "You know who else you need to see. Bev! Do you remember Beverly Marsh? I ran into her in Chicago several years ago, and we reconnected, and she actually lives in New York with us now. She's a fucking fashion designer." He pulls up a picture of Bev that's a couple of years old, but she's got an arm slung around Eddie's neck, and both of them are beaming, and it's one of Richie's favorite photos of the two of them. "She's doing pretty great these days."

"Wow." Stan shakes his head. "I haven't thought about Bev in a long, long time."

"It's weird," Richie says. "Right? It's weird how you just . . . forget."

"Yeah." He smiles. "Tell her I said hi, though?"

"Definitely."

Stan takes another sip of his coffee.

"Now that we've gotten the big stuff out of the way, it's time to get down to the nitty, gritty details. Come on, Stanny. Tell me everything I've missed in the life of Stanley." He shoves a pinch of muffin into his mouth. "How's life been treating you?"

The conversation is easy to carry from there.

There's a lot they have to catch up on, and they find a rhythm without batting an eye. They were friends once upon a time, and that hasn't gone away. Not really. Now that they're talking, it comes back easily, and they are friends, joking and teasing and having a good fucking time.

Richie has a plane to catch, though.

"I should go, too," Stan says, glancing at his watch. "It's been—shoot, nearly three hours. That's way too long for lunch. I'll have to work late tonight." He looks up. "Worth it, though."

He makes no move to get up.

Richie doesn't either.

He doesn't want to go, doesn't know when he'll see Stan again. "Give me your phone," he says, making a grabby hand motion. He can have this as least.
"Why?"

"I'm taking a picture for you to remember me by."

"I don't think I'll forget you again," Stan says, but he gives his phone to Richie, and he lets Richie tug him in close, and he smiles when Richie takes a picture of the two of them.

"Beautiful!" Richie says.

"Why is your mouth open like that?" Stan frowns.

Richie is busy.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm making this the background on your phone." He grins. "That way it'll be impossible to forget me again!"

Stan huffs. "I like my picture of a tufted tit mouse."

"Please," Richie says. "I'm way nicer to look at than some fat bird."

"Give me that!" Stan snatches his phone back.

The job is done, though. "You're welcome," Richie says. The photo of them two of them with Stan's nice, grown up smile beside Richie's big, open-mouthed gin is now the background of Stan's phone.

"I don't even know how to set it back." He pockets the phone with a sigh. "Patty will have to do it."

"Have her text me the picture, too, will you?"

"Sure."

There's a pause. Neither of them has made a move to stand, but Richie's got to go.

"It was really good to see you again, Richie," Stan says, serious. "I'm glad you called. I'm glad you saw the picture on Ellen, and looked me up."

"Me, too."

They stand up together, and they hug. Stan's hand fists just slightly in the back of Richie's jacket. They let go awkwardly, and step back, picking up their trash.

"You better keep in touch," Richie says.

"I will." He nods. "Give Eddie my love. Bev, too. Tell them I miss them."

"Give Pats a smooch from me."

"No," Stan says.

He grins, and turns to leave. "See you, Stan."

"Goodbye, Richie."

Richie makes himself turn away, and he makes himself leave. It's fine. Now that he's back in touch
with Stan, and they've exchanged numbers, they can keep in touch. Definitely. He can't help but glance over his shoulder, and he sees that Stan hadn't moved yet, that he's standing where Richie left him, looking at his phone.

Back at his gate, Richie texts Stan *I miss you already!* with a string of emojis just to annoy him. He thinks he'll have to turn off his phone before he gets a response.

But, immediately, Stan texts back a copy of the picture with a :) , because he's that guy that just types his emojis.

It makes Richie smile.

He sends a quick *boarding!* text to Eddie, and boards the plane. He'll see Stan again soon. They might have fallen out of touch before, but they aren't kids this time. They've got time and money and fucking cellular telephone. They're going to stay in touch.

---

It hasn't even been a month when Eddie asks Richie why he wants to go to Atlanta in the summer.

"What?"

"You marked a week in June on the calendar for a trip to Atlanta," Eddie says, waving a hand at Richie. "Look." Richie sighs loudly at having to pause his game, but he does, and he gets up, and he goes to where Eddie sits in front of the laptop. He frowns. Eddie is right. Richie has added a note that reads *Atlanta?* across a week in June in the shared Google calendar. "Do we have a reason to go to Atlanta?"

"I'm sure I had a reason," Richie says, frowning.

"Your mom wants us to come to the beach with them again that week."

"That probably works."

"Okay. I'm going to delete your note."

He smacks a kiss to Eddie's cheek in agreement, returns to the sofa, and doesn't think about it again.

---

It's never good news when you get shaken violently awake. He blinks. The bedroom is dark, and he slowly becomes aware of the Eddie's arm slung over his waist, of Eddie's soft, heavy breath puffing hotly against his neck.

"Poppy!" Francie says, standing at the edge of the bed, and holding his sleeve in a fist.

He rubs at his eyes. "Peaches, there isn't a vampire in your closet." She's been scared of vampires ever since learning what they were on Halloween.

"There is!" She sounds like she's going to cry. "I saw it!"
"Okay." He sits up. "Let's go look." He lifts her up, and she clings to him like a starfish, hugging his neck with her arms, and wrapping her legs around his waist. "I had some garlic for dinner tonight, so I'll just breathe on the sucker if he gets too close, okay?" He stumbles in the dark, and stubs his toe, murmuring a quick, angry "fudgesicle" under his breath.

In her room, he turns on the light, and sets her on her bed, squinting at the onslaught of light.

"Let's see what we've got." He chooses for a weapon a stick with a fluffy horse head on top. "Okay." He nudges the door of the closet open slowly, brandishing the horse. "I ate garlic for dinner!" he threatens.

But, of course, there is nothing in the closet but her clothes on pink, child-sized hangers.

"I don't see any vampires," he announces.

She doesn't look reassured. "It must have gone away," she says.

"That's good."

"No! It knows to go away when you're here, but it'll come back when you're gone!"

He sighs.

She looks at him desperately. What is he supposed to say? There's no such thing as vampires? Stop being a silly little kid? It's the middle of the night, so grow a pair, and go the fuck to sleep? He frowns, and thinks of the way his dad used to say *man up* when Richie was a kid, and he got scared of stupid, imaginary stuff.

He thinks of clowns, and suppresses a shudder.

"Poppy, it's going to get me." Her eyes well with tears.

"Hey, hey, hey." He goes sit on the bed with her. "It's okay. I'd never let any monster get you. *Never.* And you know before your daddy was a nurse, he was a monster-hunter. Renowned. The whole monster community is terrified of him."

She hugs her bear. "It was looking at me. I saw it. As soon you leave, it's going to—!"

"It's okay. I understand. It's okay." He rubs her back. "Tomorrow, we'll figure out a good way to make sure the vampires can't get you. See if we can get you, um, one of those bears that scare vampires away. And, tonight, you can sleep with Daddy and me. This is just for tonight, though. Okay? You're a big girl now, and you've got a big girl bed of your own."

"Okay." She rests her head on his shoulder.

He picks her up and turns off the light, carrying her back to the master.

"What's the matter?" Eddie says, groggy.

"We're going to devise a way to keep the vampires away tomorrow," Richie says.

Eddie doesn't protest when Francie crawls into the bed, thankfully. He hums, and helps to pull up the sheets, letting Francie burrow into his chest. Richie isn't sure Eddie even bothers to open his eyes.

Richie gets back into bed, closes his eyes, and is asleep in a matter of seconds.
(He used to have these nightmares about going missing, about getting lost in the sewers, and losing his mind when nobody came looking for him.

Sometimes, he was chased by a werewolf. Sometimes, Bev was floating in a roomful of dead, floating children. Sometimes, Eddie was lying with glazed, empty eyes in a pile of broken, rotting floor, his neck at an angle.

They faded as soon as he was awake.

It was like he was holding a fistful of sand. He woke up in a fit of terror, and thought the memory of the nightmare was firm in his mind. But, suddenly, it was gone, and it happened so quickly, so quietly, was like sand just rushing out silently through the bottom of his fist, and he was left only with a gross, gritty feeling in his palm.

It's been years since he woke up from anything other than easy, dreamless sleep, though.)

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Richie can't pick up Francie every afternoon after school, but he likes to when he can.

It's close enough that he'll walk, and he'll wait at the front of the school with the rest of the parents who walk, and when the kids are released, she'll be one of the first to appear on the pavement, and she'll run right to him.

She is later to leave the building that afternoon, though.

He is starting to worry that he's gotten his days mixed up, although he's certain she's got Daisies on Mondays, and Bev only picks her up on Thursdays, and they've talked about signing her up for soccer on Wednesdays but they haven't actually done that yet, and he is texting Eddie about it when he sees her.

"Francie!" He waves.

She glances up, and looks down again, making her way slowly to him. She stops. She isn't looking at him, tugging on the straps of her backpack, and shuffling her feet.

What the fuck?

She's always super happy at the end of the day, hugging him tightly, and ready to chatter endlessly about her day.

He squats. "Hey, Buster." He tilts his head to try to catch her eye, and when she keeps her head bent down, he brushes her bangs to the side. "What's the matter?" He is ready to imagine the worst.

She looks at him finally with big, wet eyes. "Look," she says, and she lifts the tube of chapstick she wears on a necklace. She fumbles to open it, and when she does, she reveals that most of the chapstick is gone, and what's left is a fine, sticky layer of dirt.

"Oh, no." He frowns. "How did that happen?"

"Liam." She sniffs.

"Liam?"
She nods. "He—he—he stole it, and he rubbed it in the mud, and when I tried to take it back, he pushed me." She starts to cry, and holds up her arm to reveal a bright pink bandage that doesn't entirely cover the soft red mark on her elbow.

"Hey, hey, hey." He pulls her into his arms. "It's okay."

She hugs him. "He called me prissy. I don't know what that means, but I don't like it. And he said lots of other mean stuff. And I—and I told him—I did what Daddy says to do, and told him I don't like it when you call me that, and he—and that's when he—that's when he stole it and pushed me and stuff." She hiccoughs.

"Did you tell a teacher?"

"Yeah." She rests her cheek on his shoulder. "He got in trouble."

He rubs her back.

"Poppy?" Her voice is small. "Do you think I am?"

"Do I think you're what?"

She sniffs. "Prissy."

"No," he says, gentle. "No, of course I don't."

"Then why did he say I was?"

"He—well, it sounds like Liam was being mean." He pauses. What would Eddie say? This isn't exactly Richie's parenting forte. "If anybody is mean to you like that, you—you do just what you did, and tell them you don't like it. Right? And if they're still mean, that's when you tell the teacher. Right?"

"Right."

He means to pull away from her, wanting to wipe at her tears, and smile at her, see if he can get her to smile at him.

But she clings to him.

"You know what we should do?" he says. "Let's go to the store on our way home. We'll get you some brand new chapstick. How's that sound? Can we do that?"

"Okay." She sniffllest. "It should have sunscreen in it."

"Yeah?"

"Daddy says it's important to protect your lips from possible sun damage."

He presses a kiss to the top of her head. "Definitely." He shifts, and she lets him this time, taking a hold of his hand. "Want to hear a joke?" he asks. He gives her hand a squeeze.

She nods.

"Knock, knock," he says.

"Who's there?"
"Big interrupting cow."

"Big—"

"MOO!"

She giggles.

They go to the store, and he buys her a pack of flavored, SPF 30 chapstick tubes.

At home, Richie uses Eddie's new fancy Boise stereo system to blast some hot Disney tracks.

They dance to Colors of the Wind and belt the lyrics to I'll Make a Man out of You and Richie nails Sebastian's voice when they're jamming to Under the Sea.

This is Richie's parenting forte.

"Conceal, don't feel," he sings. "Don't let them know!" He slaps a hand to his chest. "Well, now they know!" Francie runs straight at him, and he catches her and lifts her up, swinging her around. "Let it go, let it go! Can't hold it back anymore! / Let it go, let it go!"

Eddie gets home from work when they're finishing up Never Had a Friend Like Me.

She rushes him. "Daddy! Look! I got three different kinds!" She's been keeping the chapstick in the pocket of her overalls, and she shows them off eagerly now.

"Wow," he says, glancing at Richie.

"Poppy got them for me 'cause Liam ruined my chapstick at school."

"He ruined it?"

She nods. "He stole it from me." She frowns. "He said I was prissy and he stole it and he rubbed it in the dirt, and he pushed me, too." She shows him her arm. She isn't crying, though. She tells him matter-of-factly, leaning into his side, and apparently feeling better about everything.

"I'm sorry," Eddie says, combing his fingers softly through her hair.

"It's okay. He got in trouble. Here." She wants him to try her chapstick. "It's banana melon flavored, and it's got SPF 30 in it."

They don't talk about it while they eat.

But when it's time for her to take a bath, she announces that she's taking a bath by herself. "I don't need your help," she says. "I'm not a baby. I can do all the stuff by myself." She marches for the bathroom like it's settled.

"Francie, wait," Eddie says.

"I'm not a baby."

He blinks. "I know." He glances at Richie, but Richie has no idea what brought this on. "But that doesn't mean you have to take a bath by yourself. I like giving you a bath."

Eddie's been giving her a bath every night for years. Richie is happy to do it when Eddie can't, but it's one of Eddie's favorite chores. He really, truly likes giving her a bath, letting her pretend she's a
dolphin and drawing on the tiles with special bath crayons and pretending he can't find her when she hides under a towel after.

"Can I sit in the bathroom while you take your bath?" he asks. "I like spending time with you."

She considers. "Do you think—do you think other kids have their daddies sit in the bathroom with them? Sometimes? Other big kids, I mean." She asks it nervously, hopefully.

That's when Richie makes the connection.

"I'm sure," Eddie says, gentle. "But it doesn't matter what other kids do. It's about what you want to do."

"Francie, did Liam at school tell you that you're a baby? You told me he said other mean stuff to you. Did he call you a baby, too?"

She bites her lip.

"He was just being mean, sweetheart," Richie says. "He was—he was being a bullygoat! Remember? He's like the bullygoat in Llama, Llama." She loves those books. "You shouldn't listen to him."

"I know," she says, voice especially small.

"What did he say?" Eddie asks. "He called you a baby?"

She shrugs.

"You can tell us," Richie encourages. "We can't make it better if we don't know what he said."

Suddenly, it pours out of her. "He said—he said I bet your mom still gives you a bath 'cause you're a big baby, and I told him that I don't have a mommy 'cause I have two daddies, and he said—" Her whole face crumbles. "—he said that was 'cause no mommy would want a big baby like me and—"

She bursts into tears.

They surge in together.

"Francie."

"Honey."

"That's not true!"

They end up sitting on the sofa with her; she sits on Eddie's lap, leaning her head on his chest, and she's got a hold of Richie's hand, playing with his fingers, and twisting his gold wedding band around his finger.

Eddie softly explains about growing up, falling in love, and starting a family, and he says that since the two of them are boys who fell in love, there isn't a mommy in the picture. There was never a mommy in the picture. It isn't because there's anything wrong with Francie.

"I like when you give me a bath," she says, wiping at her cheeks.

"Me, too."

"You don't think I'm a baby?"
"No," he says, firm. "I know I call you that sometimes, but it's a term of endearment. It's a nickname just because I love you. It's like how your pops calls me Spaghetti. But I won't call you that anymore if you don't like it. What should I call you?"

"Princess?" Richie says.

He nods. "I could call you princess."

"Or what about . . . " Richie eyes go wide. " . . . pickles?"

She giggles.

"Pickles?" Eddie says, doubtful.

"Pumpkin?"

"Does it have to start with a p?" Eddie asks.

"What about her majesty, the queen of the world?"

"That's a mouthful."

"I like it!" Francie says.

"Okay." He clears his throat. "Her majesty, the queen of the world, are you ready to take a bath?"

She grins. "Yes."

Before they can get up, Richie touches her knee. "Hold on." He clears his throat. "If anyone is mean to you like that again, I want you tell me. Okay? It doesn't matter who it is, or what they say. If you're sad, I want to know why you're sad. I want to cheer you up. Or if you just want to be sad, that's okay, too! But if that's the case, I want to know so I can be sad with you. I . . . I just want you to talk to me, okay?"

"Okay." She nods.

"I love you."

She hugs him. "I love you, too." She says it at a whisper, breathing hotly against his ear.

Eddie takes her up for a bath after that.

Richie does the dishes, and when he's done, it's time to put Francie to bed, and this is something that all three of them do together, squeezing onto her low-to-the-ground, tiny starter bed, and reading a story.

(Bev is rarely home before they put her to bed, but, when she is, she'll end up on the bed with them, too, and they'll read together in a little puppy pile.

He loves his family a lot.)

They give her extra kisses that night, turn on the nightlight, and close the door.

"I need a beer," Richie says.

Eddie follows Richie into the kitchen. "She wouldn't let me help her with her bath. I had to sit on
the toilet. She insisted on doing it herself." He takes a seat at the counter.

"She is going on six," Richie says, sympathetic.

"I know." Eddie sighs loudly. "Is it illegal to murder a child?"

"I hope you mean Liam."

"I do."

"It should at least be legal for us to beat him with a really big stick." Richie knows logically that Liam is probably a little, clueless kid who didn't even realize quite how mean he was being, but, still, it kills Richie to think that he can't stop someone from bullying his kid. "I hope her teacher really did take it seriously."

"Do you think we should say something to her?" Eddie asks. "Ms. Dunn. I kind of want to talk to her about it, but I don't want to be, like, a helicopter dad."

"I guess we can say something if it happens again?"

"Yeah." He nods. "Okay."

Richie reaches for Eddie's hand, and lifts it, pressing a kiss to the backs of his fingers.

---

They have slow, soft sex that night. He presses Eddie's knees to his chest, and frames Eddie's face with his forearms, and pushes into him with slow, measured thrusts.

They are on their way to old these days. Richie has to carry Tums around with him, and he's got hair growing on his back, and the laugh lines around his eyes are more prominent than ever. It's okay. Eddie's got a bit of a gut now, because he just doesn't have the time he used to have for exercise, and he's started to complain about his back, about his arches, about spending hours on his feet day after day at work, but Richie loves every inch of Eddie, and he knows Eddie feels the same. They're growing old together.

They've been together for more than half their lives at this point.

He hears about couples that get divorced after twenty years together, and he wonders how that's possible.

Eddie is a part of Richie.

Eddie presses his head back into the pillow, and Richie can't help but bury his face in the curve of Eddie's neck, sucking a kiss to his pulse, and breathing in the smell of soap.

Eddie's hand pushes into Richie's hair, and his fingers scrape Richie's scalp.

(They aren't that old, of course.

They've still got another good forty years in them. They've got plans. They're going to write their own TV show, and they've decided Francie should have a dog, and they're talking about adopting more kids, about fostering some older siblings with the intention of adoption.)

Richie comes first.
He loses his rhythm, and seizes up, fucking Eddie desperately, and coming, and Eddie tugs his face up out of the crook of his neck, cups his cheeks, and kisses him hotly, rocking up, and coming, too, breathing in sharply, and stealing the breath out of Richie's lungs.

Eddie's hand strokes his back. "I love you," he sighs.

In the glow of warm yellow light from the lamp on the nightstand, he's the most beautiful thing Richie's ever seen.

---

(He turns in the flat hotel bed to look at Eddie. "I forgot you, too," he whispers. He thinks that Eddie might be asleep.

"What?" Eddie says.

Under the covers, he strokes a hand up under Eddie's shirt to feel the warm, smooth skin of his back. "I forgot you, too. I forgot our very first kiss. The details. I forgot the party. I forgot . . ." He swallows. "I forgot the you who was in Derry." He doesn't really know if he's making any sense right now.

Bill said it makes sense that they wouldn't have forgotten each other, because you can't forget a person who's right there with you.

He did, though.

He isn't married to the Eddie he grew up with, because that Eddie was lost.

He was lost the way that Richie slowly, imperceptibly lost his memories of Bowers and It and friends he swore to himself he could never, ever forget.

He's married to the Eddie he built a relationship with over years. He's married to the Eddie who helped him love himself when they were in college, and after, who was there for him when he didn't know what he was doing with his life, and adopted a child with him, and loved him unconditionally for years. He's married to the Eddie who became an adult with him.

It can't fuck with that.

Even if they were separated now, Richie just can't believe he'd forget Eddie entirely.

"I've been thinking a lot about my mom," Eddie says, quiet. "I forgot the shit she put me through. It wasn't really until after she died, but I . . . I did. I forgot. I forgot how she tried to keep me from you."

"She couldn't."

"Nope." Eddie's breath warms Richie's face. "She couldn't."

"If an evil, demonic clown with magic memory dust couldn't keep us apart, I don't think anyone can."

"I'd like to see It try," Eddie says.

It's what Richie needs to hear. The reassurance. There's no reason for Richie to fear he'll lose Eddie, because they've been together too long, are too much of a team, can't be separated by anyone, or anything.
He leans his forehead against Eddie's, and tells himself that he won't, that he can't, that he'll never.

---

They're sitting in bed at nine at night on a Friday like the old, boring married couple they are when they get the call.

It's nice, actually.

Richie can't even remember when they last had the chance to hang out just the two of them. They've been like ships passing in the night lately. Richie's always busy with work, and Eddie's been busier than ever, too, having quit his job at the hospital in a fit of frustration in April, and started at a local LGBT center that was in search of experienced, certified RNs.

Now that it's summer at last, though, and SNL has wrapped up for a couple of months, Richie's got some more time on his hands, and he plans on spending it with his man.

Tonight, neither of them is working, Francie is already sound asleep in bed, and they have a whole Friday evening to themselves.

That's why they're already in bed, cuddling, and watching *Nightbreeds* on DVD. Or, at least, they were cuddling until Richie got hungry. He knows Eddie's missed him, too, because he didn't protest when Richie climbed into bed again with a bowl of chocolate chip cookie dough ice cream.

Richie is sitting up while he eats, and Eddie is leaning back against the headboard right beside him.

"Do you know what I love about this movie?" he asks. He's got his hand up the back of Richie's t-shirt, skating his fingertips over Richie's bare skin in a kind of soothing, absent-minded gesture of affection. "Besides the obvious, I mean."

"There's something obvious we love about this movie?"

"Shut up."

"I know there's the gritty, heart-wrenching realism," Richie says, "and the acting is superb, obviously, and there's the fact that it puts CGI to shame, but—"

Eddie's phone starts buzzing softly on top of the nightstand.

"Who's calling you this late?"

"Technically, it isn't that late." He picks up the phone with a sigh. "It's an unknown caller." He frowns. "Says it's from Derry, Maine."

"Gimme."

Eddie passes it over. "I guess one of my aunts could be calling from Derry," he says, thoughtful.

Richie's already answering. "Al's bait shop, this is Al, masterbaiter."

There's a pause.

Richie thinks whoever called might've already hung up.

He hasn't. "Hi, Richie," he says. His voice is gentle and reluctant and familiar. It should be familiar. Right? Obviously the guy knows him, because he called Eddie, and wasn't confused when
Richie picked up.

"Hey," Richie says. Something must show on his face, because Eddie touches his arm.

"I know it's been a while, so I doubt you even remember me. It's Mike. From Derry. Mike Hanlon. I'm sorry to call at night, but this couldn't wait."

Fin.

Oh, I know, that we'll be growing old 'til we're gray.
We'll be getting through the good times and pain.
We'll be making the years go by like days,
'Cause you're my forever, you're my forever, you're my always.
This was supposed to be about 1,000 words. Ha. But now the story is REALLY done, and I can go back to having a life!

This is basically a complete angst fest, so feel free not to read if that isn't your thing.

Also, heads up, my medical knowledge is entirely form the interwebs. If you do have medical knowledge, this might be painfully inaccurate for you to read. I did the best I could!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He can hear rain pelting the windows. He rubs his eyes. He must have dozed off. He shifts to sit up properly, touching a hand to the crick in his neck, and frowning at the dusty brown flakes of dried blood that float slowly off his shirt at the movement. He remembers.

He looks at his husband, and swallows at the wave of grief that rises up in his chest.

“Hey, sweetheart,” he says.

It’s hard to see his husband like this: his head is shaved from surgery, his skin has a pale, deathly pallor, and his face is distorted, swollen with bruises, and held together with wires, because his jaw was unhinged, and they had to wire it back into place.

They did a tracheostomy to intubate him, because they can’t exactly put a tube through his mouth when his jaw is locked in place.

He takes his husband's hand, and looks at the monitor by the bed, reading his vitals.

The door to the small room opens, and a doctor comes bustling in, rubbing hand sanitizer into his hands. “I assume you’re the family?” He spares a glance at him, and picks up the chart at the end of the bed, scanning it.


“It looks like your husband’s vitals are holding right where they were this morning, which is what we want to see.”

“I know,” Eddie says. “I’m a nurse.”

“Oh?” He looks at Eddie.

“I know why you put him in the coma, and I know it was a really big risk to take. I know that after you take him off sedation, he might not wake up. And I know if he does wake up, it’s more than likely he’ll have brain damage.”

“Your husband was brought in with a traumatic brain injury, Mr. Kaspbrak. To save his life, we induced a coma. I know this is scary, but I assure you we are doing everything we can for him.”
“How long will he be in the coma?” Stan asks.

Eddie’s gaze whips to where he stands in the doorway. He didn’t realize Stan was there. It looks like he’s cleaned up, showered and shaved and put on a clean blue sweater.

“That’s hard to say at this point, but I’m hopeful that it won’t be for very much longer. It looks like the swelling in his brain has gone down, which is encouraging, and his vitals are steady. I understand he had a pretty tough night last night, however, and we want to give his body the time it needs to recover. I’ll check in again in the morning. If he’s still doing well, we can take him off sedation as soon as 24 hours from now."

“He coded,” Eddie says.

“Excuse me?”

“He didn’t have a pretty tough night. He coded.”

“Yes,” says the doctor.

“Once you take him off sedation, how long will it take him to wake up?” Stan asks.

“Could be hours,” Eddie says. Before the doctor can say that’s unlikely, he goes on. He knows it’s unlikely. He knows that everything’s gone off the rails. “Could be days. Could be weeks. Could be never.”

“I’m going to be with you every step of the way,” says the doctor.

“Funny,” Eddie says. “This is the very first time I’m meeting you, and I’ve been here two days.”

“Mr. Tozier isn’t the only patient in this hospital. I’m sorry if you feel your husband’s been neglected, and, I promise, everyone is doing the best they can for him. I know you’ve been working with Dr. Riesen up until now, but I’m going to be joining the team, and I assure you I will do everything in my power to save his life.”

“Great,” Eddie says. He knows the doctor has to talk that way, but that doesn’t mean he has to like it.

It’s a relief when the guy leaves.

Stan comes quietly into the room. “I can stay with him,” he offers. “You can take a shower. Sleep in a bed. Or get a cup of coffee.” He is talking to Eddie, but he is looking at Richie.

“I’m fine,” Eddie says. “I want to be here if . . .” He swallows.

“What do you think is going to happen?” Stan asks. “You’re a nurse. If he were your patient, what would you tell me to expect?”

He sighs. “I’d probably give you the bullshit the doctor just gave me.”

“The doctor made it seem like he’s going to make it.”

“He might,” Eddie says. “If his body doesn’t give out under the stress, he might. But we have no idea what to expect if he wakes up. He might not be able to speak. I don’t just mean his jaw. I mean he might have brain damage, Stan. He might not know who we are, or who he is.” He shakes his head. “His head hit the ground, and who knows what damage it sustained. And it might have saved his life to put him in a coma, but comas aren’t good for your brain.”
“Eddie.”

He pushes to his feet. He can’t be in this room right now.

He sees it again: Richie’s body falling like a puppet with its strings cut, and hitting the ground, and his gut clenches with terror at the memory, at the thought.

He steps out of the room.

Stan follows him. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine.”

“It isn’t. I shouldn’t have asked that of you. He isn’t your patient; he’s your husband.”

Nurses hurry down the hallway of the ICU, talking too fast.

They don’t bat an eye at Eddie, and he knows they have bigger fish to fry. He isn’t the only one whose life is going to hell. Bev says it’s the storm, that Derry is flooding, and trees are falling, cars are crashing, roofs are caving.

If the storm doesn’t subside, it’s going to destroy the town.

He breathes in deeply, and breathes out slowly, trying to calm the anxiety that claws at his chest.

“What can I do for you?” Stan asks.

“Nothing.” He shakes his head. No. He needs to eat. “Actually, I’m sorry. Can you get me something to eat? I’ll feel better if I eat.”

“Okay. I’ll go to the cafeteria.”

“Thanks.”

Stan heads down the hallway. Eddie watches him, and thinks Stan, I missed you, and it makes him want to cry. It isn’t right that he just got Stan back, and now he’s going to lose Richie.

He goes back into Richie’s room.

Richie’s arm is broken from the fall, too. It was shattered in three different places, and dislocated. Now it’s in a nice, clean cast, and it’s the least of Eddie’s worries.

He takes Richie’s hand. “Hey,” he says. “I’m here. I’m right here with you.”

His phone buzzes softly in his pocket. He ought to answer it. If it isn’t Bev, it’s Ben or Bill or Mike, or it could be Maggie, too, asking after Richie, or telling him about something Francie’s done or said or wants. He can’t deal with any of them right now.

---

Stan gets turkey bacon wraps for them. They eat them quietly in the room with Richie on the bed in between them. Stan’s phone beeps at him, but he ignores it.

“I didn’t forget about him again,” Stan says. “Richie.”

“What?”
“After we met up in Atlanta, I didn’t forget about him again. I couldn’t. He made a picture of us the background on my phone, and I saw it constantly, and it made him stick in my mind.” He takes a sip of his water. “I saw it after Mike called me. That’s why I came back. I remembered It as soon as I talked to Mike, and I was terrified, and I thought I couldn’t go back, I couldn’t, and I saw Richie’s big, Trashmouth grin, and I thought I have to.”

“I don’t know what we would have done if you hadn’t come back,” Eddie says.

“You would have been fine. It’s not like I did much. It’s not like I could save my best friend.”

It’s quiet.

(His heart fucking stopped when he heard the shout. He believed it was real. He heard Francie scream, and he was paralyzed, believing that she was really in the sewers, and It had her.

“It’s playing with your fears,” Stan said. “She isn’t here. She’s in Florida. She’s safe, Eddie. She’s safe.”

They were separated from the rest of the group at the time.

It was smart.

It knew they couldn’t fight back alone the way they could when they were a group.

“That isn’t her,” Stan said.

He made himself believe Stan. She was safe. But that was when Eddie heard exactly what she was screaming, how she was begging for help, and it wasn’t Eddie’s help she begged for. She was crying for Poppy. It wasn’t playing with Eddie’s fears.

They sprinted.

They weren’t fast enough, though.

The first thing Eddie saw was his own dead, mangled body: his face was a bloody, bloated mess with gouged, empty sockets where his eyes should have been, and his neck at a sharp right angle.

But when Eddie looked past his body, he saw It crouched over something. Someone.

“No,” Stan said, strangled.

It was straddling Richie’s chest, and It had a hand in Richie’s mouth, was clutching his jaw, and It looked up, made eye contact with Eddie, and, with the squeeze of a fist, It broke Richie’s jaw, unhinged it, made him scream in pain.

Eddie knows the moment will play on a reel in every nightmare he has for the rest of his life.)

“If you hadn’t come back, I might have died, too,” Eddie says. “You saved me.”

Stan is quiet.

Stan's phone beeps with another text, and he wipes his mouth on his napkin, getting up, and throwing his trash in the bin by the door. He takes Eddie's trash, too. He returns to his seat, checking his phone, and putting it back in his pocket, and they sit there in silence.
It’s late when Bev shows up with Ben in tow. “Hey.” She’s wearing a flannel of Richie’s for a jacket, and she goes to stand at his bedside, looking at him. “How’s he doing?” She fixes the fold of his blanket.

“Fine,” Eddie says.

She glances at him, and nods, bending to kiss the top of Richie’s head.

“How’s it outside?” Stan asks.

“Bad.”

He sighs. “I was thinking I’d go back to the hotel for the night. I need to sleep. I need to give Patty a call, too.” He rubs his eyes.

“Go,” Bev says. “I’ll stay.”

Eddie can feel her looking at him. “You don’t have to,” he murmurs.

“I do.” She comes to where he’s seated, kneeling in front of him. “You should go back to the hotel, too. Take a shower. I know it doesn’t seem like it, but you’ll feel better when you clean up.”

“I’ll feel better when he wakes up.”

She touches his hand. “Eddie.” Her skin looks especially pale next to his grimy, unwashed hand. “You’ll be no good to Richie when he wakes up if you haven’t taken care of yourself.” She gazes at him so intently it’s hard not to look up, not to meet her gaze.

He hates the way she’s talking to him with that soft, placating voice.

“What would Richie want you to do?” she asks.

“He’d stay if it were me.”

“He wouldn’t. He’d try. But I’d manhandle him out of here. You’re stronger than I am, though, which is why I have to cajole you verbally.” She catches his gaze at last. “Please, honey.”

He purses his lips. “Fine.”

She smiles.

He gets to his feet. “Call me the moment anything changes. It shouldn’t. But if it does, I need to be here.” He takes the jacket that Ben hands him, slipping it on.

“I will,” Bev says. “I promise.”

He turns to Richie, and leans in. “I need to clean up,” he murmurs. “I’ll be back soon. I love you. I love you so much.” He kisses Richie’s temple, and closes his eyes, breathing in.

He leaves with Stan in front of him, leading the way, and Ben trailing quietly behind him.

The rain is pounding the pavement in front of the hospital, falling in sheets, and making it impossible to see very far, to hear anything other than rain. The world even smells of rain. Stan says he’ll get his rental, and bring it around for them, and he dashes into the torrent, leaving them waiting in the drop off zone.
It surprises Eddie when Ben lights up a cigarette. “Sorry,” Ben says, noticing.

“It’s fine.”

“I quit years ago. Mostly. But I can’t help it when I’m stressed.” He blows the smoke out of his nose. “Forget the nicotine. It just gives me something to do.”

Eddie holds out his hand before he can think better of it.

If Ben is surprised, he doesn’t show it. He gives Eddie a cigarette and lights it for him, cupping his hand over the little flame until it catches.

Eddie coughs when he tries to inhale. “I don’t smoke much,” he says. The smell clogs his nostrils, though, and that’s what he wants. “That was Richie’s thing. There was a time in college when he was smoking a pack a day. I got him off it slowly.” He takes another drag, and he does it right this time. “And I know it’s disgusting, but I kind of like the smell. It makes me think of Richie. It makes me think of fucking in tiny dorm beds and his awful nicotine breath and having no idea what the fuck we were doing with our lives.” He rubs at his temple.

“You’re lucky,” Ben says.

He knows what Ben means. He’s lucky that he didn’t lose Richie for years like the rest of them, that he wasn’t all alone like Mike was, like Ben was. He knows he’s lucky, because he can’t imagine life without Richie.

That’s the problem, though.

“Do you think we’ll forget again?” he asks.

“I hope we don’t,” Ben says. “We shouldn’t. It’s really gone this time.”

“Right,” Eddie says. “We might, though. And I don’t know what I’m supposed to do with that fact. How do I . . .?” He swallows. “I can’t leave if there’s a chance I’ll forget. But how can I stay?”

“It scares me, too. I’ve spend my life missing people I didn’t know I missed.”

“Yeah.”

Ben is looking at him. “Eddie,” he starts.

“I love you, Ben, but I can stand to lose you.” He meets Ben’s gaze. “I’ve lost you before, and I survived. If I forget you, it wouldn’t be the end of the world. Mike, Stan, Bill. It’s the same. I’ve missed you guys, but I’ve been just fine without you. I know that it’s a fucked up thing to say, but it’s true.”

“I get it.”

“I won’t be just fine without Richie. I won’t. And there’s a chance I’m going to lose him twice. He’ll die, and I won’t just have to live without him. I’ll forget him. I can’t leave when there’s a chance that’ll happen. I can’t forget him. But I can’t stay in this shithole. How can I—what, do I bring Francie here? No. I can’t.”

Ben touches his shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” Eddie says, aware of the tremor in his chin. “I’m sorry, I—”
Ben hugs him.

Ben is a big, burly bear of a man these days, and he nearly lifts Eddie off the ground with the embrace. It’s strange. The only people who’ve ever hugged Eddie so completely like this are Richie, of course, and Bev, and neither of them is built anything like Ben.

He wraps his arms hesitantly around Ben, and shudders. He isn’t going to cry. He needs to keep his anxiety in check.

If he lets himself feel too much, he’ll panic.

Lights flash over them, and the black, rented Camry that pulls up is familiar.

Eddie pulls away from Ben.

Stan is blasting the heat in the car. “I can’t see anything in this rain,” he warns. He drives cautiously, inching them through the storm.

It’s nearly an hour before they actually make it back to the hotel.

He dismisses Ben’s offer to keep him company in his room, saying he needs to shower, and he’ll text Ben when he’s ready to return to the hospital. Before Ben can protest, he shuts the door in his face. He is alone at last, standing in an empty, dark room where the roar of the AC is trying to overpower the sound of the storm.

In the bathroom, he knows why Bev insisted he leave the hospital for a while.

He looks worse than he thought.

His eyes are bloodshot, and his hair is a damp flattened mess. He’s got dark bags under his eyes, a shadow of stubble on his face, and grit on every fucking inch of him. There’s the fact, too, that his clothes have become stiff, grimy rags of sweat and dirt and blood.

He strips, and takes a shower, turning the water as hot as he’s able to stand, and scrubbing at his skin furiously, watching the grime swirl steadily down the drain at his feet.

He scrapes his nails through the soap to clean the crud that was caught in them.

He uses Richie’s shampoo.

He presses his palms to the tiles of the wall, and ends up resting his forehead on the tiles, too, clenching his jaw, and sobbing.

(They overslept the morning they went into the sewer, and had to share a shower.

In the small, cramped space, Richie kneed Eddie in the crotch by accident, and Eddie had to lean his forehead on the tiles, because yes, it hurts, you giant, bony piece of shit, and Richie was trying to get on his knees to kiss it better when they heard Bev shout for them to hurry up.)

Eddie’s chest balloons with panic.

He can’t go back to New York without Richie. He can’t. He can’t lose Richie, can’t live without Richie, can’t, can’t, can’t.

He gasps.
He presses his fingertips into the tiles until they hurt, and tries to focus on the pain. He forces the tension from his back, lowering his shoulders, and trying to relax. He counts three sharp, quick breaths in, holds it, and breathes out slowly.

He finishes his shower, and towels off.

His phone buzzes loudly from the pocket of his pants on the floor.

It’s a series of texts from Tony.

*Please tell me this is bullshit. Richie won’t answer his phone. I’m losing my mind over here.*

He’s sent a bunch of links.

Eddie clicks on the first to discover it’s to a recent news article. Apparently, SNL’s Rich Tozier is currently in the ICU after sustaining severe injuries in the collapse of a house in Derry, Maine, during a storm that continues to rage. He clicks out of the story with a clench of his jaw.

He needs to return to the hospital.

He checks for injuries he didn’t notice earlier, but doesn’t see anything. He combs his hair and shaves and uses Richie’s weird spray deodorant. He dresses in khakis, a polo, and one of Richie’s old, soft sweaters that’s baggy on him, that he wishes could swallow him entirely.

He throws his clothes from the sewers in the trash, and he text Ben that he’s ready to go.

But as soon as he does, the phone starts buzzing in his hand with a call.

He picks up. “Hi, Maggie.”

“Sweetheart! I’m glad I got you.”

He sits on the edge of the bed. “I’m sorry, I’ve been—out of it. I don’t have an update for you. His vitals are steady, which is good. The swelling in his brain’s gone down. I think they’ll take him off the meds that are sedating him soon. I’ll keep you posted.” He swallows.

“Okay.” Her voice is gentle. “Do you need me to come up there?”

“No. I’ll—I’ll keep you updated.”

“Francie wants to talk to you. Is that okay? I haven’t told her anything yet. I can if you want. I wasn’t sure what you wanted me to say, though.”

He squeezes his eyes shut. “No, don’t. Let’s—let’s not tell her anything until we’ve got something more to tell her. Um. You can put her on.” He looks up at the knock on the door, and goes to answer it, preparing to lie to his daughter.

“Daddy!”

“Hey, Princess.” He lets Ben into the room. “How are you?”

“Guess who I met?”

“Who?”

“Guess!”
“Cinderella.”

“No!” She giggles. “It was Elsa! I met Elsa! She gave me a hug and took a picture with me and she liked my tiara!”

“Tiara?”

“Grandpa bought it for me! It’s got diamonds and it’s pink and it lights up and I wore it all day long and it was the best day ever! When I grow up, I’m going to live at Disney World!”

“It sounds like you had a fun day,” he says.

“Grandpa let me have a brownie with ice cream for dinner!”

“Lucky duck.”

“I told Grandpa to save some ice cream for you.”

“Me?”

“You’re going to come get me soon.” She says it like a fact, but there’s a small, sad question in her voice. “I miss you.”

“I miss you, too. But I’ll be there to pick you up soon.”

“Tomorrow?”

“No, ah.” He clears his throat. “Not tomorrow. Soon. I promise.”

“Okay.” She doesn’t sound reassured.

“You just keep having fun with Grandma and Grandpa. See if you can meet Pumbaa and Timon. They’re Poppy’s favorites, you know. And I’ll be there soon. I can’t wait to hear all about it.”

“Can I talk to Poppy?” she asks. “I want to tell him about Elsa.”

“He’s in the shower. Listen, France. I gotta go. I’m going to give you some kisses over the phone. Extra, too. From Poppy. And I’ll talk to you tomorrow, okay? Mwah, mwah, mwah. I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

He hangs up before he can feel any worse about lying to her.

“She’s with Richie’s parents?” Ben asks.

He nods. “Let’s go.” He doesn’t want to talk about Francie, about how little she is, and she’ll forget about Richie if she loses him now, will have only stories of him, pictures and videos and memories she thinks are her own but are mostly just given to her.

They take Stan’s car back to the hospital, though Stan stays at the hotel for the night.

Bev is reading a magazine to Richie when they get there. “You look a little better,” she says.

“Do I?”

She doesn’t say anything.
“Sorry,” he says. He shouldn’t be nasty to her.

He reads Richie’s vitals on the machines that stand by his bed. Nothing’s changed. He touches Richie’s shoulder, and leans in, kissing his forehead, and murmuring that he’s back.

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(The hours Eddie spent in the ER with Ben after Richie was wheeled off were the worst of his life.

He was covered in sweat and sewage and blood, rocking in the chair, and fisting his trousers in his clammy, trembling hands, trying to keep from crying, and failing. He saw a doctor, and he heard the words in his head. **We did everything we could. I’m sorry, Mr. Kaspbrak. His injuries were too severe.** He imagined he heard the sound of a flatline. He replayed what happened in the sewers, and he clenched his jaw to keep his face from crumbling with a sob.

It got to the point that a nurse had to squat in front of Eddie.

He shook his head at her to indicate that it was fine, that it was under control. She put her hands on his knees, though, and told him to copy her breathing. It took her a couple of minutes, but she brought him back from the brink.

He was full of energy, and he was exhausted. He was terrified. He was ready to put up a fight, and save Richie’s life, but there was nothing for him to fight.

“They killed It,” Ben said, and he had his phone in hand, was looking at a text from Bev.

They killed It.

They won, but Richie wasn’t going to live to know it.

How would Eddie tell Francie? **Oh, God. How did he tell their daughter that her pops was gone?**

“Eddie?”

“I don’t really care,” he said.

Ben was quiet.

He was a silent, steady presence by Eddie’s side for hours, in fact. It was what Eddie needed from him. He couldn’t have handled Ben trying to talk, giving him useless, false assurances that it would be okay, or trying to distract him with conversation.

Eddie didn’t know how long it had been when Bev, Mike, and Stan arrived.

He let Ben talk to them.

He was staring at the floor, trying to stave off the thought of never being held by Richie ever again, and didn’t immediately notice the doctor.

“You’re here with Rich Tozier?”

His gaze snapped up. “Is he dead?” He ignored the blur of tears in his eyes.

“No,” said the doctor. “He isn’t. And I’m going to do everything I can to keep it that way.”

---
He accepts the cafeteria yogurt parfait that Mike brings him for breakfast in the morning.

Slowly, his friends fill the room.

It’s the first time that all of them have been together since they went into the sewers.

Bev was there all night, lying on the small, frumpy coach with her head in Ben’s lap. Mike arrives early with breakfast. Stan comes back soon after that, and he sits on the chair by the door, quiet, and looking at his phone a lot.

Bill is the last to show up, although Eddie hadn’t thought he’d bother.

“How are you?” Mike asks.

“Exhausted,” Bill says, rubbing at the back of his head.

“Audra?”

He shakes his head. “I don’t know what to do to bring her back. I . . .”

“You could kiss Bev again,” Eddie says. “I don’t know that it’ll help your wife, but you’ve never thought things through before, so I don’t see why you should start now.”

“Eddie,” Bev says.


“It wasn’t Bill’s fault that he was separated from Richie,” Mike says. “None of us were prepared when we went down there for what It would do, for how It would manipulate us.”

“What about when Bill said we should just leave Richie there to die? That was It, too?”

Mike’s eyes widen.

“I wasn’t—” Bill sighs, and scrubs a hand over his face. “I didn’t know what I was saying.” He looks at Eddie, and the apology is written on his face, is a plea. “I was so focused on Audra, and how it was my fault that she was here, that she was in danger, and I—I wasn’t thinking. I love Richie. You know I love Richie. I just wasn’t thinking.”

“You were, though. You were thinking that Richie might not be dead yet, but he would be soon.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Yeah,” Eddie says, sour. “Me, too.”

It’s quiet.

There’s a part of Eddie that knows he’s being a bully.

If Richie were awake, he’d crack a joke, or he’d rub Eddie’s back, or he’d find an excuse to usher Eddie from the room, and he’d talk Eddie down. You know I love when you’re a brat, he’d say, but you’re scaring the children. He’d tease Eddie until Eddie’s anger deflated, and he relaxed.

Richie isn’t awake, though.

That’s the problem.
How can Eddie forgive Bill for wanting to give up on him, to *abandon* him?

(He ran at It. He was going to kill It with his bare fucking hands.

It laughed, and leapt up with Richie in tow, hopping to ledge of a tunnel like a fucking kangaroo clown.

But the laughter cut off abruptly when Bev and Bill and Ben came stumbling into the chamber of the sewer. Mike hadn’t made his way back to the rest of them, but he would. And It knew what that meant, knew that It was no match for the seven of them when they were together.

“Do you think he’ll float?” It said, and It dropped Richie from the ledge.

His body hit the ground with a *thud*.

In a blink, It was gone, and Eddie was falling to his knees by Richie, sobbing, and touching his chest, his face, his neck.

There was a pulse.

But when he cried that they needed to get him to a hospital, Bill said they *couldn’t*.

“Now?” Ben asks.

“What happens now?” Stan says.

He nods. “We defeated It. Right? I mean, you guys did. Now that It’s gone, what is everyone going to do? Just go back to your lives? Do you think we’ll forget again?” He looks at each of them.

“I don’t know,” Mike says. “I don’t really have much of a life to go back to, though.”

“I do,” Stan says. “I have a life in Atlanta. Once I know Richie is okay, I’m headed back to it.”

“You aren’t worried you’ll forget us again?”

That’s when a nurse comes in, and stops in surprise at the sight of all of them in there. “I’m sorry,” she says. “We can’t have more than five visitors in the ICU at once.”

“I’ll go,” Mike says, rising to his feet. “I’m helping with storm relief efforts.”

“We’ll call you if there’s news,” Bev says.

He nods.

“I should go, too,” Bill says. “I should check on Audra.”

They leave.

The nurse starts checking on Richie with careful, practiced hands, and she talks to Eddie while she works. She’s kind, and she’s good at her job. She gives him a smile of encouragement when she says that Richie’s doing very well, and she touches his shoulder before she leaves.

“You guys don’t have to stay here,” Eddie says. “I can call you if there’s news.”

“No,” Bev says. “You aren’t getting rid of me.”

“I’m not trying to get *rid* of you.”
“Right,” she says. “You’re just being a brat, and acting like you’re the only person who cares about Richie. I have news for you. You aren’t.”

“I know I’m not the only one who—”

“But if you’re going to be mean, the least you can do is let me hug you while you bully me.”

“I’m not bullying—”

“C’mere.”

He glares.

She’s undeterred.

He gets up with a huff, and goes to sit on the couch with her. The moment his ass hits the cushion, she’s got an arm around him. He’s stiff in her arms, but she hugs him regardless, pressing her cheek to his shoulder.

It makes his chest go tight.

“I can’t—” He swallows. “I can’t plan what happens next when he’s—”


He squeezes his eyes shut to stave off the tears that are burning his eyes, that are gathering in his lashes.

Ben wraps his arms around the both of them.

Ben was the one who interrupted Eddie’s screaming to say that he’d get Richie out of there, that he’d carry him through the sewers, and he did. He saved him. He carried him out of the sewers, and he got him to the hospital.

Eddie fists a hand in the fabric of Ben’s sleeve to bring him closer.

“Richie’s on SNL,” Stan says.

“What?” He wipes at his eyes. “Yes.”

“He can’t live just anywhere. I can, though. Everyone needs accountants. And I think I would like New York. Patty loves Broadway. So.” He clears his throat. “I say we make that the plan. Richie wakes up, and all of us stick together. Nobody forgets anything. Nobody is alone.” He looks at Richie. “Did you hear that, Trashmouth?”

Eddie looks at Richie, too, like the promise will be enough to wake him up.

He’s sedated, though.

He can’t wake up until the doctors want him to, and even when they do, he still might not. But I need you to, Eddie thinks, and he curls into Bev’s arms.

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They start to wean him off the drugs that sedate him after he’s vitals have been stable for 72 hours.
In total, he was in a coma for five days.

They aren’t going to extubate him immediately. This is a process. The doctor carefully explains that to Eddie, but he doesn’t need the explanation. He knows. And he isn’t going to leave until the process is finished, and Richie is awake.

He sits by the bed, holding Richie’s hand, and talking to him, checking his vitals.

“Maggie says Francie tried to run away yesterday,” he says. “She made it down the block before they found her. She told them she was on the way to the airport to fly to Maine to see us. Can you believe that? I haven’t told her what’s happened to you. I can’t tell her until I can promise her it’ll be okay. It will, won’t it? I was afraid after you coded. But you’re doing so great. You’re working as hard as you can to get back to me. I know you are.”

He strokes Richie’s hand in his.

His face is now a sickly yellow green from bruising, but the swelling is down, and he doesn’t look quite as terrifying as before.

He’s healing.

“Wake up,” Eddie says, “and I’ll take care of the rest. I’ll help you. If you’re confused, I’ll help you figure things out. If you can’t talk, that’s okay. We’ll figure it out. I’ll help you. You just have to wake up, and we’ll go from there.”

“Can he hear you?” Bev asks.

“Probably,” Stan says. “I’ve done some research. Even if he doesn’t know what Eddie’s saying, he can hear him, and he can recognize Eddie’s voice.”

“If there’s any voice he’ll follow to the ends of the earth,” Bev says, “it’s Eddie’s.”

*It knew that, too,* Eddie thinks.

He remembers the sight of his own dead, ruined body, and he thinks of what Richie’s last coherent thoughts must have been, how he thought that Eddie was dead, and It was taunting him, straddling him, and laughing at him, shoving his fingers in Richie’s mouth.

To get Richie alone like that, did It use Eddie’s voice?

His face?

Did “Eddie” plead for help?

He looks at Richie. “We defeated It,” he says. “We never have to worry about It again, Rich. It can never hurt us again.” He imagines Richie’s eyelids are fluttering, but they aren’t.

If Richie hears what he’s saying, he doesn’t give any indication.

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Eddie thinks Bev must have told the group that Eddie needs company, because he’s never left alone.

If Bev isn’t there, she’s made certain that one of the others is.
He watches the news with Stan. He plays a game of cards with Mike. He shows Ben pictures of Francie on his phone, and thinks of how she cried to him on the phone last night because she’s homesick.

(He dozes off while Ben is there, and when he wakes up, it’s to the murmur of voices.

The room is dark, but he can see Bev’s profile in the glow of the corner emergency light. She’s sitting on the sofa with Ben. She’s turned to face him fully, and she’s got her knees at her chest, and her toes tucked under Ben’s thigh, and she’s speaking so softly that Eddie can’t hear what she’s saying, but he can hear a warmth in her voice that he’s never heard before.)

Bill is there for an afternoon, and he starts telling stories about when they were growing up. The memories slowly return to Eddie, too. He laughs until he cries, remembering what a vulgar little shit Richie was at twelve.

Two days pass like that.

Mike is with him when it happens.

Bev is spending the night at a hotel, and Mike’s brought a pizza, and they eat it quietly, listening to the ever constant, comforting pitter-patter of rain on the window.

Mike says his house is flooded, but he doesn’t seem concerned.

“How’s he doing?” Mike asks. “Rich. It’s—it’s normal for it to take this long, right?”

“Yes.” Eddie hesitate. “I saw—I think I saw Richie’s hand twitch. Earlier. It was only a little spasm, but it was something.” The confession makes his heart beat faster. But. Somehow, Mike always puts Eddie at ease, and makes him willing to admit the things that scare him.

“Really?” Mike’s whole face brightens at the idea.

“Yeah.” He nods. “It was a few hours ago.”

“He’s going to pull through,” Mike says, certain. “I know he is.”

Eddie wipes his mouth on a napkin. “I’m going to go to the bathroom.” He kisses Richie’s temple. “I’ll be right back, sweetheart,” he murmurs. He smiles when he’s at the doorway, and he hears Mike tell Richie that he loves his snooty French character on SNL’s Weekend Update.

He goes to the bathroom, and when he’s washing his hands, he looks at himself in the mirror.

That, or his eye own was twitching from a cocktail of stress and exhaustion and caffeine.

No, he thinks. I saw it move.

He leaves the bathroom in time to see a nurse go running into Richie’s room. He sucks in a breath, and lurches in shock, only for the realization to sink in, and he breaks into a run, into a sprint.

Richie is awake.

He’s thrashing on the bed. The heart rate monitor is going crazy beside him. Mike is trying to press him flat with an arm over his chest, but it’s clear he’s trying to keep from hurting Richie. The cast on his arm bangs the table. The nurse is trying to talk to Richie, saying that it’s okay, that he
needs to calm down before he hurts himself, but her efforts to flatten him against the bed aren’t going much better.

“Move,” Eddie says. “Move!”

“Mr. Tozier, I’m going to sedate you, but I need—”

Eddie tugs Mike out of the way. “I’ve got him.” He grabs Richie’s face, pinning Richie’s shoulders with his elbows, and holding the sides of his head, forcing him to look at Eddie.

“Mr. Kaspbrak, your husband is confused, and he’s panicking. It’s common. I’m going to give him a sedative, and—”

He ignores her. “Look at me,” he instructs.

Richie’s eyes wildly search his face.

“I know you’re scared. But it’s going to be okay. You’re at the hospital.” He keeps his voice soft and level and calm. “You’re intubated, and that’s why you can’t talk. It’s helping you breathe. You jaw is wired shut while it heals, which is why you can’t move it. But you’re going to be okay.” He pauses. “Do you understand what I’m saying? I want you to blink like this twice to say yes.” He demonstrates a slow, exaggerated blink. “Twice to say yes,” he repeats, “and once to say no. Okay? Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Richie’s hand plucks at the sleeve of Eddie’s sweater.

“Do you understand what I’m saying?” Eddie’s thumbs stroke his cheeks. “I need you to blink twice if you do. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

He blinks slowly once, and again.

“Good.” Eddie smiles softly. “Good. Now. Do you know who you are?”

He blinks slowly twice.

“Good! That’s really good, Richie.” He swallows. “Do you—do you know who I am?”

Richie blinks slowly, and it’s his longest, most exaggerated blink yet, and when he does it again, Eddie’s heart leaps into his throat. He knows who Eddie is. Richie’s grip on Eddie’s sweater tightens, too, to say it a whole other way, fistling in the material. There’s a plea in his gaze. It makes Eddie want to cry with joy, because Richie is scared, but he is Richie. He didn’t lose himself when his head hit the ground, when they put him in the coma. Eddie knows the look on his face, can recognize his husband in the expression, and that’s enough for now.

“It’s going to be okay,” he promises.

“I need to sedate him,” says the nurse. “His panic is affecting his vitals. We have to keep his heart rate steady.”

But when she moves in, Richie’s heart rate sours again.

“It’s okay!” Eddie says.

Richie blinks slowly. Once. No, he says.

“I understand,” Eddie assures. “You don’t want to be put under.” And without taking his eyes off
Richie, he says, “let’s extubate him.”

“We need to do that when he’s ready to breathe on his own, and we can coach him through it. The ventilator’s been breathing for him. Having him start breathing on his own again isn’t as simple as it seems.”

“I can help him through it.”

“Mr. Kaspbrak, I understand that you’re a nurse, but this is not your hospital. You do not work here. You must know we can’t be liable for decisions you make. I’m sorry. I need to put him under again. Temporarily. I’m not putting him back into the coma.”

He can’t argue with her. He knows it, and he knows why she’s right in more ways than she’s saying.

He isn’t in a state to make decisions about Richie’s health right now.

“They’re going to put you back under,” Eddie says, relenting, “but it’s okay! I’ll be here when you wake up again. Everything is okay. I’m okay. Bev is okay. Stan and Mike and Bill and Ben are okay. Francie is okay. You are, too. I’ll explain everything when you wake up again.”

Richie’s gaze clings to Eddie’s.

“I love you,” Eddie says.

Richie blinks slowly once, twice. Yes.

Eddie shifts slightly to allow the nurse to put the IV back into Richie’s arm. He keeps a hold of his gaze, though. After a beat, he leans his forehead against Richie’s.

Richie’s eyelids flutter.

“I’m here, my love,” Eddie says. “I’m going to stay right here with you.”

The moment Richie’s under again, Eddie’s eyes prickle with tears. He kisses Richie’s forehead. There are times in his life that he’s been too happy for words, and he’ll never forget them, that first time in the dorm and the night they got married and the day the court said Francie was officially their baby. It’s never been like this before, though. He’s never been so happy he feels like he can’t breathe for the joy that fills him.

Richie woke up.

Eddie was able to talk to him, to hold his gaze, and tell him he loved him.

Mike’s hand presses warmly to Eddie’s shoulder. “He’s going to be okay,” he says, a smile in his voice. Eddie turns his head, resting his check on Mike’s hand for a split-second, and trapping it there.

He’s going to be okay.

It’ll take a while before he’s back on his feet. He’ll need a lot of care. They could be in the hospital for weeks to come.

Eddie couldn’t possibly care less.

“I’ll call Bev,” Mike says.
He nods. He can’t take his eyes off Richie, doesn’t want to, is happy to stay right where he is, looking at Richie’s pale, battered face, slack with sleep, and remembering the way Richie’s hand fisted in his sweater. *We’re going to be okay*, he thinks.

**Fin.**

Chapter End Notes

I figured since Henry's dead, and if you threw Stan into the mix, things would happen a lot differently in the sewers, so I went with that. I hope it didn't disappoint! I love me some good angst with a happy ending. :)

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