make it up as we go along

by itsrainingem

Summary

Joe drives his cab, Chuck plays Call of Duty, and Babe just wants to pass Biochem; their apartment is like Grand Central at the best of times and that’s without the two possible fugitives they decided to harbor in the guest room; Luz’s life is turning into a terrible romcom about a coffee shop; Harry’s friends are bad at running a bar but they’re trying their best; somebody got punched in the face; and someday there will be a New York Times Bestseller about all of it.

Or, the interlinked soap opera-worthy drama of a group of millennials in Philadelphia, told day by day.

Notes

I saw this post about how we need a fic of all the complex tangle of drama of all these people, and somewhere between that and reading a bunch of historical interview compilations for class this thing finally came together! The process took several spreadsheets, multiple rewrites and a couple of times where even I’d lost track of what was going on...so if you have any questions I have answers!

Title from This Must Be The Place, which permanently lives on my happy playlist.
As always, this is based off of characters from the miniseries and not on the actual historical figures. No disrespect is intended.
“All the details? Why? You some kind of pervert? Don’t get me wrong, this is important, but what does my personal life have to do with any of it? I get that you’re looking for the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth and all that, but shit. Thought we had a goal here, is all. Pursuit of social justice and all that. I’ll tell you what I know, don’t get me wrong. Fuck. I’ll give you the whole play by play, cause I remember every minute of it. I remember all the way back to the exact day it all started. But first I gotta ask: exactly how many details of my sex life are you after here?”

He’s reaching for his phone before he’s even fully awake, shrill alarm cutting through the peace of the morning abruptly. He fumbles with it for a long moment, the brightness of the screen near blinding in the dark of his room. He ends up just stabbing at the screen with his thumb until the thing goes blessedly silent, the apartment still and quiet once more.

Well, almost. He can hear the rush of cars on the street below his window, and from the sound of it someone is already puttering around in the kitchen. He stretches his arm out of his blanket cocoon to nudge the curtains aside, and sunlight filters into his room. If he’d gotten more than four hours of sleep he might have been able to appreciate the good weather.

As it is, he’s exhausted.

He drags himself out of bed, the chill of the apartment instantly making him shiver and grab a hoodie from the pile of clothes on his desk chair before he heads to the kitchen. Babe is already there, muttering at the coffee maker. It’s finicky on a good day. Today is evidently not a good day.

“Joe,” Babe greets in a whisper. “Do you have any idea why this thing won’t work?”

“Did you turn it on?” Joe asks.

Babe scoffs, frustrated. “Yes, I turned it on. You think I didn’t know that? I’ve been pushing the button for the last five minutes, but it isn’t doing anything.”

Joe steps closer, squinting at it. It sits silently, plugged in and switched on and as still and silent as the grave it probably belongs in. “Why don’t you get Gene?” he asks as he flicks it on and off. “He’s the only one this thing seems to like.”

“He’s at his place. Those three have a big test tomorrow, and they’ve been studying all night. I don’t want to distract him with this.” He flicks the switch again. Nothing happens. “I mean for Christ’s sake, this is an apartment of engineers. Why the hell can’t we get this thing to work? It calls itself a coffee machine and it can’t even make a cup of coffee—”

Maybe if you were nicer it would want to help you.”

Babe whacks the side of the machine, mostly out of frustration. It lets out a cloud of steam and a mechanical sputter before coffee suddenly begins to drip into the pot. Babe and Joe let out a surprised cheer.
Chuck stumbles into the kitchen a moment later, rubbing at his eyes. The skin below them is a sickly shade of violet-grey, and Joe frowns at him.

“Morning, Chuck,” he says warily. “How’d you sleep?”

“Call of Duty,” Chuck grumbles, like that answers everything. It kind of does. “I just wanted to finish the stupid game but then I had a term paper I almost forgot about and it was just. It was a night.”

Joe winces. As much as half of Chuck’s problems seem to be his own fault, Joe can’t help but feel bad for him. He hands him the first cup of coffee as consolation. “Are you ready for German at least?”

“Fuck no. Do we have a quiz?”

Joe nods sagely and Chuck’s frown deepens. “I’ll help you study on the way there.”

Chuck nods, taking a sip of coffee. “Babe, did you need a ride to the engineering building? I can drop you off along the way.”

Babe shakes his head. “Class got cancelled. I’m gonna stay home and see if I can get the landlord up here to fix the radiator.”

Joe snorts. “Good luck with that. If there’s one thing Dike’s good at it’s disappearing when you need him.”

“He’s gotta come eventually,” Chuck argues. “It’s getting cold. He can’t expect us to keep living in a freezing apartment.”

“I’ll find him,” Babe promises. “I’ll drag him in here kicking and screaming if I have to. That isn’t illegal, is it? Is it illegal if I kidnap him in his own building?”

“And on that note it’s time to go!” Chuck announces with false cheer. “Joe, get ready. We’re out of here in ten.”

“Yes, mother,” Joe mutters under his breath, but he takes his coffee to his room and kicks through the clothes on the floor for something to wear. He settles on a worm green henley and skinny jeans, kicking his convereses into the living room as he gets dressed. He crosses to the bathroom and manages to style his hair into something windswept-yet-casual in five minutes flat, then spends another minute examining his work because honestly, sometimes he impresses even himself.

“Are you done preening?” Babe calls. “I gotta pee.”

“Yeah, yeah. Chuck, you ready?”

“As I’ll ever be,” Chuck says. He shuts his bedroom door and pulls his jacket on. “Let’s go. We’re gonna be late.”

“We’re not gonna be late.”

“You know how traffic is in this city.” Chuck’s car keys jingle as he picks them up off the counter.

Joe scoffs. “At eight in the morning? We’ll be fine. Traffic is never that bad this early in the day.”
Traffic is that bad.

When they finally get to class they’re out of breath and nearly late. Their asshole of a TA almost refuses to give them the quiz they’d scrambled to study for in the car, and it’s only Chuck’s baby blues and pragmatic tone that make him think twice.

To make matters worse, one of Joe’s classmates has apparently made it his mission to piss him the hell off every single day of his life. Today his success rates have reached new levels.

Joe takes a deep breath, letting the musty dampness of the lecture hall kiss the bottom of his lungs. He holds the air for a long moment, feeling his chest strain before he lets it out in one long, slow breath. The darkness behind his eyelids is soothing, and he basks in it for a moment before opening his eyes to take in the man sitting in front of him. His irritation doesn’t dissipate in the slightest.

Clearly he needs to take another deep breath.

“No, just—no,” he says in measured tones. The guy has his mouth hanging open. It makes Joe want to punch him in the face and kiss him in equal measure, and confusion over that particular idea makes him even more angry. “I am not going to be lectured on the pronunciation of a language I fucking speak, thank you very much.”

“It isn’t right, though!” the guy insists. “You said yourself that your parents are Austrian! Is it really so impossible that they pronounce it differently in Germany?”

“Just because it’s pronounced that way in Germany doesn’t mean that’s the right way to pronounce it, asshole. Germans aren’t right on everything.”

“Really? Is that why the language is called German?”

“Webster. Liebgott,” their TA calls. “We’re trying to get something accomplished here. Are you two done?”

“Not really, Sobel,” Joe says evenly. “See, this guy—”

“You know my name, Joe,” the guy hisses angrily.

“—seems pretty invested in arguing regional pronunciations are wrong just by virtue of not being German.”

Their TA glares at them both flatly. “As far as I’m concerned, this is a German class. Liebgott, you’re here to learn something. Just because you speak a little German already doesn’t mean you know everything.” Joe rolls his eyes as the man seated across from him puffs out his chest victoriously. His grin dies a second later when Sobel adds, “As for you Webster, you’re a junior in college. Stop acting like a kindergartener with a crush.”

“As if I could have a crush on this asinine—”

“Shut the fuck up, David,” Joe growls.

Across the table, Chuck gives him his best bitchface. “Joe. I love you, but if you get us kicked out of this class one more fucking time so help me God.”

Mercifully the clock changes before Sobel can harass them further. Everyone starts packing up on
cue and Joe gathers his things quickly and stomps out of the lecture hall behind Chuck. Before he can throw himself into the rush of students in the corridor a hand catches his arm. He doesn’t have to look to know it’s David—he doesn’t know much but he knows the weight of those hands, knows the warmth of them and the strength in his fingers. It’s for that reason that he doesn’t hesitate to dislodge his grip before turning around. “What do you want?”

David’s eyes are guarded, mouth pressed closed in a thin line for once. “Would you chill out? I just wanted you to know Hoobler’s shift is going long tonight.”

“You’re the freaking governor, you know?” Joe sasses, though really the offer makes something in his chest lurch.

David’s face somehow gets even bitchier. “Fine, then don’t come.” He pushes past Joe, and this time it’s Joe who jolts forward to catch his arm.

“Woah—hey, alright. I’ll text you when I’m off work, okay?” He licks his lips. “I’m sorry.”

David just raises his eyebrows at him before jerking out of his grip and leaving the lecture hall. He’s instantly swallowed by the rush of bodies. Joe rolls his eyes before following, heading the opposite way toward the parking lot. The crowd of people is enough to annoy him on the best days, and today is decidedly not one of those days. He pushes through as quickly as he can while still keeping up the semblance of not being an asshole, reaching into his pocket and working a cigarette out of the battered pack before he’s even out the door.

The cool air hits him like a slap to the face, but for once he finds it refreshing. He puts the unlit cigarette between his lips and sighs, leaning against the worn red brick next to the door. He can feel Chuck staring at him from where he’s leaning a few feet away, can already picture his carefully assessing eyes without even looking. He turns to him with a glare, half-baked snappy remark on the tip of his tongue; it dies in his throat when Chuck meets him with his own lit cigarette extended toward him, eyebrows raised in a silent question. Joe sighs again, takes it and lights his own off it before passing it back. They smoke in silence.

“Thought you said you were gonna try and quit,” Chuck says finally.

“Thought you said the same.”

Chuck huffs quietly. A quiet laugh, accompanied with a puff of smoke. It makes Joe smile wryly to himself, and they stand there for another minute before Chuck breaks the silence again. “That guy isn’t worth your energy, you know.”

“Hey, someone’s gotta call him on his bullshit.”

“On his bullshit, yeah. You and him are a little past that point.”

“What do you mean?”

Chuck raises an eyebrow at him. “You know what I mean. I just…are you happy, man? I know this isn’t about love or any of that shit, but are you happy? Because you don’t seem happy. I’m always willing to fight someone for you if I need to.”

Joe takes a long drag of smoke, turning the question over in his head. “Chuck, if you think I’d be happier dating you that’s all you have to say. I’ll treat you real nice, too. Maybe even take you to Cheesecake Factory or something, and we can—”

Chuck shoves him in the arm. “Fucking dick,” he says, but at least he’s laughing now. He stomps his
You need a ride to work? I’m going that way. I’ll drop you off.”

“Joe!” Someone yells from across the parking lot.

Joe looks up from where he’s wrestling with the lock on his cab’s shitty door. The keyhole is usually loose to the point he’s fairly sure it could be opened with a well-aimed screwdriver, but today the cold must be messing with it somehow. “Bill! What’s the good word?”

“Good word?” Bill calls. He’s making his way carefully through the sea of yellow cabs toward where Joe stands. “Uber, probably. Or Lyft. I guess they’ve sent all the assholes to us today.”

“Just what I wanted to hear. Are you just starting or just getting off?”

“Getting off. Frannie’s coming to pick me up. I’m going home to a beautiful woman and a hot meal.”

“Lucky bastard,” Joe mutters under his breath. Bill laughs like a lizard. “Ever think about the irony of how we all drive cabs and yet not one of us can afford a car with our cheap-ass cabbie paychecks?”

“Yeah, yeah. Don’t bring it up with Toye. You’ll get a whole rant about it.”

Joe frowns. “How’s he doing?”

“Working his ass off, as always. He’s trying to get a second job now that the company’s trying to cut down on drivers. Better to ask him about it than me. He’s working until one tonight, so you’ll probably run into him eventually.”

“Yeah, alright.” He finally gets the key jammed into the door and swings it open. “Have a good night, Bill.”

“Yeah, you too.”

He gets into the car and adjusts his mirrors quickly, then shifts out of park and drives out of the lot. The rise of Uber has made things harder for the average cabbie, and Joe struggles to find passengers on the best of days. They’re only slightly easier to find in Philly than they were in San Francisco, and it means most of his clientele now are either traditionalists or sympathetic to the cabbie cause. He doesn’t mind it so much—there are fewer drunk kids and cheapskates, at least. It means he spends a lot of time standing around trading gossip with his fellow drivers on slow days, which he doesn’t mind either.

Unfortunately this doesn’t seem to be a slow day. His cab is full of rude businessmen and harried tourists for the next few hours. He isn’t sure what kind of tourist comes to Philadelphia, much less in the winter. He halfheartedly recommends they see the Liberty Bell and just like that they choose it as their new destination, discussing National Treasure all the while. He leaves them at Independence Hall happily, only getting to savor one second of quiet before another passenger is piling into the back.

“Hey, asshole,” a voice says. “How about you take me to the nearest bar as fast as humanly possible. I’ll buy you a shot if it takes less than two minutes.”

Joe rolls his eyes. “Hey, Cobb.”

“I just got dumped, can you believe it?” Cobb says. He has a habit of starting conversations in the
middle, something which never fails to leave Joe reeling. “She had the nerve to dump me at Independence Hall. Two-hundred and thirty years ago our founders debated cutting Britain loose. Ten minutes ago my girlfriend succeeded in cutting me loose. All in the same hallowed grounds.”

“That’s real poetic. You think she thought about that when she did it?”

“I’m sure she did. Fucking history majors. I was exaggerating earlier, by the way. Head toward Chinatown. There’s a great hole-in-the-wall somewhere near there with a bartender who’ll have you feeling like you just jumped out of a fuckin’ plane or something.”

“You got an address?”

“Like I said, you can’t tell up from down leaving that place. I don’t even really remember where it is, but it’s called Currahee. Two R’s, two E’s.”

Joe types it into the GPS and pulls the cab into traffic. “I’m really sorry about your girl, Cobb,” he says, and he means it. Cobb can be irritating, but ever since they roomed together in freshman year he’s been one of Joe’s friends. Cobb wasn’t part of his apartment this year, but only because of several circumstances outside of Joe’s control.

Like Cobb’s inability to hold his liquor.

Or his general dislike for both of Joe’s current roommates.

Or his extreme dislike for Joe’s enemy-with-benefits.

Joe’s pulled out of considering that last thought as Cobb waves off his comment in a rare display of good nature. “It wasn’t meant to be, anyway. You know what they say. Liberal Arts kids don’t get along romantically. Too much drama. A Liberal Arts type and a STEM type are the ultimate power couple.”

“Well gee, Cobb. If you wanted to date me all you had to do was say so.”

“I’m serious, though! It makes sense! I mean, hell—every couple we know is half STEM, half artsie.”

“That’s not true at all.”

“Sure is! Think about it. You remember Kitty Grogan?”

“From Calc?”

“Yeah. Her boyfriend’s in English or something. They’ve been together since high school. And there’s Bill and Fran, and Don and Skip last year from across the hall. Those two are as steady as they come.”

“Yeah, except they added a third,” Joe snorts.

“What?”

“Their duo has become a trio. That guy Penkala from a few rooms down.”

Cobb’s leaning forward, face between the two front seats. “Shit, really?”

“Yeah. That makes two engineers and—what’s Don in, business? And your theory doesn’t explain Gene and Babe.”
“Well then, they’re doomed to fail. I give them a semester, tops.”

“They’ve been together for twenty seven months.” He knows that because yesterday Babe was panicking about the lack of two-and-a-quarter-year anniversary cards at CVS. He hates his friends.

“Shit,” Cobb says again.

“Who knows, though,” Joe adds generously. “Maybe we’ve all got a Liberal Arts major waiting for us somewhere out there, eh?”

“Yeah, I know one. She’s at Independence Hall. Newly single. Ask for Mandy.”

“I think I’ll pass.” He stops in front of an alley. The sun set not long ago but already the streets are dark, air heavy with cold. “Is this it? I don’t see anything but the GPS says we’re here.”

“Yeah, it’s down there,” Cobb says, gesturing down the alley. There’s some sort of storefront halfway down, carnival glass windows spilling golden light onto the pavement. Cobb hands Joe a stack of bills. “Looks rundown, but I swear it’s the best bar in town. Have a good night, yeah?”

Before Joe can answer the back door swings open and two people scramble in. Cobb is bodily shoved through the other side to make room, and he slams the door behind himself with a look of abject horror. Joe turns in his seat. There is a redhead sprawled half across the backseat, trying to scoot further into the vehicle and having little success. It’s partly due to his awkward position and partly due to the two large backpacks he seems to have thrown in ahead of himself. The man trying to shove his tongue down the poor guy’s throat probably isn’t helping either. Joe clears his throat loudly, which accomplishes absolutely nothing. They don’t even pause, but the second guy finally gets his entire body into the car and slams the door shut so at least there’s that.

“Where to?” Joe asks loudly.

The redhead finally breaks for air and the man in his lap immediately relocates his mouth to his collarbone. “Mmff—Marconi Plaza, just head there and I’ll tell you where to stop.” He’s got some sort of southern drawl. It would be charming, except his voice cracks as the other guy gets a hand up his shirt.

“You know, there are laws against fucking in cabs,” Joe says conversationally. He throws an apologetic wave to Cobb before he starts driving; Cobb laughs at him.

The man sprawled in the ginger’s lap looks up to glare at him in the mirror. He’s a little crazy-eyed, actually. Normally it would be unsettling, but Joe’s tired and caffeine-deprived and he could give less of a shit. He glares right back. “Then how about you don’t watch and no one gets in trouble, boo,” the man says, honey-slow.

“Shut up, Snaf,” the redhead snaps.

“Make me.”

Joe grumbles to himself and kicks up the speed to ten past the legal limit. He pointedly ignores the breathy moan that drifts from the backseat.

When he finally gets off work—cab blessedly undebauched, thanks to his sharp turns and quick driving—he still hasn’t seen Toye or any other driver. It’s midnight when he pulls into the lot, the cab station like a ghost town. He locks the car and pulls his collar off before heading in the direction
of David’s apartment. The temperature has dropped again, clouds dark purple and heavy. They could
get snow any day now, and he dreads the day the roads finally frost over. He doesn’t mind walking,
likes the simplicity of it and the time alone with his own thoughts, but as soon as the snow comes it
won’t be nearly as enjoyable.

He climbs the stairs to David’s building and pushes the buzzer a few times. The door unlocks with a
soft clunking sound and he lets himself in. Within a minute he’s standing in front of David’s door as
it swings open. David is standing on the other side in a t-shirt and a pair of sweatpants slung low
over his hips. His hair is still distinctly Disney-ish, which is really not fair. People shouldn’t be
allowed to look that cozy and suave at the same time. It gives Joe a weird warm feeling in his chest
that he pushes down forcefully.

“I’m only here because you have my German textbook,” Joe says by way of greeting.

“Who’s fault is that?”

“Mine. I left it here. But it’s your fault for being a dick about it.”

“I’m not being a dick. I would’ve brought it to you today if you’d have asked.” He steps out of the
doorway to let Joe in. “Is that all you’re here for?”

“What’s that mean?”

“It’s midnight on a Thursday.”

“So?”

David shuts the door behind him, raising his eyebrows. “We have a schedule, lieb. Deny it all you
want, but you know we do.”

“I’m not denying anything,” Joe protests as he steps further into the apartment. It’s a good space,
small but with high ceilings and hardwood floors. Joe still wonders how exactly David and Hoobler
managed to nab it, though he figures David’s wealth combined with Hoobler’s charm had something
to do with it. “What makes you think I’m not busy today?”

“It’s a Thursday. It’s midnight,” he repeats. “You’re never busy. Neither am I. That’s why we have a
schedule.”

Joe rolls his eyes and goes to the living room. His textbook is lying on the couch and he grabs it,
trying to shove it into his bag. He sits down when the zipper decides to put up a fight. “You’re so
fucking annoying.”

“Are you still mad at me about class?” Joe doesn't answer and David huffs, taking the bag from him
and carefully loosening the zipper before handing it back. “I’m sorry I refuse to patronize you by
telling you you’re right when you're wrong. I'm sorry you're too stubborn to concede a point.”

“David,” Joe snaps, anger finally boiling over. He reaches up to grab a handful of David’s shirt,
dragging him onto the couch. David goes easily, letting Joe manhandle him. Joe pushes him onto his
back and David’s tiny, smug smile just makes him even more pissed off. “Shut up.”

David laughs, breathless. “And let you get the last word? I get that you hate me, but…”

He trails off with an almost silent as Joe gets a hand in his hair, tugging on the soft strands. David
arches into it a little and something about that loosens Joe’s shoulders, makes his heart melt in a way
he’ll never admit to. He tugs David’s head to the side so he can press his nose to the juncture of his
jaw. He smells clean and sweet and Joe sighs against his neck. “I don’t hate you.”

“You sure could fool me.” He gasps when Joe nips his jaw.

“No, I don't. You piss me off, but I don't hate you.” He noses his jaw again, exhaling quietly before speaking. “Do you hate me?”

“No,” David says quietly. Joe grinds into him and his eyelashes flutter, and Joe will never get over how beautifully responsive he always is even after two years of this. He does it again. “You--no, I don't hate you. I'm sorry I called you asinine.”

“I'm sorry I called you an asshole,” Joe mumbles into his neck.

“And a dick?”

“And a dick.”

David huffs a laugh and bites at his ear, most likely just because it's near his face. Joe always forgets about his complete lack of restraint when it comes to putting objects in his mouth. He's always chewing or smoking or leaving his lips hanging open, and it's distracting more than anything. Joe puts his fingers to his lips as an offering. This backfires as soon as David takes a fingertip into his mouth. Joe stares at his mouth, forgetting himself for a moment, before tugging at David’s waistband one-handed. A hundred words in two different languages come to mind for how gorgeous he is, half of them endearments—but that’s not what this is. That’s not what they are to each other, no matter how much the line seems to blur. “Fuck,” he says instead.

It comes out sounding like an endearment anyway.

David laughs. “Stop.”

“You stop,” Joe replies, but he’s laughing now too. He tugs on David’s waistband again. “Lift up for me.”

David scoots out from under him instead of lifting his hips. He stands and tugs Joe to his feet before leading him through the apartment to his room. There he strips hurriedly before flopping onto the white down and colorful afghans that make up his bed. Joe toes off his converse before following him.

“You're overdressed,” David says.

“I'm fashionable.” David snorts and tugs at his shirt, and Joe raises his arms obediently to let him pull it off.

“How was work?”

“Awful. How was studying?”

“Boring.”

He thumbs at David’s hole, getting a shaky exhale in response. His thumb comes away slick, and his eyes widen. “Did you…”

“Like I said. Boring afternoon.” David’s tone is flippant and he holds his gaze, but Joe doesn't miss the tinge of red that rises to his cheeks. He pushes his middle finger past the ring of muscle and it slides in easily, David’s mouth falling open.
“Did you think of me?”

“You wish.” Joe adds a second just to be sure and he gasps and reaches toward the nightstand, rifling blindly through the drawer before flinging a condom at Joe’s face. “You’re the worst. Stop teasing and fuck me.”

“Bossy,” Joe gripes. He tugs his jeans down his thighs with one hand, David rolling the condom on him impatiently. And then he’s lining up and pushing in and--

“God, yes,” David breathes.

Joe hardly waits before he’s rolling his hips lazily, getting a groan in response. It’s rough without enough lube but the drag of friction makes his toes curl, and by the way David writhes under him he knows he feels the same. He bites at David’s throat. “You're so fucking hot.”

“You're so fucking slow,” David laughs. “I know you can do better than that.”

“Fuck you.”

“That's the idea. Come on, lieb.”

Joe thrusts into him hard, gathering David’s wrists into his hands and pinning them above his head. David chokes on air, and Joe sucks a bruise into his shoulder as he fucks into him fast and hard. “Like that?”

“Yes, perfect,” David says into the air between them. He groans again at a particularly well-aimed thrust. Joe releases his wrists to tug at his hair again and David keens, digging his nails into Joe’s shoulder blades. The sting makes Joe hiss, pain and pleasure bouncing off each other. He knows this is going to be over embarrassingly fast so he reaches down to get a hand around David. Less than two thrusts later David’s shooting off between them, muffling his moan by clamping his teeth around the juncture of Joe’s neck and shoulder.

Joe’s not sure if it’s pain or pleasure that has him coming a minute later. He groans against David’s ear, eyes squeezing shut and hand tightening in David’s hair of its own accord. It just makes David’s teeth tighten further until he finally goes limp, pressing a lazy kiss against the bite as Joe sags against him.

“You draw blood?” Joe asks, coming back to himself slowly.

“Mmh. No, you're not that good.”

“I'll consider it a blessing,” Joe says, stretching before getting up and crossing over to the bathroom. “Bloodstains are a bitch to wash out.”

“I don’t want to know how you know that.”

He comes back with a washcloth, tossing it at David. It lands on his stomach with a wet spat and he yelps. Joe flops down next to him, looking him in the eye, stupid warm feelings bubbling through his ribs again when David gives him a dopey smile. This isn’t supposed to be about feelings or any of that shit, just pure attraction and frustration and lust. It’s a thin line he’s walking. “I like you,” he says quietly, like it’s a secret.

“Careful. That's the happy glow talking.”

“Yeah, you're probably right. You suck.”
“Shut up,” David says, grinning. “Don’t you have somewhere to be? Preferably far away?”

“Yeah, yeah.” He gets up and pulls his shirt back on, picking his converses off the floor and loosening the laces. “I’ll see you in class on Thursday if I don’t see you before.”

“Alright. Don’t forget your textbook.”

“Not gonna walk me out? You having trouble with your legs or something?”

“Like I said, you’re not that good.”

“Sure, sure. Is that why you keep coming back for more?”

David flings a pillow at him and he laughs as he leaves the apartment. He shuts the door behind him, jogging down the stairs to the street.

He feels a little lighter as he walks back toward his building. Maybe David’s right and it’s the happy glow talking. When it comes down to it, Joe finds he doesn’t really care. He has slightly-better-than-average grades and a reliable source of income. He has roommates who he loves. He misses his family in California but he knows they’re proud of him. And he and his fuckbuddy might just be becoming friends at last.

He reaches his building at around one in the morning. When he stumbles into the apartment not a single light is on. The street is silent outside and the air is still, any late night partygoers forced inside as the temperature drops. Joe rifles through the fridge and finds a sandwich he saved from the day before. He unwraps it and eats half in one bite as he crosses the living room.

The walls flicker blue and white from the light of the television. Chuck is sitting on the couch playing a video game, his eyes glazed over and his brow furrowed in concentration. The only sound in the room is the clicking of the controller. Joe studies the screen for a minute. “What is this?” he asks finally.

Chuck shrugs. “I don’t know. It’s your sandwich, not mine.”

“No. I mean what’s the game?”

Chuck tears his eyes away from the television for a moment to look at him quizzically. “Call of Duty. Duh.”

“Oh.” Duh. “I thought you finished last night?”

“No. I’ve still got this stupid side story with the Nazi zombie thing. I might finish it tonight but it’s —” onscreen his character dies in a burst of gunfire, and Chuck swears quietly.

“It’s hard?”

“Yeah. It’s hard.” He puts the controller down and looks at Joe again. Joe doesn’t miss the way his eyes catch on his neck. “How was your night?”

“Same old. It looks like it’ll snow soon.”

“Getting cold,” Chuck agrees. “You should’ve called. I would have given you a ride home.”

“It’s alright. I like walking.” He crams the rest of his sandwich into his mouth and talks as he chews. “I’m going to bed. Got some sleep to catch up on. Night, Chuck.”
“Mmph.”

The buttons of the controller are still clicking away as Joe closes his bedroom door and falls into bed, exhausted. He’s asleep almost as soon as his head hits the pillow.
Thank you so much to everybody who left reviews or kudos! I came close to giving up and scrapping this entire project multiple times, so your kind words mean the world to me :-) Anyway, things are about to get very confusing so get ready!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Grant, Charles. 1/24/2018. Interview and transcript by Evan Wright. CURRAHEE, Philadelphia, PA.

“I guess you just got to remember it can happen to anyone. You can't dwell on any of it, that's what they told me. My part in it all isn’t special. I came so close to...I don't know. But you just want to hear about the other stuff, right? It was just another few weeks for me. I didn’t do anything, not really. If you want all the grand heroics of it you know who you need to be talking to. My friends are heroes. They're the best people I've ever met. I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

Chuck wakes up before his alarm for once. He gropes for his phone to silence it before it can ring and rolls his head to look out the window.

No snow. Not yet, anyway. School as always, then.

He hauls himself out of bed, taking the topmost blanket with him as he shuffles across his room and into the common area. He can hear movement in the kitchen, and sure enough when he rounds the corner he finds Gene already scooping coffee into their temperamental old coffee pot.

“When are you signing the lease?” Chuck rasps sleepily, sitting at the table and tucking his legs up under him.

“As soon as you all learn how to make your own food and work your own coffee pot,” Gene replies, tone bland. “Although I do like having my old apartment on standby for the day one of you finally burns this place to the ground.” He flicks the coffee pot on, his fingertips barely peeking out from the sleeves of the beat up blue Phillies sweatshirt he’s swaddled in. Chuck’s pretty sure it’s Babe’s. The drawstrings are missing and the edge of one sleeve is torn and singed from the time Babe tried to make chili.

Babe isn’t allowed to make chili unsupervised anymore.

Chuck is pulled from war flashbacks of the Great Chili Debacle of ’16 by Joe’s entrance into the kitchen. He joins Gene in staring at the coffee pot, and Chuck looks him over for a minute. He’s been wearing the same slump in his shoulders for the whole semester. The dark bruise on the side of his neck might have something to do with that, but Chuck banishes the thought before it can sour his morning. Joe yawns, somehow turning it into a full-body movement, before sitting down in the chair closest to the counter so he can continue to watch the coffee brew.

Chuck studies him. “Rough night?”
“Just long. Cobb got dumped.”

“That’s too bad,” Chuck says with absolutely no inflection because honestly, he couldn’t really care less. He doesn’t hate the guy, but Cobb has been a dick to him on more than one occasion. Gene hums noncommittally, and Chuck knows he feels the same.

“Yeah, he was talking my ear off about it until he got shoved outta the car by some Cajun and his southern belle. Think you know him, Gene? Scrawny, scary and trying to get laid in the back of my cab?”

Gene blinks. “That could be literally anyone from back home that I know.”

“Yeah, well. Hopefully you don’t know this one. He was a real piece of work.”

Babe chooses that moment to appear in the kitchen, clad in an old t-shirt and some pajama pants patterned with smiling avocados of all things. He wraps his arms around Gene’s waist and presses his face into his shoulder, and the guy cranes his head to smile at him like he hung the fucking moon.

That’s true love if Chuck’s ever seen it. No one should get that kind of adoration while wearing avocados on their legs. Joe seems to be thinking the same thing, because he snorts quietly to himself.

Babe grumbles something into Gene’s shoulder, words lost in the fabric of the hoodie. He pulls back to speak again. “Test tonight.”

“You ready?”

“Fuck no. You know you’re still the only thing I enjoy about Biochem.”

Gene bumps their heads together gently. “Well, maybe we can get you a three-point and you can enjoy that, too. Study day?”

“Study day.”

“Study day,” Joe raises his eyebrows. “That what you were doing last night?”

“Ha ha,” Babe says flatly. “If you really must know, I was trying to kidnap and scare our landlord into fixing the damn heating. I wish I could say I was doing something as fun as studying, but no such luck.”

“You didn’t find him then?” Chuck asks. He can already guess the answer.

“It feel any warmer in here to you?”

The coffee maker lets out a few last drops of coffee before making a rattling noise and shutting down. Joe doles coffee into four cups, bringing two to the table. He hands one to Chuck and Chuck breathes in the steam gratefully, the smell already clearing his head a little. He downs it in one go.

Joe reels a little. “Good god, man,” he mutters. “Call of Duty?”

Chuck immediately makes grabby hands at the pot, and Babe hands it over sympathetically. Chuck refills his cup with a graceless slosh, barely avoiding spilling it. “Game’s ruining my fucking life. Fucking Nazi zombie.”

“Nazi zombie?”

“Why has there gotta be a Nazi zombie, huh? Isn’t it bad enough that they’re fucking Nazis? They
gotta be zombies too?” Chuck slugs some more coffee. Unfortunately he’s awake enough to register the heat this time, and he hisses as pain lances across his tongue. “God, this day. Let’s end this day. Let’s all just go back to bed and pretend Friday is over.”

“No can do,” Joe says, clapping him on the back. “We gotta get going if you want to actually be on time to class for once. Babe, I picked up a shift this afternoon so you guys will have all day around here to study as you please.”

“Thanks, man,” Babe says. “It’ll probably be more productive than your study sessions with Webster, in any case.”

“Ugg, shut up. You have avocados on your pants.”

Gene seems to notice this for the first time. He snorts loudly. Babe glares at Joe but his blush ruin the effect.

They stop at the coffee shop on the edge of campus before class. Joe has long argued that the shared experience of college students everywhere is drinking several cups of coffee at home just to gain the strength to go find a few shots of espresso somewhere, and it’s a theory Chuck agrees with wholeheartedly. That combined with Chuck’s blueberry scone addiction makes them regulars here, and with good reason. Easy Café has good coffee, excellent pastries, fast internet and low prices. The fact that their close friends all work here is just a bonus.

“Hey, look who’s awake before noon!” the man behind the register shouts at them.

“You know we’re nothing if not morning people, George,” Chuck yells back.

George snorts and starts typing away at the screen in front of him, already knowing what they want. “Rumor mill’s been working up some nice stuff about you two this week,” he says conversationally.

“Oh yeah? Who’s been talking?”

“Eh, some freshmen. I just heard it here in passing, really. The coffee shop is the modern ham radio, you know. An agora for trading information and ideas.”

“Lotta big words outta that mouth today,” the barista pipes up.

“Shut it, Perco. Anyway, rumor has it you’re the most eligible bachelor on campus, Chuck.”

“That’s not news,” Chuck replies without missing a beat. Perco snorts.

“Not a bad rumor either, though,” Luz reasons. “Anyway, some sophomores from your German class have been chatting about your dreamy eyes and perfect hair. I could give them your number if you want.”

“I think I’m good,” Chuck says. He’s flattered, but he can think of few things less appealing than a blind date. “I’m not really looking for a relationship.”

“Who said anything about a relationship?” Luz says lewdly, and Chuck swallows against a sudden wave of nausea.

“Do me a favor and put in a bad word for me,” he says, smiling to cover his unease. “Tell them I collect beanie babies or something.”
“You’re no fun,” Joe chimes in, but he must sense Chuck’s discomfort somehow because he changes the subject deftly. “What about me, George? Anybody saying anything nice about me?”

“Nope,” Luz says, popping the ‘p’. “Actually, word is you got into a fight.”

“A physical fight?”

“Duh. You verbally fighting people isn't news.”

Chuck turns to him expectantly, eyebrows arching toward his hairline. He’s followed Joe into more than a few fights, and they’ve never kept stories of fights a secret before. If Joe’s started keeping things from him now there will be words. Chuck stares him down as Joe thinks about it, but he ultimately shakes his head. “Nah, I haven’t fought anyone since that—the guy.” He looks to Chuck.

“Campus preacher,” Chuck supplies. He remembers the day well. Chuck is in his third year at this school now and the man’s homophobic drivel and anti-semitic remarks still piss him off as much as they had on his first day. When the preacher had finally got a little too close to Joe’s face and shoved him none too gently Chuck had been more than happy to retaliate, Joe backing him up when he got knocked down a minute later.

“Thank you. Campus preacher, about a month ago.”


“Aw, leave me alone. Either way, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

They move down the bar as more customers come in, and Perco pours milk into perfect hearts. He sets their coffee on the counter, sliding Chuck his scone. Chuck grabs it a little too fast and holds it close to his chest, steam filtering through the bag and bringing the smell of butter and fruit with it. Joe raises an eyebrow and Perco barks a short laugh. Chuck glares at them both. They don’t understand his love, but that doesn’t mean they need to make fun of it.

Luz finishes ringing up a customer, and before the next can step up he turns to them. “Hey, before I forget. You two interested in coming out tonight?”

Joe tisks. “I’ve got work ‘til eight.”

“I mean after that. A late-night type of thing.”

“Late-night type of thing?” Chuck parrots. “Where are you guys going?”

Luz and Perco look at each other. “We were thinking about maybe going to Trigger.”

Chuck frowns. “…The gay club? Have we been hit with tragedy? Someone go through a breakup I didn’t hear about?”

“Not quite,” Perco says, smiling slowly. “Georgie here is pining. Needs to find himself a hookup so he can shake his crush.”

“Hey!” Luz snaps. “No, it’s not like that at all. Just think we could all use a little fun, you know? Maybe blow off some steam.”

Chuck thinks about it for a minute. He has to focus now more than ever, what with the semester being almost halfway through. It would do him good to get out, though. Being cooped up in the apartment with Babe-and-Gene and all of Joe’s angling over David is doing nothing good for his
sanity. He looks to Joe, who shrugs. “Yeah, alright,” Chuck says. “You can probably even come over to pregame. I’ll ask Babe.”

“Awesome! We’ll probably head over at ten or so, alright? Let me know if—”

“Hey!” Chuck turns around to see Sobel in line behind them, glaring daggers. “You gonna chat all day or can I get some coffee?”

Luz rolls his eyes and gives the guy his best bitchface. “I’ll see you around, boys,” he says. “Stay out of trouble.”

“We’ll sure try,” Chuck mutters back.

Despite the quantity of caffeine in his system Chuck has trouble focusing on his lecture. His professor is droning about network security in what might be the most monotone voice a human can possibly achieve, and Chuck doesn’t make it ten minutes before his mind starts to wander.

He’s never done poorly at school. He got here on scholarship and doesn’t plan to lose that money anytime soon, but if anything is threatening it it’s times like this: when he can’t focus, when he can’t find it in himself to even try, when his attention is back on his apartment and its residents rather than the extremely boring lecture he really should be listening to instead.

He loves his roommates, he really does. He, Joe and Babe had been fast friends ever since freshman year. Intro to Engineering had only been tolerable with the three of them bickering in the back of the lecture hall, and a year later they were moving into their shitty apartment together. Julian had lived with them for a while, in their oversized pantry that was sold to them as a guest room. When Gene started staying over more and more Julian bit the bullet and moved into the spare room in Gene’s old place instead.

Chuck can’t help but miss him. Or maybe he misses not being the odd one out; he doesn’t know.

The facts of the matter are Babe and Gene move in sync without even realizing they’re doing it. Chuck doesn’t begrudge them that, could never begrudge his friends happiness. But now Joe is spending more and more time with David, despite that they’ve done nothing but fight and fuck in a never-ending loop for the last two years. Even Luz is chasing some unknown patron of the coffee shop. Chuck can’t help but feel that everyone is moving into a new stage of their lives, a stage Chuck isn’t even sure he wants to follow them into, and as he tries to figure out what he truly want he’s getting left behind.

He’s jolted from his thoughts by the familiar rustles of paper and backpacks as everyone starts packing up. He rushes to follow, pulling out his phone once all his things are packed away.

Need a ride to work? He sends to Joe quickly. Grey ellipses blink as Joe types back a second later.

Stopping by webs to pick up some stuff.

Chuck rolls his eyes and flicks his phone off, taking his bag and heading to the parking lot.

When he gets home Babe and Gene really are studying, heads bent over a textbook as they talk to each other in quiet murmurs. Babe looks up as he shuts the front door.
“Where’s Joe?” he calls, breaking the peaceful silence.

“At David’s.” Chuck tries not to sound too petulant. He thinks he has Babe fooled, but his words have Gene looking up with sharp blue eyes. “We talked to Luz and Perco. They’re going to Trigger tonight if you guys want to come.”

“That would be—you know, that would be good,” Babe says, nodding slowly. “Our test is at eight, and after that we’re done for the day. We should be back in time.”

“Did you ask them if they want to come here first?” Gene says.

“Yeah, already did it. They said they’ll be here at around ten.” Chuck toes his shoes off, placing them on the rack by the door neatly. “I’m gonna nap for a few hours, maybe do some reading. If I’m not awake by then just come hit me with a book or something, alright?”

“I’ve got my turbomachinery textbook in my bag. Should be heavy enough.”

“Thanks, Babe,” Chuck says with mock sincerity, going into his room.

He manages to knock out his work for the next few days, and then starts picking away at a paper for German. It fills the better part of the afternoon, and by evening he has all his work done and is scrolling through Facebook, eyes glazed over. In the back of his mind he registers Babe and Gene leave for Biochem, and then the apartment is blessedly quiet and still, the winter sun long past set. He closes his laptop, plunging his room into darkness. He could do to catch up on some sleep while the semester is still slow in this last breath before the chaos of finals. He shuts his eyes, and between one breath and the next he’s asleep.

He doesn’t get to rest for long. He’s awoken rudely by his phone vibrating directly under his head, the buzzing resonating through his skull. He jerks upright and answers the call without bothering to look at the screen. “Hello?”

“Sorry, did I wake you?”

“Julian? Don’t worry about it. I was just napping. What’s up?”

“Oh, nothing,” Julian says, voice tinny through the speaker. “Things are just grand, you know? Things are so great.”

“…Okay?”

“Yeah, it’s so great. It’s just—” there’s a burst of static, and Chuck imagines Julian rubbing a hand over his face before speaking again. “No, you know what? Things are not grand. They are decidedly not. You know why?” He pushes on before Chuck can answer. “I need some advice from you, Chuck.”

“Advice?”

“Yeah. Romantic advice.”

“Are you coming on to me?” Chuck asks, genuinely confused. “I’m the last person you should ask relationship advice from.”

“That’s not true. Joe would be way worse.”
Chuck frowns. “Why aren’t you talking to Babe? He’s been in a relationship longer than any of us.”

“I can’t ask Babe! He’ll tell Gene!”

That’s probably true. “Why does it matter if he tells Gene?”

“Because I’m crushing on his ex-roommate!”

“Renée?” Chuck stretches to reach the lamp on his nightstand. He might as well commit to being awake. “I think you’re barking up the wrong tree. She likes girls.”

“No! Ralph! Ralph Spina!”

“Oh.”

“Oh? What’s that mean?”

“Nothing. I just wasn’t expecting that.”

“Well, what’s his deal? Do you know anything?”

“What do you mean?”

“You know, his deal. Gay, straight, single or taken?”

There’s a rattle of keys in the door and as Babe and Gene return, and Chuck can hear Perco and Luz’s voices in the mix as they all enter the apartment. Chuck keeps his voice quiet as he speaks. “Julian, I barely know the guy. You’d have to ask Gene.”

Julian groans. “Fine. But if he tells Ralph I’m blaming you for it.”

“Do you want me to put him on the phone? He just got home.”

“No, don’t do that. I’ll ask him in my own time.” He’s silent for a moment. “How is everyone? How’s Joe?”

“With David,” Chuck says. It comes out more petulant than he would’ve liked, and he hears Julian suck in a breath.

“Chuck, I’m sorry.”

“Sorry about what? He’s an adult. He can make his own choices.”

“I know, it’s just—I’m sorry anyway. I know what he means to you.”

*What he means to you.* Chuck ponders that. He wishes Julian could inform him exactly what it is Joe means to him. Half the time Chuck isn’t sure even he himself knows. “It’s not—I’m not jealous. It’s not like that. He’s my best friend,” he says. “I want him to be happy. If this is making him happy, then whatever.”

“But you don’t think it is.”

“Does he seem happy to you?”

There’s a crackle of static as Julian sighs. “Give it time. Something’s gotta give. Either David stops raising his blood pressure, or Joe stops seeing him. This love-hate thing can’t go on forever.”
“Don’t hold your breath. It’s been two years now,” Chuck says darkly. “Julian, I’ve gotta go. Luz and Perco just got here. We’re heading out to Trigger in a few.”

“No invite for me?”

“I know your work schedule, idiot. You’re busy tonight.”

“It’s the thought that counts.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Chuck mutters, hanging up. Everyone is chatting happily in the kitchen and he can already hear the clinking of glass as drinks are poured. He wanders into the living room just as there’s a knock at the door.

“Who’s that?” Babe calls from the kitchen.

“Joe probably forgot his key again,” Chuck calls back. He crosses the room and swings the door open, ready to tease his best friend about his forgetfulness.

The men on the other side are decidedly not his roommate.

“Um, can I help you?” he asks warily.

The two men stare, seemingly just as confused to see him as he is to see them. They’ve both got packs on their shoulders as if they’ve just finished a three-month hike through the wilderness, and Chuck doesn’t exactly pride himself on his knowledge of fashion but even he can recognize their matching tan boots as military.

“We’re looking for an Edward Heffron,” one of them says politely, seeming to have recovered from his surprise. He has a shock of red hair and some sort of southern accent Chuck can’t place. Chuck opens his mouth to reply, but before he can he hears movement in the room behind him.

Gene calls, “Let him in. We’re doing shots.” He comes to stand in the doorway with Chuck, nudging him over a little—and he’s still got the door half closed without even realizing it, his body blocking the narrow space. Gene has to press into his shoulder just to see past him into the hallway, and when he finally gets a look at their visitors Chuck can feel him tense. He stares at the men for what feels like an eternity. The redhead watches him warily; the man next to him stares with a series of emotions Chuck can’t even begin to parse before finally settling on a smirk as he breaks the silence.

“Thank god for that, cause I could use a drink,” he says, vowels long and slow in a lazy version of Gene’s drawl.

Gene stares at him for another long moment before muttering something very quietly in his not-French. Chuck doesn’t hear it often, and he’s certainly never heard it spoken angrily like this. He opens the door a little wider, mostly just so he has room to edge away from his seething friend. Before he can do anything to defuse the situation the man in the hallway is saying something equally incomprehensible back, and then they’re trading what seem to be increasingly loud and rapid-fire insults.

Chuck looks into the apartment, at a loss for what to do about the situation. He’s about to call for reinforcements but the commotion has already drawn Babe from the kitchen. When he sees their visitors he only sighs.

“Sledge.”

That explains a thing or two.
“Heffron,” the redhead in the hallway says, sounding equally exhausted. “Mind if we come in?”

Gene switches abruptly back in to English mid-tirade. “—You are a full-grown man and you can’t figure out how to work a telephone? *Fils de pute—*

“Oh, that’s rich!” the man laughs. It’s a sharp sound, almost unhinged. “Yeah, that’s real cute, Gene! Cause I don’t seem to remember you ever picking up a phone, do you?”

“You bastard,” Gene spits, words coming out crisp and quick with anger. “You know damn well—”

“Yeah, let’s take this inside,” Babe cuts in, opening the door wider. Chuck drags Gene back into the room, half expecting to be shoved away. Gene comes easily though, still spitting insults as the man follows right behind him. Sledge is last and then Babe is shutting the door and leading him to the kitchen. Chuck follows, more out of desire to distance himself from the two in the living room than anything.

Luz and Perco are watching with wide eyes when he enters the room. “We can do this a different night if you guys need to sort this out,” Perco says, but Babe shakes his head.

“No way. If anything, we’ll all need a drink after this.”

Chuck sits down next to them at the table. “Welcome to the family, boys.”

The arguing in the living room ceases abruptly as Gene storms into the kitchen. His eyes land on their other visitor. “I hope you have a real good reason for bringing him here,” he says, tone clipped.

“You must be Eugene Roe,” Sledge replies. He looks drained, sallow and tired and underfed. Chuck has the sudden urge to try to find him a sandwich or something. “I swear we wouldn’t be here if we didn’t need to be.”

The three stare each other down: Babe with guarded eyes, Gene with barely contained anger, Sledge with a determined set to his shoulders. Chuck looks away. In front of him there is an assortment of different liquor bottles and shot glasses. He wordlessly pours three shots of vodka. He, Perco and Luz drink in unison.

The Mexican standoff in front of them breaks when the front door clatters open. Chuck hears voices in the living room and then Joe is stomping into the kitchen. Chuck can’t help but brighten at the sight of him, hair windswept and jaw clenched. It’s his pre-fight look, and Chuck can admit he kind of missed seeing it. “Who the fuck is in our living room?” he grits out, leaning one hand against the kitchen island.

“That’s Merriell,” Gene says, anger making his words short and sharp.

That’s Chuck’s suspicions confirmed, then. He sighs heavily and refills the shot glasses.

“Oh,” Joe says in false cheer. “Oh, okay. That’s good to know. I didn’t catch a name when he was too busy trying to suck this guy’s dick in my cab last night!” He jerks his thumb at Sledge, who grimaces.

“They’re the dickbags from your cab?” Chuck says. This entire situation is suddenly ridiculous, and he’s torn between laughing maniacally and sobbing into his vodka. He manages to school his features and look at Joe flatly.

Sledge squares his shoulders finally and addresses the room at large. “Merriell and I need a place to stay for a time,” he says. “We’ve run into some trouble back home.”

“Well the hell are you?”

“I’m Eugene. Eugene Sledge. Babe’s cousin from Alabama.”

“Oh. Oh no,” Joe mutters, deflating all at once.

“Oh yes,” Chuck mutters back sarcastically. Joe sits down heavily at the table and Chuck pours him a shot, too. Joe is still staring at something, and Chuck follows his gaze to where Sledge and Babe stand side by side. He’s hit suddenly by how similar they look: same brow, same sharp nose, same shock of red hair. If not for their accents Chuck could mistake them for brothers, and he guesses Joe is thinking the same thing. There’s something sharp about Sledge, though. Babe is all sunshine and warmth on even the worst days; less than ten minutes into meeting him it’s obvious his cousin burns a couple degrees hotter.

“That’s Merriell Shelton in our living room, isn’t it?” Joe asks Chuck, horror dawn ing in his eyes. “Fucking Snafu?”

Chuck nods wordlessly. Joe’s head thunks down onto the table.

Next to him, Perco and Luz are frowning. “I don’t get it,” Luz says. “What is this?”

“They’re family,” Gene says shortly. “Merriell and I were childhood acquaintances.”

“Childhood acquaintances?”

“We were friends. Out of necessity. It was a small town.”

“Okay…? So what happened?”

“I got my admission letter to come here, and he got mad at me and threw my car keys into the swamp and stole all my shoes—”

“Je n’ai aucune idée —” Shelton shouts from the living room.

“Pic kee toi!” Gene shouts back. “J’ai aimé ces bottes, putain—”

“Calm down,” Chuck says warily. Gene rarely gets angry, and when he does his temper burns hot and fast. Chuck has long since been something of an emotional mediator of the group, mainly just because Joe and Babe don’t have the patience for it themselves. It doesn’t mean he wouldn’t rather everyone just get along. “We don’t need to let them stay here if you hate them so much.”

“You remember how Gene and I met, though,” Babe says, eyeing his simmering boyfriend. “We kind of owe them.”

“What?” Perco cuts in. “I always thought you guys met in class or something.”

“No, no,” Babe says. “We met at the start of Freshman year. See, I got a letter from Sledge in the mail. He said he’d met Shelton in the army, and Shelton’s best friend wasn’t replying to any of his letters. They’d got to talking and it turned out Shelton’s friend went to the same school as me, and so Sledge wanted me to check and make sure this guy wasn’t dead in his dorm room or something.”

“I had no choice,” Sledge adds, lowering his voice. “Merriell was real broken up about the whole thing, even if he didn’t talk about it much. They’d been friends for life, he’d enlisted and then…”
nothing. I had to see if there was a way to fix it.”

“It never occurred to him that maybe I just didn’t want to talk to him,” Gene replies.

“Oh, that was the first thing to occur to him,” Sledge says, bristling.

Babe interrupts them both, at this point too swept up in the story to be upset. “So I figure why not, this guy’s room is only a floor down from mine. I go down there with the letter and knock on his door, and when it opens I come face to face with the most beautiful human being I’ve ever seen in my entire fuckin’ life. Like, my jaw must’ve hit the floor. It was love at first sight, I’m telling you. I completely forgot about the letter, I was so caught up.”

“Yeah, you remembered it eventually. We got to talking for ten minutes or so before he finally remembered why he’d come down.”

“Well what did you expect, Gene? You opened that door and I was a goner, I tell you. And that was before you even spoke to me. Anyway, I finally learn that he is indeed the man I am looking for and I give him the letter. That part didn’t go as well. I did not get him to reply to his buddy over in Afghanistan, but I did get a phone number and a coffee date. I call that a success.”

Gene’s glower finally breaks as he smiles softly.

“You guys haven’t told us why you’re fleeing the south,” Chuck realizes, turning to Sledge pointedly. “What’s so important you had to come here?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Sledge says. He sounds suddenly tired.

Chuck frowns. “It kinda does. Seeing as you’re staying in our apartment, I think we all deserve an explanation.”

“At least tell us it’s nothing illegal. Are you running from the law?” Joe cuts in.

Snafu appears behind Sledge, leaning on his shoulder and nodding gravely. Babe blanches.

“No, that’s not—” Sledge pinches the bridge of his nose. “It isn’t anything criminal. We just both need to get away from our parents for a while.”

“Don’t you worry,” Snafu adds, suddenly serious. “All they wanted was us gone. They ain’t gonna come knocking trying to get us back anytime soon.”

“That sounds extremely ominous,” Babe points out. “You realize that sounds extremely ominous?”

“We just need a place to stay,” Sledge says, meeting his eyes.

“Where were you staying last night?” Joe asks. “I thought you had a hotel or something.”

“We’ve been here and there,” Sledge answers carefully. “Looking around, mostly. The bus station, the library.”

“The park,” Snafu supplies. “That night was fun.”

Joe frowns. “What the—seriously?! It’s November.”

“We were Marines. We’ve done worse.”

“Why didn’t you find a place to stay?”
“What do you think we’re doing right now?” Sledge counters, and levels another look at Babe. “We didn’t have a plan. Still don’t. We’ll bounce back if you can’t help us, but we’d really appreciate if you could.”

They hold each other’s gaze for a minute. Babe breaks first, looking to Gene and getting a nod before turning back to their visitors. “Alright,” he says softly. “Alright. I guess we have a spare room for a reason. Chuck?”

Chuck thinks it over, mind a bit sluggish from alcohol. Anyone who fucks with his roommates is no friend of his, but he knows an act of desperation when he sees one. Ultimately he shrugs. “I don’t care.”

Babe looks at Joe and he sighs. “Yeah, sure. Forecast says snow on Sunday.”

“Alright. Spare room’s the door around the corner.” Babe gestures to the other side of the kitchen. The spare room was originally intended to be a pantry by the architect, but it’s still a step up from the park. “And now that we got that figured out, who wants to go to Trigger? I think it’s time we let loose.”

Trigger is everything it should be: dim, humid, hot and absolutely packed. The space is filling with a mix of artificial fog and very real steam from all the bodies on the dance floor; lazer lights cut through the darkness in time with the pounding bass, and a few guys are dancing on the counter of one of the three bars in the huge room. Chuck honestly can’t tell if they’re being payed to do it or if they’re just clubgoers. Either way it’s a spectacle.

Half their group immediately gets lost in the crowd, and Chuck sees Perco make a beeline for one of the bars. Within moments two larger men give him a boost onto the counter, and then he’s joining the others in dancing on the counter with a wide grin on his face. Chuck shoots him a thumbs up before looking around for Joe. He finally spots him at a more secluded bar area in the back, downing a shot in unison with Luz. Chuck hurries

“Hey, wait for me!” Grant slides up to them. “The boys are already out there. Perco got up on the counter.”

“Of course he did,” Luz laughs. “He’s barely even drunk. I love that guy.”

“Who’s this you’re pining over, Luz? Perco mentioned it earlier,” Joe interjects, watching Luz carefully.

Luz shakes his head, gesturing for another shot. Chuck registers the smell of tequila before he’s throwing his own back. He blinks back tears after he swallows it down. Mixing liquors is probably going to catch up with him in a bad way later, but right now he can’t bring himself to care.

“Just some guy,” Luz says then. “He comes into the shop a lot. Can’t tell if he even cares about me or not.”

“Aww, Luz,” Chuck says, “if you were pining after me all you had to do is ask me how I feel.”

“Shut it, Chuck,” Luz gripes, but he grins. “Anyway, I’m gonna get wasted and hopefully hook up with a random person and we’ll call that a night.”

Joe claps him on the shoulder. “I can wingman for you if you want,” he tells him seriously, voice slightly slurred. “You know I’m a great wingman.”
“I think I’ll pass. You got bigger fish to fry.” He gestures across the bar. Joe follows his gaze and freezes. For a long moment he’s still as a statue, and then he suddenly jolts back into motion and walks quickly around the bar counter. Chuck follows his gaze. David Webster is sitting across from them, eyes lowered to the glass in front of him. He looks up as Joe takes a seat at his side.

“Well that’s charming,” Chuck mutters, mostly to himself.

Luz snorts. “Don’t be jealous. Snow white over there is spoken for, but I can guarantee you there are plenty of single people out here tonight.”

As if on cue a blond woman slides up to Luz’s side. “Dance with me,” she says in some sort of accent. German, maybe. It’s too loud for Chuck to hear clearly.

Luz turns back to Chuck. “You wanna come out?”

“No,” Chuck says. “I don’t think so. I’m gonna hang out here for a while.”

Luz shrugs. “Suit yourself.”

He disappears into the crowd after the woman, and Chuck watches them go. He backs slowly toward the bar until he feels a stool against the back of his legs, sitting down with his back against the counter so he can watch people dancing. The world is spinning steadily, the alcohol finally catching up with him, and he spends a minute or so watching the whirling lights of the club color people’s faces in blues and purples. A man in the crowd catches his gaze and leers at him, and Chuck turns back to the bar quickly.

“Rough night?” a voice somewhere off to his right rasps, and he turns toward it hazily. There’s a man sitting there, a tumbler resting on a coaster in front of him. The brown liquid in it is turned a strange green color from the colored spotlights of the dance floor.

“You could say that,” he says. The guy huffs a laugh.

“I know you. You live with Heffron, right? And Lieb?”

“Yeah. Why?”

The guy laughs again. It’s more of a short burst of air, a gruff sound. For all his not-laughs he has yet to smile genuinely, and his shoulders remain hunched. “I work with Liebgott and Bill Guarnere. Do you know him?”

Chuck nods. He’s only met him once, but Wild Bill isn’t the type of person who is easy to forget. He’s about to say as much, but suddenly he catches sight of Luz and Blondie again. They’re very enthusiastically making out on the dance floor, and a second later he can hear Perco hoot from somewhere across the bar. He laughs to himself.

Next to him a glass shatters. He looks down to see shards at his feet, liquid spreading across the floor in a small pool. “Shit,” his drinking buddy mutters.

“Must’ve just slipped on the counter or something,” Chuck says generously. He’s had his share of drunk fumbles.

“Yeah, or something. Probably best I call it a night, anyway.” The guy reaches down to gather the bigger chunks of glass carefully, and Chuck’s eyes catch on a ribbon of gauze stretched across his hand.
“Is your hand okay?”

“Eh?”

“Your hand. It’s bandaged.”

“Oh.” The guy stacks the pieces of class on a napkin carefully and hands the bartender some cash. “Yeah, it’s okay. It’s not from today.” He stands up and gathers his coat. “I’m heading out. Have a good night, alright?”

“Yeah,” Chuck says distractedly. Luz has disappeared back into the crowd, and soon enough his new friend vanishes, too. All at once he’s alone in the middle of the packed room. Joe and Webster have disappeared, he hasn’t seen Babe and Gene since he arrived and all of the clubgoers around him are slowly pairing up for the night.

A sudden rush of some feeling he can’t identify rises up in his throat. He isn’t jealous, really. He can’t be, not when the idea of following someone into the grimy club bathroom or through the back to the alley just fills him with dread. He hates the feeling of being alone, hates it more than anything, but he doesn’t envy any of these people or their casual hookups. Either way there isn’t anything left for him to do here, sitting alone with his thoughts. It’s claustrophobic suddenly to be alone in his own head, and he stands abruptly and pushes toward the door. Halfway there he sees Perco dancing on a table, and he taps his calf to get his attention.

“I’m going for a walk.” He has to shout above the music.

Perco squints at him. “A walk? You okay?”

“Yeah. Just need some air.”

“Alright. You want company?”

“No, stay here. Just let the others know I’m okay if they can’t find me.”

Perco still looks confused, but he nods and resumes dancing as Chuck continues toward the exit. He pushes outside and the wall of cold air that hits his face is a sudden relief. He takes a deep breath before stepping down onto the sidewalk to go somewhere—anywhere, really. It probably isn’t smart in this part of town at this time of night, but he needs to move.

He walks down the street until the club’s pounding bass can’t be heard anymore and then keeps going. He passes shops and then houses and then more shops, crosses streets and cuts through alleys with no destination in mind. He thinks about smoking but doesn’t like the idea of scraping his cold thumbs on the rough metal of his lighter, so he just walks and walks until he doesn’t know where he is.

Well, he still has some idea. He’s lived here long enough, though he can’t say he’s ever been to this particular corner of Chinatown before.

There’s a halo of light warming the alley in front of him, turning the pavement gold. Where garbage cans usually stand there are a few tall planters, the flowers still blooming despite winter’s approach. He can hear people laughing and glasses clinking, can smell something frying somewhere. Much stronger is the smell of cheap tobacco, and he scans the alleyway for a few moments before his eyes catch on the cherry of a cigarette. A man is standing next to a doorway, camouflaged well in an all-black ensemble right down to his boots. If not for the glow of embers Chuck would’ve missed him entirely.
Chuck steps closer, pulls out a cigarette and makes grabby hands at the man. Warm brown eyes flick up to meet his, something like surprise registering on the man’s face. He passes his cigarette wordlessly and Chuck lights his own off the end. He studies the man as covertly as he can while he does so, but it’s hard with the man still staring at him. All he can make out in the darkness is neatly styled hair and the bow of a very nice mouth.

“Coming for a drink?” the man asks finally as Chuck gives him his cigarette back.

“No, just a walk,” Chuck answers. “I think I’ve drank more than enough already tonight. You?”

“I work here. I do deliveries and that sort of thing,” the man answers. He gestures at the windows next to them, carnival glass panes hiding some sort of tavern. The door is heavy and wooden, old in a way not many things in this area are anymore. CURRAHEE is emblazoned above it in gold paint.

“Deliveries? Do you deliver cocktails to people or something?”

He smiles, and it somehow makes his eyes even warmer. “No, I pick up stuff from our suppliers and deliver it here. What kind of bar delivers drinks?”

“A smart one,” Chuck answers. “That’s a great business model. You could make big money.”

The guy actually lets out a laugh at that, and Chuck just stares a little. Whatever weird sexuality crisis he’s going through—and he’s not stupid, he knows being absolutely repulsed by the idea of a hookup has to mean something, no matter how little he wants to admit it—he is fully capable of recognizing this guy is ridiculously pretty. He has the sort of good looks that belong in soft pencil portraits, in history books or polaroids or advertisements touting the nuclear family. He’s timeless, even standing in an alley laughing and stubbing out the remains of his cigarette against the bricks behind him and saying something Chuck’s too lost in his own thoughts to catch. “What?” he asks belatedly.

“I said do you want to go somewhere? Maybe get something to eat? They’re just about closing up in there but I’m off work and I could use the company.”

Company. Chuck could use some company too, but all at once he feels exhaustion weighing on him heavily. He lost several hours walking, and it must be well past two in the morning now. “I should get home.”

“Let me walk you.”

That’s probably a terrible idea. They’ve only just met. “How do I know you aren’t gonna try to murder me?”

The guy looks taken aback, dark eyebrows scrunching together. “Do I look like a murderer?”

“No. That’s how they get you, though.”

“Ah.”

Chuck studies him for a minute. He has strong shoulders and the kind of lanky muscle that only comes from a hard day’s work, but Chuck’s pretty sure he could take him if he had to. Already he can tell it’s unlikely it’ll even come to that. The guy practically exudes empathy and harmless humor in every easy smile. His posture is relaxed, almost lazy. They may have met in a dark alley under dubious circumstances, but he’s no threat.

It’s that thought that has Chuck pushing off the wall and starting down the alley. “I live a good ways
north of here. It’s a long walk.”

There’s a scuffle against the pavement as the guy jogs to catch up. “I live that way too, by the university.” He can hear a smile in his voice.

“Yes? You study there?”

“Yes, communications. Part time, though. I still gotta work. You?”

“Engineering.”

They trudge along in silence for a few minutes. They’ve only just met, but it isn’t uncomfortable. Chuck wonders at that. “So you live where, Ludlow?”

“Bit north of that,” his companion answers. “If you study there I’m guessing you know the area.”

“Shitty brick buildings galore?”

“That would be the neighborhood, yeah. Really nice place to live,” he adds sarcastically. “We never have cell service or wireless and I think my landlord’s blocked my number at this point.”

“Let me guess: Norman Dike.”

“What, you live in one of his buildings too?”

Chuck nods, and his companion’s eyes widen in mock horror. “We haven’t had any heating for three weeks.”

“That’s awful,” the guy says sympathetically. “Our apartment is a shithole, but no heat? That’s just inhumane. Maybe you should come stay with me for the night.”

Chuck stares at him flatly, but the stranger is smiling in genuine amusement, nothing leering or suggestive about it. Chuck can’t stop his lips from quirking up. “That’s real smooth.”

“Thanks. Anyway, you should just drag Dike up there and have him fix it.”

“Tried that. He’s impossible to find on a good day. We should never have signed the lease. I lived in one of his places last year and it was awful. Me and my buddy are from California so we just went for whatever’s cheapest, since out of state tuition is so high. Turned out that was a mistake.”

“I get that. I’m from Indiana and my roommate is from Virginia, so we had the same idea. Is it just you two then?”

He shakes his head. “We signed the lease with another friend. He’s local. And then his boyfriend is working on moving in with us permanently, and now we’ve got a couple of marines on the run crashing in our spare room, too.” He laughs to himself in disbelief. “I’ve got five roommates in a three bedroom apartment.”

“Wait, wait. Marines on the run?”

“Yeah.”

“Where are they from?”

He sounds a little too interested for Chuck’s liking. Their temporary guests may not have made the best first impression, but Chuck is no snitch. He remembers the exhaustion in the lines of Sledge’s
face, remembers the defensive curl of Snafu’s shoulders. Something hot and protective flares in his chest. “Who’s asking?”

“No, I’m not—” The guy cuts himself off, grimacing. “My name’s Floyd Talbert. People call my Tab. I’m massively gay. I’m not about to turn anyone in, alright?”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“Seriously? Have you been watching the news? A few days ago a veteran in Alabama drove to New Orleans and kidnapped a corporal from his platoon. They’ve been missing ever since. The family is claiming all sorts of nasty stuff about how the guy turned their baby girl trans and gay and all this shit —”

“What?”

“Do you live under a rock? Anyway, the rest of the platoon’s been trying to clear their names but at this point nothing is concrete until someone gets a statement from the two of them. In the meantime conservatives are calling for their heads, and they’ve become internet heroes in the span of hours. It’s still trending internationally, I think. It’s a mess.”

Chuck just stares at him as if he’s grown a second head. There’s no way the two men—the two scrawny kids who showed up at their door are the people Tab is describing. The world isn’t that small, and yet the pieces fit together a little too well for Chuck’s comfort.

None of it is his business, and that’s what bugs him the most. It doesn’t feel right to hear all this from a stranger.

“You’re saying if,” Chuck says slowly, “And that’s a big fucking ‘if’, Tab. You’re saying if the two guys sleeping in my apartment are who you say they are, you’re not going to turn them in?”

Tab shakes his head solemnly. “Like I said, I’m on their team. They’re heroes for serving our country and they’re heroes for fighting for what they believe in. They deserve the privacy. That is,” he pauses for effect, “if, theoretically, they were to be the two guys crashing in your apartment.”

Months later, Chuck will look back on this as some sort of turning point. In the moment, Chuck just stares at him. Tab doesn’t look away. His eyes never waver, in fact, not once. That more than anything is what has Chuck holding his hand out until Tab takes it into his own. “My name’s Charles Grant. I might be fairly gay, too. Still figuring it out. Friends call me Chuck.”

“Nice to meet you, Chuck,” Tab says, smiling. “Would you like to get lunch with me tomorrow?”

“I don’t put out on the first date.” Or ever, possibly.

“Does that mean it’s a date then?”

And Chuck—he’s not sure what to make of this mess of a night, of the sweet smile this guy gives him when he flirts. He doesn’t have anything figured out yet, not who he is or what he is or how nothing seems to add up anymore, but he knows this last hour on the dirty streets of Philadelphia has been the first time in a while he hasn’t felt alone. The dirty feeling that started coiling in his chest ever since he walked into Trigger has loosened slightly, and he almost feels normal. So he clamps down on the nerves and expectations rising in his chest and smiles wryly in spite of himself. “Give me your phone. I’ll add my number.”

Tab smiles like the sun.
He leaves him on the street and goes up to his room a minute later, and the apartment is dark and quiet. He can hear snoring from Babe’s door, sleepy grumbling in Joe’s and an undercurrent of whispers from the spare room. It’s fucking freezing as usual and crowded as ever, but it’s home. His legs ache from walking all night and his head is clouded with alcohol. He expected nerves to keep him up well into the night, but exhaustion has him passing out on his blankets the minute he lays down.

Chapter End Notes

1 comment = 1 prayer for my sanity as I wade through my 6 plot spreadsheets

My knowledge of French is hilariously limited. Any French that shows up in this fic is all google translate, my dudes. If any of you happen to speak it and spot any errors let me know please!

I also do not live in Philadelphia. I have never even been to Philadelphia. So we'll all just pretend this makes sense geographically and if it doesn't just chalk it up to AU magic.

Writing is a long and lonely process, but hearing what you guys think makes it all worth it! I love hearing your feedback, and remember you can always say hi on tumblr as well. I'll do my best to reply to any comments or messages in a timely fashion! url is you-oughta-know
Midterms are over and I have survived. Like, it was a near fucking thing. But I have returned with updates which I have been agonizing over for far too long, so I'm just gonna go ahead and post!

On this day in Philadelphia: Joe thinks he’s real slick, Chuck has butterfingers, and Babe really fucking loves Eugene Roe.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

_Heffron, Edward. 1/24/2018. Interview and transcript by Evan Wright. CURRAHEE, Philadelphia, PA._

"Yeah, I was there. Saw the whole thing. You already know what happened though, don't you? You’re just here for the details. You want the whole saga so you can write it down and get your five minutes of fame. Let's get one thing clear right now: I ain't ratting. I was only a witness. Now the others, they've had a hell of a time but that story is theirs to tell. If they don't want to tell it then tough shit. I mean, you ever had something like that happen to you? The politics behind all of it? I'll tell you my side. But after that how about you give us all some goddamn peace, huh?"

Babe’s head is pounding.

He lets out a groan and moves closer to Gene, curling around him and nudging his nose into his collarbone. He gets a low grumble in response. When Babe opens his eyes he can only be grateful that they had the foresight to close the blinds when they came home the day before because really, this sucks.

“This sucks,” he says.

“That last round of tequila was probably a mistake,” Gene replies. The words are muffled in Babe’s hair, voice rough and low from sleep. He sounds content and warm despite the hangover hovering over them both, and Babe is glad about that at least—this is the first real sleep Gene’s gotten in weeks, and he’s going to count it as a blessing.

“You getting up or going back to bed?” He wiggles out of Gene’s hold so he can see his face.

“I don’t know.” One blue eye opens to look at him. “Getting up, I suppose. Give me a minute.”

“I’m gonna put the coffee on.”

Gene snorts. “Good luck.”

“Hey, I’ll have you know me and the coffee pot are great friends.”

Babe slides out of bed and instantly regrets it, and not just because of the chill. His bed has slowly been turning into their bed, and he’s finding it harder and harder to leave every morning. The pillows
smell like both of them these days, several having migrated from Gene’s apartment to mix with his. He isn’t really sure which blankets were originally whose anymore and it makes him smile. It’s just one physical example of the ways they’re growing together, the lines between them blending into each other. Call him a sap, but he’d curl up in their mismatched blankets with Gene for the rest of his life and never move again if he could.

Honestly, he might do that anyway. The apartment is really fucking cold.

He snags an afghan off the end of the bed and wraps it around himself, then smacks an obnoxiously wet kiss on Gene’s cheek before entering the freezing living room. Chuck is sitting at the table eating apple jacks out of a mug. He has a ski cap on his head and fingerless gloves on his hands, knees tucked up against his chest like a kid. Shelton is leaning over the counter, fiddling with the coffee machine.

“It doesn’t usually work unless you smack it,” Babe tells him. His headache has gotten worse since he stood up, and he grabs an ice pack out of the freezer. He sits down next to Chuck and presses it to his temple, hissing at the sudden rush of cold. It doesn’t do much for his head but at least it helps him wake up a little.

“Smacking it’ll do no good,” Shelton replies. There’s an unlit cigarette hanging out of his mouth, making his words even more sluggish and accented than usual. “Y’all need a new fuse. Shouldn’t be hard to fix.”

“That’s what we figured, but we haven’t had time to work on it recently,” Chuck says around a mouthful of cereal. “Honestly, Babe, we’re a stain on our major.”

Babe snorts. “You’re up early. How long were you out? I didn’t hear you come in.”

“No late. I snuck back in at around three.”

Huh. That isn’t late for Chuck, Babe supposes. He looks remarkably well-rested for a man on six hours of sleep, but then that’s almost twice as much as he usually gets. How he and Gene do it, Babe will never understand. “Where’d you wander off to last night?”

“I was just walking around, I guess.”

“Oh. Why all the...” He looks pointedly at Chuck’s winter gear.

“It’s just fucking cold. I don’t know why you need that,” he gestures to the ice pack with his milky spoon, a drop falling onto the table. “Just sit out here for five minutes and you’ll feel like you’re covered in ice already.”

“Fingerless gloves, though? Those only keep half your hand warm.”

“It’s called fashion.” Babe squints at him, and he rolls his eyes. “Okay, and grip. I may have broken the bowl.”

Babe’s breath catches in horror. “The bowl?! Tell me the rest of the mugs are okay, at least.”

“Yep, all three of them,” Chuck says sarcastically. “Honestly, we should just hit a store.”

“You’re telling me.”

There’s a metallic twang from the coffee pot. Shelton puts it back on the counter and slaps the side a few times. It turns on with little complaint.
“It lives to see another day,” Chuck says wryly.

“Probably its last,” Shelton adds. He sits down next to Chuck. “We can look at it tonight if you want. Me and Eugene are good at fixing shit, and we’ve got plenty of time to kill.”

They all look up as Joe’s door squeaks open. David Webster steps out, looking a little lost as Joe herds him toward the front door. Babe knows better than to comment, but Shelton either doesn’t notice the tense silence or doesn’t care enough to go along with it.

“Who’s that?”

Joe grimaces as everyone’s eyes turn to him but doesn’t answer, muttering something to David before all but shoving him out the front door. Babe raises his eyebrows and pours some Apple Jacks into his palm.


“You don’t like him?”

“Is it obvious? Guy’s a dick.”

Across the room, Joe frowns. “Stop gossiping. I’m right here.”

“I wasn’t calling you a dick. Although, to be fair you’re kind of a dick too.” He chews cereal thoughtfully. “They’re both dicks. Dicks to each other. It’s the principal of the matter, though.”

“Yeah,” Babe nods. “It’s like, if a guy’s a dick to you that’s one thing. If you don’t like a guy that’s all well and good. But falling into a cycle of dickery isn’t good for anyone’s health. Who has energy for all that rage, you know?”

“Exactly,” Chuck says with his mouth full.

He hears Gene come out of their room before he sees him, and when he turns to look he’s making his way over to the kitchen. Babe pats his lap and wiggles his eyebrows suggestively. Gene rolls his eyes at him and goes to the counter instead. “You guys talking about David?” he asks, voice still rough around the edges.

“Yeah,” Joe says. “How’d you know?”

“I heard someone say ‘dickery’.” He pauses as he reaches for the coffee pot, frowning. “Who got the hot plate working?”

“I did,” Shelton volunteers, though he doesn’t turn to look at him. “Coil was fucked up. Just needed to pop it back in.”

“Oh.” Gene doesn’t turn either, lips pressed into a line. “Thanks.”

Joe crosses the living room, taking a seat at the table. “Are we overdue for some sort of roommate meeting? Is that why we’re all gathered or is that just a coincidence?”

“I thought we did the meeting thing yesterday,” Chuck says. “That’s why we went partying. Meetings are supposed to be followed by parties.”

“Does the meeting count if we started drinking ahead of time?” Babe asks the room at large. At the counter Gene has filled one mug. He holds an empty one up to Babe in silent question, and Babe nods.
“If anything, that should make it count even more,” Chuck answers.

“Why? That makes no sense,” Joe says.

Chuck starts to answer, but his phone lights up with a text. He snatches it off the table with lightning speed, reads the screen quickly and then rapidly starts typing a response. Babe exchanges a glance with Joe.

“Someone special, Chuck?” Babe asks.

“What?”

Gene wordlessly plunks two coffee cups down on the table before looking around for a chair, the four at the table already taken. Babe pats his lap again and Gene rolls his eyes before sitting in it, leaning against Babe’s chest. He’s warm and smells like honeysuckle and disinfectant and maybe smoke, and when he twists sideways a little to rest more fully against him Babe has to hide what is probably a very dopey grin in his shoulder.

“You grabbed that like it’s on fire,” Joe is saying.

“Nothing wrong with answering promptly.” Chuck sends his text, puts his phone down and picks up his mug.

“Nothing wrong with it except that you never answer promptly,” Joe says. “And why aren’t you eating out of a bowl like a normal person?”

“The bowl has sadly fallen.” Chuck answers.

Joe stares. “Did you drop the bowl, Chuck?”

“...Maybe.”

Across the table, Shelton watches them like they’re playing the world’s most entertaining ping pong match. “Are you saying you guys only have one bowl? For all four of you?”

“Technically, we now have zero bowls,” Chuck corrects.

“The fuck.”

Joe waves his hands broadly in a silencing gesture. At least, that’s probably what it means. Babe isn’t really sure. “Okay, okay,” Joe says. “Roommate meeting. We need more bowls. Who’s gonna get more bowls today?”

“Why don’t you get more bowls?” Chuck says.

“I went last time. You’re the one who dropped the bowl. You should go.”

“I dropped one bowl. Babe broke the other five.”

“How’d you break five bowls at once?” Shelton asks Babe, a little awed.

“I had them stacked and I dropped the entire stack because I tripped over the dishwasher—” he can feel Gene shaking as he tries to stifle his laughter “—you know what, I’ll go to Ikea and get more bowls. Fuck you guys. Gene, stop laughing at me. You’re coming, too.”

“Are you buying me meatballs?” His voice vibrates in Babe’s chest, they’re pressed so close.
“Of course I’m buying you meatballs. We’re hungover. Meatballs are necessary.”

“Nice.”

The door to the pantry swings open, Sledge stepping out neatly with his phone pressed to his ear. “Alright, good luck,” he says before hanging up.

Shelton is watching him, face carefully blank. “Burgie?”

“Burgie. He’s doing the thing.”

“It ain’t gonna do shit.”

Sledge sighs. “Worth a shot.” Then he steals Shelton’s coffee.

Babe isn’t sure he wants to know what any of that means, in all honesty. “Do you guys need anything from Ikea? You can come with us if you want. We’re leaving in a bit.”

It’s polite to ask. Babe knows Gene would agree; his southern manners win out against his grudges even on his worst days. Shelton is shaking his head before Babe is even done asking the question though, and he can feel Gene relax against him a little. “No,” Shelton is saying. “We’ve got somewhere to be today.”

“Alright. Gene?”

“Yep.” Gene slides off his lap and Babe follows him into their room.

When they get into the car ten minutes later it’s with two generous travel mugs of black coffee, two pairs of cheap sunglasses, and a general attitude of stubborn determination.

“Game plan,” Babe says as he starts the engine. He looks through the windshield, jaw set. He feels like he’s going into battle. “Get in, get shit, get out.”

“It’s Ikea. There’s no point having a plan. We’ll be there forever either way.”

“It can’t hurt to try, right?”

Gene shrugs and cranks the heat up.

When he looks back on it he’ll be able to pinpoint this as the exact moment the day devolves into complete chaos. No one has ever walked into an Ikea, bought what they needed and left. It simply isn’t possible.

“I’ll grab a cart.”

“I thought we only need mugs and stuff.”

“Mugs, bowls, and maybe napkins. And meatballs.”

“Right. Should we just get a basket?”
“If we get a cart we can take turns riding on it.”
“…Get one of those long flat ones.”

“What do you think?”
“Hmm…I don’t think I like it so hard.”
“It’ll soften up eventually.”

Babe rolls over to face him. The plastic covering of the mattress crinkles as he does so. “You’re absolutely right. We’ve got to plan for the future, you know? Maybe it’s actually not hard enough.”

Gene sits up to give an experimental bounce, then flops back down. “You’ve gotta like it in the meantime, though. Sleeping on a rock’s no good for your back, but sleeping on a marshmallow is bad, too. We need that balance.”

“Well, all I know is if we’re looking for a balance this ain’t it.”

They stand in unison then flop onto the next mattress in the line.

“Oh yes.”

“This is amazing. What’s it called?”

Gene snorts. “MORGONGÅVA. It’s only…a buck short of a grand.”

Babe laughs. “Perfect. Let’s get two. We can push them together and then when we fight we can separate them like couples in the fifties.”

“If you separate from me in that freezing apartment I’m leaving you flat-out. And I’m taking my MORGONGÅVA with me.”

They stand side by side in front of a display, shoulders barely brushing as they contemplate the items in front of them. Gene’s arms are crossed, but he untucks one to rub a thumb against his mouth in thought. Babe’s forehead is starting to ache from how hard he’s frowning, but he can’t tear his gaze away from the strangely shaped items before them.

Finally Gene turns to him, eyes dancing. “Well, I never realized people struggled so much with cooking eggs.”

“I’m a terrible cook and probably can’t judge, but is it that hard to just use a knife? Why do you need —” he holds up an egg slicer and opens and closes it rapidly. “Who slices enough eggs every day to justify purchasing this?”

“I wish I had answers.”

“The lighting section is my favorite section. It’s so, you know. Light.”

“…Really?”
“Maybe we need more plants. They really open a space up.”

“You’re right. Do we have room for plants, though?”

“I don’t know…” Babe bites his lip. “I mean, there’s the windowsill. If we clear it—”

“—half that stuff is mine, I can clear it off—”

“Yeah, I’ve got a pile of textbooks there that can go.”

“We could just do a little one, I bet.”

“Just a little one, yeah.”

“What about this little bamboo or something? It’s on clearance.”

They both contemplate it. Babe picks it up slowly. “Just a little one…”

Out of nowhere Gene starts laughing. “Can I offer you a… a Grönkulla in these trying times?”

“The fuck is a Grönkulla.”

“What do anchors actually gotta do with bathrooms?”

“Anchors go in water and water goes in bathrooms, so… anchors go in bathrooms too?”

“That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Heffron, do I look like I’m in charge here?”

“Clean lines. No white walls or anything.”

Babe nods, movement a little awkward from how he’s leaning his neck against the cushions. “Too clinical.”


“Very important. And high ceilings. Not too high though, or else it’ll get too cold in winter.”

“Balcony. No smoking indoors.”

Babe smiles at him, their faces inches apart. “I like our bed,” he says quietly, like it’s a secret.

“Me too. I like the colors and all the blankets and I like that you’re in it sometimes.”

“I like that you’re in it sometimes too.”

Gene leans even further back in the lawn chaise they’re sprawled across. “Big yard, if we get a house,” he says. “Big porch.”
“Somewhere warm. Somewhere we can sit outside.”

They fall quiet, both thinking the same thing. It’s Gene who voices it. “Philadelphia isn’t very warm.”

Babe’s had long enough to think about it—years, really. And it feels almost too real to say out loud, but he only hesitates a moment before replying. “I wouldn’t mind moving.” Gene rolls his head toward him, ready to argue, but Babe presses on. “I mean it. This is my home. I love my friends and my family, but I can come back. I don’t think home is something you’re tied town to, I think it’s just a place where you’re able to return. Somewhere you can always land, you know? It doesn’t matter where we’ll end up in the long run. You left home. You know that.”

Gene just watches him for a moment, eyes indigo in the fluorescent light. Babe takes advantage of it and stares right back. His skin is getting fair again, losing the gold shine of summer, and it makes his eyes that much more vibrant. His nose is pink today from the ever-present chill, lips a little chapped. The usual circles under his eyes are nearly completely gone. “Yeah, I do,” he says softly. “We’ve got time, too. Years.”

Babe’s never known anyone more beautiful, through and through. It was true those twenty seven-odd months ago and it’s still true today; he’s never known anyone more beautiful, more kind and caring and careful with the people around him. “I love you,” he blurts out, eyes wide and heart skipping as if it’s the fist time he’s ever said it, and it makes Gene grin. “Like a lot. I really, really love you.”

“I really, really love you too,” Gene says, and if they trade a few kisses on some colorful lawn furniture in the garden isle of Ikea no one has to know.

“I don’t know about purple in a bathroom.”

“Purple-gray’s not so bad. No monogrammed towels, though.”

“What, you mean you don’t need your own name stitched onto a towel just to remember it’s yours?”

“Shockingly, no.”

“Where the fuck are the bowls?”

“How are all of these so expensive? The Flitighet is cheapest and that couldn’t even hold a can of soup.”

“This one’s nice.” Gene squints at the label. “Färgrik.”

“Bless you. It’s twenty dollars for twelve. I don’t need twelve bowls and I don’t have twenty dollars.”

Gene contemplates that for a minute. “There’s always Goodwill.”

Brown eyes meet blue. “That might not be a terrible idea.”
“What’s that myth about the lotus eaters?”

He can feel Gene looking at him quizzically from where he’s tucked into the passenger seat, slowly making his way through a box of meatballs. “In the Odyssey?”

In all honesty he read it in the Percy Jackson series as a kid, but Gene sounds a little impressed so he doesn’t bother correcting him. “Yeah, yeah. That’s what Ikea is, you know? You eat their magic meatballs, wander through the warehouse for a while, and before you know it it’s been six hours and you haven’t accomplished a thing. Just—” he lets go of the steering wheel to gesture broadly, “—blissful ignorance.”

“I don’t know. We got a pretty cool plant.”

That’s fair. Their plant is pretty neat. It’s resting in the cup holder between them, and honestly the energy in the car is improved because of it. “Meatball me,” he says, opening his mouth without taking his eyes off the road. Gene feeds him one, careful not to stab him with the fork.

Goodwill always smells the same. Babe isn’t sure what it is—something like mothballs and old cotton, maybe. Bleach and Tide. He picks up another mug and turns it over in his hand, nose wrinkling of its own accord.

“Are you finding anything?”

“I found this awful set with roosters. They’re ugly, but all twelve could be ours for just three dollars.”

“Let’s see.”

Gene holds up a bowl. A hand painted rooster decorates the inside, the rim accented with tiny grape leaves. “Like I said, it isn’t pretty but it’s functional.”

“What’s the matter, you don’t like roosters?” Babe says. He picks up a clear glass mug from the shelf. The logo on the side is half worn off, but he can just make out an eagle in some sort of crest. He shrugs before putting it into his basket. The next one is painted around with the colors of the rainbow, and Babe adds it to his collection without another thought.

“Not on my dishware, no,” Gene mutters.

He snorts and continues rifling through the shelf, the next mug stamped with the marine corps insignia. He turns it over in his hands. PROUD VETERAN OF YOUR MOM, the other side proclaims in loud font. “What do you think? A gift for our houseguests?”

“Why does that exist? Merriell probably….” The mock-horror in his voice fades mid-sentence, and he frowns at the rooster bowl in his hands. “He would like that,” he finishes lamely.

Babe watches him for any tells, not sure what to do. The truth is this is all new. He knows the way Gene’s shoulders go up rather than slump down when he’s upset and the careful movements of his hands when he’s thinking too deeply about something—those are old signs, things Babe learned to read long ago even if he isn’t the most perceptive one of their friends. This is different, though: the furrow above the bridge of his nose, his eyes cast downward and his fingers still and pale.

This is something he hasn’t seen before. He’s reminded sharply that they both had whole different lives before they even met. He loves his boyfriend more than he thought it was possible to love someone, but there are entire sides of him that are still nothing but question marks.
He puts the stupid mug in their basket, then takes the bowl out of Gene’s hands carefully. Gene watches him do it. “This is ugly as shit,” Babe says quietly, mostly just to fill the air between them. Gene huffs a surprised laugh.

“Yeah,” he answers, just as quietly.

He’s close enough that Babe can feel his breath against his cheek. Millimeters from touching, and there’s an overlooked sort of intimacy to that. “Eugene,” he says, and Gene’s eyes flick up to meet his. “They don’t have to stay with us. We can find somewhere else for them to go. Or we can leave and go to your old place. I’m pretty sure Julian owes us one anyway.”

Gene is already shaking his head. “You know we can’t. Me and him have a history we gotta work through. That doesn’t mean we don’t owe them. We’re not gonna kick them out on the street.”

Babe studies the lines of his face, but Gene doesn’t elaborate on any of that. Babe knows it’s probably not his place to ask. If Gene wanted to talk about it he would’ve done it by now. But this is his boyfriend of two years, and there are pieces of the puzzle—the whole shit show that’s been the last three days—that are missing. Be sighs internally and bites the bullet. “What happened between you two?”

Gene’s frown deepens. “I’ve already told you. I got my admission letter and he threw a fit. Enlisted the next day. I didn’t see him again.”

“Yeah, but—he wrote you. Why didn’t you reply? He didn’t cut you off, not really—”

Gene steps away from him abruptly. “He left. Alright? That’s what happened.” That unfamiliar downward curl is back in his shoulders, his eyes cast down once more. “We were best friends and then outta nowhere he left.”

Guilt. He’s guilty. That’s the piece he’s been missing. “It wasn’t your fault,” Babe tries. He gets a flat stare in response.

“I’ll try and talk to him.”

And yeah, Babe doesn’t know much about his boyfriend’s past, but he knows him well enough to know what he isn’t saying is sometimes more important than what he is. He doesn’t press it, though. “Alright. Grab the rest of those rooster bowls, will you? I think they’re a good set.”

“Joe’s gonna hate you for this.”

“Let him.”

They bring their haul up to the register, and the woman seated there looks over it approvingly. “A good collection,” she says, picking up a bowl to scan. “The rooster is a symbol of bravery and honesty, you know.”

Gene lets out a helpless laugh.

“I did not know that,” Babe says, “but now I do.”

By the time they pull up in front of their shitty building it’s already dark. Babe turns the key in the ignition and the engine stutters into silence. “Five-thirty,” he says. “What time’s that movie?”
“In an hour,” Gene says. He gets out and starts grabbing bags to carry up to the apartment, and Babe follows suit. “We probably don’t got time to cook.”

“Hmm.” He juggles bags to get the car door closed. “My coat’s got deep pockets. There’s a lot of snacks we could fit in there, theoretically. We can make dinner when we get home.”

“You should bring those—”

“—jalapeno chip things, yeah. I think we still have some.” They climb the stairs to the door, and as Babe shifts his weight to rifle through his pockets for his keys he spots their temporary roommates down the street. “Hey, where have you guys been?” He calls. Gene turns to look as he does so.

“Just working,” Sledge calls back. He jogs closer. “Need help with that?”

“Yeah, thanks. It’s that square key.” There’s a scraping sound as the lock catches, and Sledge holds the door open for them. “Did you guys get a job around here or something?”

“We’ve just been working for a local bar in the neighborhood.”

Knowing where they live, that could mean a lot of things. “You’re not strippers or anything, are you?”

Next to him, Shelton nods solemnly. “Oh yeah. Daytime strippers. Bringing in all sorts of cash. Yeah, my stage name is—”

“Shut up. No. We aren’t strippers. We do repairs and things like that. Why would your mind immediately go to stripping?”

Babe shrugs helplessly. “I don’t know! It’s a weird neighborhood! Don’t be offended. Stripping is hard work.”

Sledge waves him off as they reach the door to the apartment. “Round key?”

“Yep.”

When they get inside Babe toes his shoes off before he’s even put anything down. Sledge does the same thing. Family habits die hard, apparently.

Joe and Chuck are sitting on the couch, Joe swearing at the television vehemently. “Are you still trying to finish Call of Duty?” Babe asks.

“Joe here thought the reason I haven’t finished it yet is that I’m terrible at video games. He’s taken it upon himself to teach me how it’s done.”

Joe flinches violently as his character dies onscreen. “Motherfucker,” he hisses. Chuck pats his shoulder.

“Don’t feel bad. Everyone has rough nights. And look, you got three feet further that time.”

“Fuck this game.” He puts the controller down and turns in his seat. “Did you guys find bowls?”

Gene sets his bag down on the table, digging through it for a moment before wordlessly holding up a rooster-decorated bowl. Everyone stares at it.

“That’s ugly as shit,” Chuck finally says. “I love it. What else did you find?”
“Just some mugs, mostly,” Gene says. He digs around in the bag, pulling out various chinaware. “Apparently when you fill this one with something hot a shark comes out of the kelp—”

“Dibs,” Joe says immediately.

“There were a lot of rainbows, so we got those—oh, Merriell, this one’s for you.”

Shelton takes the ugly thing from him, eyes crinkling in what might be the first genuine smile Babe’s seen from him. He laughs, a quiet sound. “This is horrible.”

“Thought so,” Gene quips, but he’s smiling softly into his bag. “We can do all the dishes later, though. We’re gonna be late to that movie if we don’t hurry up.”

Chuck sighs and hauls himself up from the couch. “Almost forgot about that. It’s gonna be packed. Everybody in the school is going.”

“Tell me about it,” Joe adds. “I’m getting German credit for that. Can you believe that? There’s hardly any German in that movie.”

Chuck shrugs. “I’m going because apparently one of my teachers thinks it will educate me about radio frequency-related circuits.”

“What?”

“Honestly I’m not even going to question it. Our government is in shambles, the country is falling apart and nothing makes sense anymore. If an engineering professor wants to give me extra credit for watching Inglourious Basterds then that’s their right.”

“That’s probably a good policy.”

They go to their respective rooms to get dressed, calling through the hallway to continue their bickering. Gene picks up the plant and heads into his and Babe’s room, and Babe is about to follow when he feels a hand catch his arm.

“Babe, wait up a second,” Sledge says.

“What is it?” Babe asks. They’re alone in the kitchen, Shelton having disappeared at some point.

Sledge digs around in his pocket for a minute before pulling out a neatly-folded wad of bills. He holds it out to Babe. “Just something for you guys as a thanks for putting up with us,” he says. “We’ve been looking around for a place to stay so we can get out of your hair, but everything’s booked. I guess there’s a,” he clears his throat, “a Lindy Hop competition going on or something? All the hotels are full. So.”

Babe looks at the money—and it has to be five hundred dollars, at least. “And you’re sure you’re not a stripper?”

Sledge laughs. “No. Odd jobs. I promise.”

They’ve never struggled for cash, not really. They’ve never missed a payment on their rent, and sometimes things get tight but they’ve never starved. That’s college: sometimes living off ramen for a few days but always pulling through, always having each other’s backs. Money like that is tempting, but it isn’t Babe’s to take. His cousin is a part of this apartment now too, whether he likes it or not. So Babe shakes his head. “Keep it,” he says. “Put it aside for the day you wanna get your own place, okay? You two are family. You stay here until you’re back on your feet. That’s what family is for.”
Sledge holds his gaze for a minute, but Babe doesn’t back down. Finally Sledge pockets it again, though grudgingly. “We’ll find a way to pay you back,” he says firmly. “What about the radiator?”

“I can’t ask you to—”

“You aren’t asking, I’m offering. Let us fix it.”

“Do you know how?”

Sledge nods. ‘Like I said, we picked up a lot of stuff. There was one like that in my parents’ house, anyway. It shouldn’t be hard.”

Cash is something Babe can refuse, but the temptation of a warm apartment is too strong. “Only if you want to,” he says. “You don’t have to.”

“We kind of do,” Sledge says, tone lighter. “If you’re really okay with us staying here, we should probably find a way to avoid freezing to death in your pantry.”

Babe winces. “Yeah, it’s gotten bad.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll handle it.”

“Thanks,” Babe says. At least that’s one problem solved.

Chuck comes out of his room, his chatter with Joe put on hold for the moment. “Babe, are you driving or am I?”

“I don’t know. Do you want to drive?”

“I don’t mind.”

“Chuck, just drive us!” Joe calls. “Your car is nicer.”

Normally Babe would be offended, but it’s true. Chuck’s rental is practically brand new. Babe’s piece of shit has been in the family since Reagan was in office. “He’s not wrong.”

Gene comes out from their room, coat already on. He goes to the kitchen and starts rooting through a cabinet. “We got chips, we got gummy worms. Joe! You want gummy worms?”

“Hell yeah!”

“Alright,” he shoves the bag into his pocket. “Luz and Perco are already there. They said they saved us a seat, but we gotta get moving.”

“Yep,” Babe says. “Chuck, you ready?”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Do you want any snacks?”

Chuck appears from his room. “I think I’m good. I had a big lunch, so I should be alright until we get home.”

“That so, Chuck?” Shelton asks, coming out of the pantry. “It looked pretty good. Did you have a nice time?”
Chuck gives him a hard glare and Gene looks between the two of them, frowning. “Have you two been hanging out?” he ventures.

“No,” Chuck says, still staring Shelton down. Shelton just grins lazily back.

“Kinda sounds like you have,” Gene says.

“We haven’t. We just bumped into each other earlier.”

Gene looks between the two of them, bemused. “Huh.”

“Look, we gotta go,” Chuck says. “Let’s move, people. Come on. We’re gonna miss the beginning.”

“You’re gonna want to take the northern route,” Joe says. “You know that alley? Gotta take that. Traffic is a bitch on the main drag.”

“I’m not trusting any of your cabbie advice after last time,” Chuck answers, pulling his car onto the street and heading toward campus. “I’ve seen you drive. You’re a fucking maniac. This is a rental and I’m never attempting to take it through a five-foot-wide alley ever again.”

Joe mutters something under his breath that sounds vaguely like “Coward.”

“Hey, I don’t even care. That kind of stress is bad for your heart. Tell him, Gene.”

“Stress like that is bad for your heart,” Gene says, tone soft and kind in a mock version of what Babe’s starting to think of as his doctor voice. He grins at him in the dim gold light of the street lamps shining through the windows, and Gene grins back.

“There you go,” Chuck says, pounding the steering wheel. “Bad for the heart. Save your insane driving for when you’re on the clock.”

“Sure, mom.”

Chuck snorts and turns the wheel hand over hand as he pulls onto the main drag. “And look at that! There isn’t even any traffic.”

“There totally is. Look at this. Max speed you could go on this is fifty with all these cars around.”

“Joe, sometimes I wonder how you haven’t been fired yet,” Babe pipes up.

Joe snorts. “My dashing good looks. Duh. Every time they call me in for a meeting I just smolder at them silently until they let me go.”

Chuck parks in front of a lecture hall, killing the engine before turning fully in his seat to look at Joe head-on. “Does that work for you?”

“Surprisingly well. I think they think I don’t speak English, though.”

Babe gets out of the car, the chill prickling against his skin instantly. He’s lived in Philly his whole life and he’s more than used to the winters here, but that doesn’t mean he wouldn’t rather be in a warm bed. His roommates are the ones who really suffer, all used to warmer climates. Joe frowns deeply when he gets out of the car, and Gene curls into his jacket until only his eyes and the top of his head are visible. Babe pulls him into his side.
“It could be worse,” Gene says, snuffling into his collar. He sounds like he’s trying to convince himself.

Chuck grimaces. “Don’t jinx it. They’re saying snow tomorrow.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. They might cancel school.”

“I fucking wish,” Babe mutters. No weekend feels long enough this close to finals.

“I don’t,” Gene retorts. “I’d rather have class than snow on the ground.”

They reach the building and Babe holds the door for everyone, their little group filing in and immediately sighing at the warmth of the indoors. Someone calls Gene’s name and when Babe turns to look he spots Renee coming across the lobby toward them.

“Comment ça va?” she asks, and Babe at least knows what that one means. “J’ai entendu que tu avais des problèmes avec ton ami.” Which, yeah. She’s lost him.

“Tous mes amis me donnent des problèmes,” Gene retorts, and then they’re launching into a full-blown conversation. Gene’s French always comes out a little more liquid than his English, vowels and consonants sliding together into one blur of foreign sound where his words are usually carefully paced, and Babe finds himself listening as raptly as if he could understand it himself. He’s startled out of it by a bony elbow digging into his ribs.

“You have a dumb smile on your face, fool,” Julian says.

“Dick. I didn’t know you were coming to this.”

“Yeah, well. Turns out I’m getting credit for Turbomachinery.”

“No shit? I didn’t get offered credit for that. Why are they giving it to you?”

“Do I look like I know? What the fuck does this movie have to do with turbomachinery, anyway?”

“Julian, I swear,” Babe says. “It makes no sense. There’s gotta be a reason they’re dragging everyone in here.”

Julian snorts. “I heard they’re gonna start doing this more often. They want us off the streets cause of all the fighting recently.”

“Fighting?”

“You know. With Joe.”

Babe frowns. “Joe hasn’t gotten into any fights.”

“That’s not what I heard. Rumor is he was having a slow night at work so he stopped at a coffee shop. Some guy was drunk and getting rowdy with the barista, so he grabbed him and slugged the guy in the jaw.”

“Seriously? Joe did that?”

Julian shrugs. “That’s what they’re saying.”
They head into the already-packed lecture hall ahead of the others, squinting through the dim light cast by the screen to find a place to sit. There’s a row empty behind what Babe recognizes as the back of George’s head, and Julian heads in first. Before Babe can follow him Chuck is scooting by, chasing after Julian.

“Psst! Wait!”

“Shut up!” someone in front of Luz whispers back.

Chuck and Julian settle, whispering quietly between themselves. Babe tries his best to hear what they’re saying, but between the machine gun fire echoing through the speakers and the fact they decided to try being discreet for once he’s fighting a losing battle. He’s distracted from his eavesdropping by Gene sliding into the seat next to him, Renee and Ralph not far behind. Joe comes in last and he sits down in front of them next to Luz.

“Smoke break?” Babe asks.

“And gossip. I promised them the whole story. They said they wouldn’t tell anyone. Apparently our visitors have been on the news though, so I don’t know how long we can keep it quiet.”

“No shit?”

Gene nods solemnly, eyes trained on the screen. The light makes him look somehow ethereal, drained of all color but blues and silvers. “Yeah. Or they saw their pictures, at least. The police are looking for information on where they might be.”

Babe frowns. “I thought they’d just left home for a while.”

“That’s their side of the story, anyway. A friend of theirs did a press conference today about how they’d been planning this since before they shipped back home. I guess the cops found enough evidence backing him that it hasn’t gone federal. It’s a thin line.”

“Burgie?” he asks, and looks at him questioningly. “Eugene was talking to someone named Burgie on the phone this morning. Was he the guy in the interview?”

“I wouldn’t know. If that’s their buddy from the war then probably.” He looks at Babe finally. “I think this might be serious though, Babe. This sounds like it could be a big deal.”

Babe is about to respond when the door to the hall silently opens just wide enough for a person to slip through. A second later David is sitting down in front of them, next to Joe. Their heads lean together, faces inches apart as they whisper.

“Well this is gonna end well,” Babe mutters under his breath. Babe watches Chuck through the corner of his eye, but Chuck just has his gaze trained on the screen and a barely-perceptible twitch in his jaw. He probably has the right idea, honestly. Babe turns his attention back to the film.

It can’t be more than ten minutes before David stands up again and sneaks back toward the door, and Joe turns around to look at them. “Guys, me and David gotta discuss the prompt for class real quick. If I’m not back later don’t wait up, okay?”

It’s the most transparent excuse Babe has ever heard possibly ever, but he’s not about to point that out. They’re in a crowded theater and already getting glares from their neighbors just for talking. “Yeah, alright,” he whispers back. Gene nods. Chuck doesn’t move an inch, and a second later Joe is sliding out of his seat and moving toward the door, smooth and silent in the darkness.
As soon as he’s gone George whips around. “Okay, but do they think they’re subtle? Hell, half of Philadelphia—”

“Luz,” Gene says, low and soft. George goes silent instantly. It’s just as well. Babe needs to focus if he wants to find a way to relate this movie back to engineering.

By the time they’re filtering back toward the car Joe still hasn’t returned and Chuck is assessing the parking lot with careful pale eyes.

“Do we wait, or…”

Gene gives a helpless half-shrug, movement small as he curls inward against the cold. “He said go on ahead.”

Chuck’s mouth flattens “Guess you’re right. I don’t want to wait around for it to start snowing, anyway.”

They pile into the car, Babe ushering Gene into the passenger seat. Gene frowns at him, but he gets in the car without protest and immediately cranks the heat up. “Do we have a plan for food?”

“I don’t want to cook,” Chuck whines, taking them on the fastest road home. “I hate cooking. Standing at the stove is such a pain now. You gotta have gloves on just so you don’t drop anything from numb fingers.”

“Or you put on gloves and drop stuff anyway,” Babe says.

“Shut up. It was one bowl. One. You dropped—”

“—Hey, excuse me, the last bowl is way more important than—”

“—Five bowls, Babe! You dropped five bowls! How do you even do that?”

“I tripped! It happens!”

Babe can’t see Gene’s face from here, but he can see his shoulders shaking with suppressed laughter.

“It’s alright,” Chuck says, parking in front of their building with practiced care. “I’m not upset. We have those lovely rooster bowls now. I love eating food off of a picture of a farm animal.”

“They were a great price,” Gene says reasonably. “You couldn’t get a better deal unless you pulled them outta the trash.”

As soon as the two of them get out they dart toward the door of the apartment. Chuck gets the door open and they all duck into the relative warmth of the stairwell, jogging up to their floor. “They probably belong in the trash,” Chuck says. “At least they’re functional.”

“As long as they work, right?” Babe adds. “Once you put food in there you don’t even have to look at the roosters.”

Chuck wrestles with the shitty lock on their door for a minute, and then it’s finally swinging open and they’re hit with a wall of heat so suddenly Babe almost feels dizzy.

“Oh,” Gene says, and the smell of food filters into the hallway—sausage and fish and a series of spices Babe can’t identify.
Sledge is crouched next to the radiator, hands tinted gray with dust and oil. There’s a drop cloth covered in tools next to him, and he’s strategically wiping them down and putting them back in the toolbox they came from. “So we got the radiator working,” he says, a little unnecessarily. He has an actual short sleeved shirt on inside, which is more than anyone’s managed in the last few weeks. “We had to go to the hardware store for a few things, so we figured we’d pick up some groceries and make some food, too.”

“You cooked?” Babe asks, taken aback. The last time he’d been to Alabama no one in the Sledge household could cook but the cook himself.

“Well, Merriell cooked. I can’t cook.”

“What, never had to learn how with all the servants running around?” Babe gripes.

“Fuck off, Edward,” he says good-naturedly. He wipes at his forehead with the back of a wrist, getting a smear of oil face. Here, crouching on the floor and smiling a tiny satisfied smile with gray shit all over himself, wearing what’s probably an outfit made entirely out of thrift shop finds, he clashes horribly with the old image Babe had carried in his head for so long: a quiet rich kid from Alabama, straight-laced and buttoned up and always a little too hot-headed. It’s a good change.

Gene wanders toward the kitchen. No one follows, though Sledge squints at them for a minute.

“Wait. Didn’t you bring Joe with you? Where is he?”

“David,” Chuck says. He sounds about as frustrated as Babe feels. It’s never fun watching your friends fall into a cycle with someone who only pisses them off.

Sledge frowns. “Who’s David?”

“His fuckbuddy. I guess you didn’t see him at breakfast while Joe was trying to sneak him out.”

“Sneak him out? Isn’t the whole point of a fuckbuddy that they don’t stay the night?”

“Yeah, and for the most part they remember that,” Babe says. “Sometimes I think they forget they’re supposed to be screaming at each other and not going on lunch dates. But then David does something shitty and Joe retaliates and they’re back in square one. It’s all very juvenile.”

“I’ll say.”

They’re interrupted from their gossip by Shelton leaning out from the kitchen. “Food’s on. Get it while—” he breaks off to snort a laugh. “Cher, go wash up. You got grey shit all over your face.”

Whatever Shelton made for dinner is warm and spicy, comforting and perfect on a cold night. When they all finally turn in for the night the apartment is finally cozy again, and though Gene curls just as tightly against Babe’s side as he always does he isn’t wracked with shivers anymore, his usual two layers of socks left off for the first time in weeks. He smells clean and warm from showering, hair cold and still a little damp. Babe pulls him closer in the darkness, pressing a kiss to what he’s pretty sure is the side of his chin. Within minutes he’s nodding off, happy and content.

And in all honesty, it probably makes him a bad roommate. Maybe it just says something about his spatial awareness, or a testament to how tired he’s been. Either way, he doesn’t notice the distinct lack of sniffling, of sheets rustling and lights turning briefly on and off in the hallway as his and Chuck’s best friend settles for the night, a task that usually goes on for at least half an hour before all
is still and dark.

Call him a bad friend, but he doesn’t even notice that Joe never came home.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is brought to you by dumb google search terms including but not limited to: stupid ikea product names; bad goodwill finds; tacky marine mug; ugly china set; rooster symbolism. Also by my dorm room lacking heating, and by Inglourious Basterds being on netflix.

Comments are one dollar toward the ikea meatball fundraising jar. I love hearing what you guys think, be it on here or tumblr (also I think my askbox is actually working now. If it's not working someone should let me know though because technology is honestly an enigma to me). Thanks for reading!
Whatever kind of bug is going around? Is nasty shit, man. Please avoid it if you don’t want to be incapacitated for six days like I was. Fortunately I have now survived midterms and that, so I’m pretty sure I’m immortal.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

_Sledge, Eugene. 1/24/2018. Interview and transcript by Evan Wright. Conducted over telephone._

"I don’t mean to be rude, swear to heaven, but I already gave my statement to the police and I have nothing more to add. Please respect our privacy."

Eugene emerges from sleep in stages. He stretches his legs first, blankets soft and heavy against his calves. This spare mattress on the pantry floor and all the blankets piled on top of it is the only place he’s able to find real warmth in the northern winter, the chill hitting him bone-deep during the day even with the now-functional radiator running all hours of the day. Here he can at least spend the night without his teeth chattering. He burrows deeper into the blankets with a sleepy hum, pressing himself against the warm body next to him and breathing in the faint smell of tobacco, of musk and something sweet and spicy that brings him back to those rare nights in the desert when the air was still and quiet and for once he felt safe and secure, knowing the men around him had his back.

He feels more than hears his bedmate laugh. A moment later a kiss is pressed to the side of his neck, and Eugene sighs and presses closer. “Sledgehammer,” a voice murmurs into his hair. It's soft, almost reverent, so different from the sharp whisper that would have him snapping awake to take watch months before. That more than the warmth of the blankets or the soft mattress underneath them reminds Eugene how far away from the war he really is. He hums and presses deeper into the pillows. “Eugene, wake up.” He gets another kiss to his neck and then another after that, and then there are teeth biting at a bruise from the night before and Eugene’s gasping as his eyes flutter open.

Merriell’s smiling at him, hazy and carefree. His eyes are still blurred slightly with sleep but the shadows beneath are nearly faded out of existence. Eugene doesn't know when he last saw him this well-rested, let alone happy. Certainly not since before they were shipped home, and the irony of that isn't lost on either of them.

Eugene stretches again and presses closer, getting an open-mouthed kiss to his shoulder in reward. “What time is it?”

“Six thirty,” Merriell says. He snakes an arm around Eugene’s waist to hold him tighter to his chest. “You know boot camp ruined us.”

Eugene’s eyes drift to the narrow window above them. “It’s snowing. I bet they’ll close the college. We’ll have our work cut out for us at the bar today, won’t we?”

Merriell pushes him onto his back, settling over him. “Work. Don't remind me. No talking about shoveling snow when we’re in bed together, or I'll get up and leave you here alone.”
Eugene laughs. The sound just bubbles out, happy and uncontrollable. It makes Merriell smile against the side of his face. “Is that any way to speak to your betrothed?” Eugene gets out between giggles.

“Betrothed, Jesus.” There’s a puff of air against his cheek as Merriell laughs. “If my betrothed would rather chat about the weather than fuck his fiance then I don’t know what to tell him.”

He makes to roll off of him, and Eugene knows he’s acting but he still can’t stop his now-freed hand from shooting out and tugging him back down into a kiss. He means to keep it playful and light, he really does, but Merriell nips at his bottom lip before soothing it over with his tongue and between one breath and the next it turns slow and dirty.

“I’d never,” Eugene says. It comes out a little too raw but it makes Merriell’s eyes shine and with a reaction like that he really can’t bring himself to mind much. Merriell kisses him again, lazy and sweet and perfect, hips rolling down against Eugene’s languidly. Eugene gasps into his mouth and Merriell laughs at him. He doesn’t even bother pretending to hide it, the bastard.

“I guess you’re fully awake, then?” he teases, eyes dancing.

“Shut the hell up,” Eugene laughs breathlessly, but between one second and the next Merriell somehow intertwined their hands without Eugene knowing and he suddenly decides to use it to his advangage, pinning Eugene’s hands on either side of his head as he grinds down again. Eugene’s mind stutters, then flatlines. His eyelids droop but he can’t look away from Merriell’s lips. He cranes his neck until Merriell takes pity on him and presses their mouths together again, kissing him like he has something to prove. It makes Eugene’s head spin, makes him grind his hips upward in a way that has Merriell pulling away with a hiss a second later.

“Mon dieu, tu es beau, je t’adore.” It comes out in a rush of syllables, and Eugene’s French has gotten better over the years but the meaning is clear just based on Merriell’s voice alone. He squirms beneath him, chest feeling suddenly too big and too small at once.

“Merriell,” he most certainly does not whine, and Merriell shushes him.

“It’s okay, I got you. Gotta be quiet for me, alright?” He squeezes Eugene’s fingers between his own. “Can you keep these here for me? You look so good like that I’d hate to have you move.”

Eugene nods silently, determined to follow at least one of those requests, and Merriell smiles at him before ducking down to kiss him again. He gets lost in it in an instant, so distracted he barely even registers Merriell easing his underwear off until there’s a hand on his cock. He arches up into it, barely holding back a groan, and Merriell pulls away to huff a laugh against his neck.

“You’re so sensitive in the morning, I can’t get enough of it,” he murmurs, ducking down to lick a long stripe along the underside of his cock. Eugene tenses to keep himself from moving, but he can’t hold back a soft hum. “Gorgeous,” Merriell says, then takes him into his mouth.

And then everything is soft wet heat. It takes all his willpower not to thrust up into it, not to touch him or move. He feels like he’s burning with it. He distantly registers Merriell grinding down on his thigh and he bends his knee slightly to give him more leverage. Merriell hums low in his throat at the change and the vibration has Eugene moaning, too. He feels suddenly untethered.

“Merriell, let me—I wanna touch you. Please?” he asks nonsensically. His point must get across; Merriell watches him from under his eyelashes before nodding once, and immediately Eugene is stroking his fingers through his hair and tracing his thumb over his cheekbones, his jaw, the corner of his mouth—
He can feel pleasure arching under the surface and he tugs at Merriell’s hair in warning. He doesn’t pull off, never does, and his eyes look decidedly hazy when they meet Eugene’s. He holds his gaze, giving one last hard suck, and then Eugene is spilling down his throat as static courses through every vein in his body. He muffles a moan against his own wrist before going boneless, loose and sated.

Merriell is breathing hard against his hipbone. It almost tickles. Eugene registers that before he realizes he’s still grinding against him, and he feels like a fool all at once. “Get up here,” he says, and reaches down to tangle a hand in Merriell’s hair.

“Eugene—*mon coeur*, just…” Eugene knocks his hand aside and reaches past his waistband, stroking over him with sure movements. He tightens his grip in his curls and Merriell keens. “Like that?” he murmurs, and Merriell nods frantically. He can feel his thighs twitching, back tensing like a coil. “I love you,” he says, quietly and just for them. Merriell mumbles something unintelligible in French in response, and then Eugene presses his fingers down just so, tightens the hand in Merriell’s hair just enough that Merriell writhes against him as he comes with a cry he muffles quickly by sinking his teeth into Eugene’s collarbone. Eugene hisses at the pain, but he can’t bring himself to care.

Merriell flops down next to him and Eugene pulls his hand free, wiping it on the sheets before pulling Merriell closer. They meet in the middle, kissing lazy and slow as the sky goes from grey to white outside.

Merriell pulls away finally to poke at the bruise already forming on Eugene’s collarbone. “Sorry.”

“You’re not.”

“Nah,” he grins. “Like knowing you’re mine.”

Eugene rolls his eyes, but he can feel his cheeks heat. “Fuck off.”

Merriell just cackles, pulling the blankets back over them and burrowing back into his side. Eugene can feel sleep tugging him back under. He could doze off again. It isn’t something he’s able to do often between nightmares and the schedule drilled into them at bootcamp, but this morning he’s happy and sated and Merriell is a dead weight against his side. He could drift off again.

A shout cuts through the still morning air.

Eugene tenses, Merriell going abruptly still and silent beside him. For a long moment neither of them breathes, Eugene’s hands twitching for a rifle that isn’t there.

It feels like hours, but barely a second later another shout cuts through the air, this one victorious and happy. It’s followed by Babe’s yell of “School’s closed!” And then Gene and Chuck are joining in as well.

He can feel the tension leave Merriell’s frame where they’re pressed together. Eugene runs a hand through his curls, the familiar texture grounding him in the present. He drops a kiss on top of his head. “I guess we might as well get up,” he says, reluctant to leave the warmth of their bed.

“We can always just pretend we’re dead,” Merriell says dryly, voice muffled against the pillows. “Could stay in bed all day doing that.”

“I’m making pancakes!” Chuck yells from the kitchen, the three still celebrating.

They’re both silent for a long moment, considering. “We need to get up,” Eugene says finally.
Merriell sighs heavily, but he’s already dragging himself up and rooting around next to the mattress for a pair of pants. “You bet your ass we do. What kind of marine turns down pancakes, Sledgehammer?”

Eugene scoffs and rolls out of bed, throwing on sweatpants and some socks. Fixed radiator or not, the apartment is still icy compared to the climates he’s used to. A few extra layers never hurt.

He makes it out of the room before Merriell does and walks into the kitchen. Chuck is there, already working on breakfast. “Sledge,” he greets. “Is Joe up?”

“Haven’t seen him,” Eugene says, pouring coffee. Chuck frowns and steps around him into the living room, passing Babe along the way.

“Roads are gonna be hell today,” Babe says. “Are you two going anywhere?”

“Planning on it, but we’ll be walking if we do.”

Chuck comes back into the kitchen. “Joe isn’t in his room.”

“You sure? I didn’t hear him come in last night but I thought I’d just slept through it,” Babe says. He and Chuck share a long look, brows furrowed. Eugene looks between them.

“Isn’t he sleeping with that guy, though? He’s probably just staying the night or something.”

“David? They’re just friends with benefits,” Chuck says, shaking his head. “They fuck and that’s it. Outside of the bedroom they can’t stand each other. He never stays over.”

“He hasn’t texted me,” Babe chimes in, scrolling through his phone. “Chuck?”

“No. Nothing.” He taps a few buttons on the screen then holds his phone to his ear.

“Oh god,” Babe says, half to himself. “I hope he’s okay. Maybe he crashed his cab or something. It’s so icy out there, maybe it swerved and he crashed. Or maybe he’s in trouble. Should we call the cops?” He leans out of the kitchen, calling into the living room. “Gene! Joe’s missing, should we call the cops?”

Gene appears in the doorway, hair sticking in all directions and a coffee mug clutched in between his hands. “We most certainly should not call the cops. Did you try calling him?”

“He isn’t answering,” Chuck says quietly. “He’s never done this.”

“It’s barely been twelve hours,” Gene says. “He’ll turn up.”

“What if he doesn’t?”

“If he doesn’t, we call the cops,” Babe says, resolute. “Right? This is weird, guys.”

“He’ll come back,” Chuck says. “Twelve hours, that’s not that long. I bet he’ll be back before noon.”

He sounds more hopeful than he does sure. Babe nods, but he’s still frowning into his cup.

One hour and many pancakes later Merriell and Eugene leave the apartment to brave the Philadelphia snow.
Merriell hisses as soon as he steps outside. “Fuck this. Take me back to the fucking desert, cher. This is awful.”

“It’s not so bad,” Eugene says, though the cold seems to cut through every layer down to his bones. He pulls the scarf he borrowed from Babe up over his nose. “Come on. The faster we move the faster we’ll feel warm.”

He can hear Merriell grumbling something into the collar of his jacket, but he drags him along through the snow and before they know it they’re arriving at Currahee.

They’d found this place on a whim, and if it wasn’t a blessing then Eugene didn’t know what was. Those first days of travel are still a blur—writing a note, taking his shitty car from the garage for the first time since high school and driving straight to New Orleans. It was only then that he’d finally called the number he’d been holding onto for all those months, not entirely sure what would happen if Merriell picked up. If he even would.

But he had.

He’d answered the phone, and when Eugene asked if he wanted to get away Merriell had said yes. He’d left him with nothing but an address before hanging up, but it was all Eugene needed. When he’d finally pulled up at a street corner Merriell was already waiting with nothing but his duffel bag and a smile on his face that not even the car breaking down ten minutes later could get rid of.

And then they’d hopped the greyhound and ridden it all the way to Pennsylvania. And then they’d gotten off, wandered the city for an hour in a giddy haze, and finally walked down an alley and stopped here in this bar.

Eugene stomps the snow off his boots before crossing the threshold. They haven’t started resorting the hardwood floors yet--don’t know when they’ll be able to afford closing the bar long enough to work on them, in all honesty--but there isn’t any sense in damaging them any worse by tracking snow in.

Harry is the only one there when they walk in, slumped over the bar with a cup of coffee cradled in his hands. “Boys,” he says with a sleepy smile. “I wasn’t sure if you’d make it in today.”

“What, you thought a little snow would stop us?” Merriell goads through chattering teeth. It’s so very him that it makes Eugene snort.

“We figured you’d need help today more than any other time,” he says. “There are bound to be people looking for an escape from the weather, and you won’t be getting them coming in here with the walk iced over like that.”

“Is that you volunteering to shovel the sidewalk, then?” Harry says. “Because I was gonna do it before Dick and Lew come down, but as long as you’re offering…”

“Yeah, we’ll do it,” Eugene says. “Who else is coming in today?”

“Well, I know Ron’s coming in early. He and Floyd said something about doing supply runs this morning, so they’ll probably be here soon too.”

“Aw yeah, Tabby cat,” Merriell laughs. “He talk to you? How’d his date with our Chuck go yesterday?”

Harry levels him with a deadpan stare, but a smile breaks through it. “Not that it’s anyone’s business but theirs, but it seemed like it went well. If it even was a date. He’s always quiet about that sort of
thing. Anyway, get to work.” He stands up to head behind the bar. “If Dick gets back and we’re all just sitting around gossiping he’ll have our heads.”

“That’s a lie and you know it. He’s got a soft spot a mile wide,” Merriell says. Eugene just grabs a shovel, rolling his eyes as he steps outside.

It’s good work to take his mind off things, the repetitive motions and straining of muscle. They spend the better part of the morning clearing the alley. It's good work, honest work. Eugene finds himself missing this kind of thing more often than he'd care to admit. His time overseas was filled with mindless physical labor where his childhood never was, but something about the repetitiveness is soothing. It feels good to stretch his muscles, anyway.

They work side by side, mostly in silence, breath coming in thick clouds. An hour later Merriell stands back, leaning on his shovel and looking up and down the alley.

“You think we did good?”

The cobblestones are visible again at least, and piles of white line the walkway. “I think we did alright.”

“Good.” Merriell stomps snow off his boots and holds the door for him. “Now maybe they’ve got a job for us that involves staying warm.”

It’s not only warm inside but decidedly cozy. Something is cooking in the kitchen, and the air is thick with the smell of bread rising. “Did you guys convert into a bakery while we were out?” Eugene asks the room at large.

Lew snorts a laugh from where he and Dick are leaning over a binder, heads together. They spend a few minutes each morning looking it over, discussing it in quiet tones over coffee and carrying it around like it’s their newborn child. Eugene knows the binder has something to do with finances; it isn’t his place to ask more details than that.

Harry is crouching a ways down from them, steadily reupholstering seats. Half of the stools are cracked, greying leather while the others are shiny and black, so he’s making good progress. He puts down his tools with a thunk, pausing to grin and gesture at an unfamiliar man behind the bar.

“Eugene, Merriell. We’re a temporary bakery ‘cause of Lipton, here. Lip is the bun man.”

The guy gives him a look Eugene can only describe as one of motherly disapproval. “That’s me,” he says dryly. “Nice to meet you boys. Carwood Lipton. I've heard great things.”

Merriell looks a little bewildered by the whole exchange, and Eugene has to suppress a laugh. “Like the tea?” he asks, bordering on suspicious. Eugene elbows him.

“Yep. Like the tea.”

“That one’s new.” Harry pipes up, laughing.

“Here, come sit down. We’ve got soup.” They take seats at the bar, Harry pausing in his work to sit with them. Lipton slides three bowls across to them. “You need something warm after working outside all morning. It’s almost lunchtime, anyway.”

Eugene watches him turn to prod gently at a tray of what looks like brioche left to rise on the edge of the bar, movements careful and patient. He has a gentle sort of energy about him that contrasts strangely with his hulking shoulders and the thick scar cutting through one cheek. “Do you work
here?” he asks. “I hope that doesn't sound rude. I've never seen you here before.”

Lipton gives him another warm smile, ladling out some more soup for himself. “I just help with some of the supplies. For a bar Currahee’s got a great industrial kitchen, and since mine is out of commission right now I’ll be spending a little more time here during the day.”

Harry waves his hand broadly. “He’s being modest,” he says around a mouthful of soup. “Lipton has a big kitchen in one of the industrial buildings along Hawthorne. He supplies a lot of food for most of the restaurants, cafes and bars in the area. Bread, baked goods, that sort of thing.”

“So a bakery?” Merriell asks.

“A commercial one, kind of. No retail.” Harry looks to Lipton, who shrugs.

“I don't like working a register,” he explains. “It gives me more time during the day to do other things, anyway.”

“Yeah, and business is booming,” Harry goes on. “But unfortunately the kitchen has a lot of problems because all the buildings are run by the scum lord himself.”

“Norman Dike,” Merriell guesses.

“You know him?”

“We’re staying in one of his apartments,” Eugene says.

“He’s a busy man,” Lipton says kindly. “He owns a lot of properties.”

“He’s a shitty man,” Harry says flatly. “He’s never around, and he doesn’t look after his stuff.”

“Well, it would be nice if he’d find a way to count rent better. He keeps cutting off my utilities at random times,” Lipton says.

Harry waves a hand. “There ya go.”

The door lets in a cold gust of air as it swings open, Ron walking in with Floyd not far behind. His steps falter when he sees Lipton, and his shark stare is replaced by something that could almost qualify as warm. “Carwood,” he says.

“Ronald,” Lipton says, smiling.

Floyd rolls his eyes, ducking around Ron with a box full of bottles. “Hi, Lip. Hi, everyone. Nix, Brad says he took your advice on that whiskey and he says thanks. Harry, you owe Ray twenty bucks from Saturday.”

Harry swears under his breath.

Floyd puts his box down on a table, sitting down next to Merriell. Lipton slides him a bowl of soup, and he takes it gratefully. “Thanks, mom.”

“Mmh.” Lipton gives him another one of those looks that’s just a little too warm to qualify as disapproving. “Are you sticking around?”

Floyd shakes his head, pausing between bites. “I'm just here to drop that off. I'll be back later tonight, though. The restaurant next door is starting to open, so I'm guessing it'll be business as usual down here. You'll probably need the extra hands.”
They’re interrupted by a sharp ringing cutting through the air. It takes a moment for Eugene to recognize it as the phone they’d bought before leaving Louisiana. Merriell frowns at him and Eugene shrugs back before digging it out of his pocket.

“Hello?”

“Eugene,” Babe says. “Is there any chance you heard anything from Joe?”

Eugene feels his frown deepen. He and Joe aren’t exactly close. If they're asking him and Merriell then they must be running out of options. “No. He hasn't come home yet? It’s almost two.”

“Yeah, he isn't home.” Babe laughs, a thin, nervous sound. “Well, I'm sure he'll be home soon. He’s gotta come home eventually.”

Merriell is watching him like a cat, and Eugene stares right back. It’s grounding. “He’ll be back soon. Let me know when he does, alright?”

“Yeah, sure,” Babe says, a little too brightly.

Eugene hangs up, pocketing the phone. Merriell is still staring. “Joe didn't come home,” he says.

“Still?”

“Yeah. Those three are freaking out, it sounds like.”

“Don’t know why,” Merriell says, finishing his soup. “He's probably with his boy. Webster, or whatever.”

Nix looks up from down the bar. “David Webster?”

“Think that’s his name. You know him?”

“Yeah, he comes in here pretty frequently. Sweet kid, if a little naive. He's one of those romantic types, you know? Poetic. I didn't know he had a boyfriend.”

Merriell snorts. “He ain't go a boyfriend, as far as I can tell. He and Joe are just fucking around, or at least they think they are.”

“Yeah, I'm sure there's plenty of poetic tragedy involved,” Eugene adds. “It's kind of obvious to everyone that they're both gone for each other. I mean we’ve lived there what, two days? And it's already obvious they're just pulling each other’s pigtails.”

Nix snorts. “That's not a position I'd imagine Web ever being in.”

“If he’s really as artsy as everyone’s saying he probably finds some inspiration in it,” Eugene ventures. “As for Joe…”

“Joe’s a fighting man,” Merriell finishes. Eugene looks at him, confused. It isn't what he would've said; antagonist maybe, though perhaps that's too strong of a word. Merriell must notice his surprise. “What? You know I’m right. Joe’s always pushing, trying to find someone who’ll shove back. Sounds like he’s found it in that David.”

“Someone who’ll shove back,” Eugene parrots, almost incredulous. Merriell grins at him, the same leering smile that defined their first month of knowing each other. The beginning of their tour was monotonous, days bleeding into one another in an endless blur of heat and sand. When cards had grown dull they'd resorted to combat, fighting hand to hand after an attack on the way to the
bathroom or an ambush from the shadows in the early hours of the morning. It was good practice, even if it led to some knife nicks and bruised ribs. Something to kill the time, a big game everyone was in on.

Merriell wasn't cruel, like some of the guys could be. He was wiry and scrappy, but he knew his strength--Eugene had carried a black eye and a shallow cut on his chin after Leyden had decidedly forgotten his, much to his own horror. No, Merriell was just fucking irritating. He'd spend the day teasing Eugene in that slow drawl, spend the night sprawled halfway into his space, and get the drop on him when the world was still grey and still just before dawn, wrestling him into the sand with a wide smile. Waiting for him to shove back, Eugene supposes.

But he had. One morning he’d simply snapped, anger and exhaustion fueling him as he flipped Merriell easily, twisting the kabar out of his grip and pressing it against Merriell’s own ribs, ignoring the sting as it nicked Eugene’s side in the process. Merriell wasn't smiling then, eyes wide and startled.

And Eugene still doesn't know what drove him to do it but he’d ducked down and kissed him, long and dirty. Merriell had gasped, seemed at a loss with it all. Perhaps it was one too many surprises for him before five in the morning. Eugene bit at his lips, traced the roof of his mouth and when he finally felt hands twining themselves in what was left of his hair back then he just stood up and walked away--left Merriell off kilter and confused for a change.

They’d gotten along famously after that.

“One who’ll shove back,” Merriell says back to him, and he’s smiling that same smile from the desert that makes the tiny scar on Eugene’s ribs prickle. “Fighters need lovers.”

Nix is watching them carefully, smirking. “Are you a fighter, Shelton?”

“Fighter? Oh, not anymore. I got out of that game.”

Eugene can't help it; he grins at him, and Merriell grins right back.

He spends the afternoon rewiring old lamps. Merriell is holed away somewhere in the basement to work on some leaky pipes, possessing most of the practical expertise between the two of them. Lighting has been a priority for a while though, and it isn’t complicated work. He spends a few hours at a table in the back, plucking through wires on chandeliers five times his age.

The first customers are just starting to filter through as he finally finishes. He’s cleaning up tools and wiping off surfaces when he hears his own name. He looks up, but he’s alone in his corner of the bar. His eyes land finally on the television across from him and he freezes.

Floyd’s footsteps are heavy as he comes into the room. He takes one look at the screen and mutters something under his breath, grabbing the remote from behind the bar and changing the channel. The photo disappears, replaced abruptly by some sort of program about sharks. Eugene blinks.

Floyd sits down at the table heavily, remote in hand. “I’m not the only one who’s made that connection,” he says. “I recognized you two the minute I saw you.”
“We noticed,” Eugene says, and they did. They’d both known his eyes were a little too bright upon meeting them yesterday. It was only a matter of time before someone recognized them.

Merriell bangs up the stairs, hands and forearms grimy. There’s dust in his hair and a cigarette behind his ear, a few spots of water on his shirt. Something of the mess in Eugene’s head must show on his face, because Merriell stops just short of the table and looks between the two of them. “What?”

“Tab’s been watching the news.”

“Oh.” He drops a wrench on the table and Eugene wipes it down for him methodically. “Are they still using that photo from base, or have they moved on to service portraits?”

Floyd snorts, disbelieving. “It doesn’t bother you?”

“Bother? It was bound to happen.”

Floyd looks at Eugene incredulously, and he shrugs. “We knew what we were getting into. It was only a matter of time before someone stirred up a fuss, and only a matter of time after that before someone recognized us. I’m kind of surprised you did, though. That photo isn’t exactly recent. Is it really from camp? I don’t remember it being taken.”

“Two years ago, right after you showed up,” Merriell supplies. “They gotta find something newer. You still got your baby face in that one.”

“Like you don’t,” he retorts. “I hope they get ahold of some other stuff, though. I’ve never seen you in your dress blues.”

“I’m told they bring out my eyes,” Merriell says blandly.

Floyd looks between them. “You’re crazy, both of you. You didn’t think to use aliases or anything? Maybe grow a beard?”

Merriell snorts. “Eugene can’t grow a beard.”

“Shut up, Snafu,” Eugene throws out halfheartedly. “We didn’t break any laws. We don’t need aliases.”

Floyd nods to himself. “Well, I know everybody here will look out for you. I’m guessing the others already know?”

“We explained it to them outright.”

“Alright. I hope all this blows over soon. It can’t go on forever, right?” Floyd waves an envelope at them. “I got your pay for today. You two should head home. It’s already dark out there, and you know the ice will be bad.”

They wait until they’re outside before opening it, Merriell flipping the envelope open and sifting through bills with numb fingers.

“How much?” Eugene asks, breath coming out in a cloud.

“Three… four fifty,” Merriell says, then laughs. “Not bad for one day. How much does that make?”

“Just from work?” Eugene tallies it up in his head quickly. “We’re at thirteen hundred. Including
what we had before that’s a bit over two thousand. Almost enough for a down payment.”

Merriell grins and stuffs the envelope into his pocket. “Damn. We should start looking at places.”

Eugene tugs him closer to give him a kiss that’s more smiling against each others’ lips than anything. “Hey, would you want to maybe move in together?”

Merriell laughs a cloud between them, their foreheads still pressed together and teeth beginning to chatter. “You fuckin’ dork.”

“Shit,” Merriell mutters as they walk into the building. There are two squad cars outside.

“Shit,” he hisses with slightly more feeling after they pass an officer on the stairs.

“Putain merde,” he whispers when they get to their floor. The apartment’s door is wide open, roped off with crime scene tape.

“What do we do?” Eugene whispers.

Merriell shakes his head, eyes wide. He reaches up to touch the cigarette behind his ear, checking it hasn’t fallen. “We gotta go in. Turn back now and it’ll look suspicious.”

He holds the tape up as Eugene steps underneath it, following him a moment later. It’s just as well that he’s a few steps behind, because all eyes in the room latch onto Eugene instantly. He feels his stomach drop.

“That’s our other roommates,” Babe says. “Hey, did you get my text?”

Eugene frowns and pulls out the phone. Called the cops, fair warning, the screen reads. Oh. “I have now,” he says, walking over. Babe smiles at him apologetically

The detective across from him eyes him critically. “And you are…”

“Eugene,” he says quickly. “I was just at work.”

Merriell skirts around him like a shadow, going straight to the kitchen. Eugene can hear him putting the kettle on. He knows the detective hasn’t missed his entrance. Her eyes track him as he crosses the room, but she doesn’t say anything. It isn’t a guarantee that they’re clear but it’s better than a confrontation, so Eugene doesn’t think too hard about it.

“Allright, let’s go over this one more time,” she says to the group at large. “You couldn’t find your friend Joe—exactly how long has it been, by the way?”

“It’s been twenty-four hours, now,” Babe says, worrying his bottom lip between his fingers.

“Right, okay, your friend Joe has been missing for twenty-four hours, so you called Joe’s coworker Joe to ask if he’d seen Joe?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Gene answers, eyeing Babe out of the corner of his eye. “There are two Joes. I thought we said that.”

“And who are you?”

“I’m Eugene.”
“I thought that one was Eugene,” she says, gesturing at Eugene.

“We’re both Eugene.”

“And you live here?”

“Not really.”

“Does that Eugene live here?”

Gene looks at him, and Eugene can see him calculating exactly how much it’s safe to say. He isn’t subtle, but hopefully the cops won't pick up on it. “…Not really.”

Merriell comes out of the kitchen silently, stopping behind Eugene’s shoulder. He presses an arm to Eugene’s back, invisible to everyone else in the room.

“Could you clarify?”

“I live here with my boyfriend, and he’s my boyfriend’s cousin. But neither of us signed the lease.”

“You or the boyfriend?”

“Me and the cousin.”

“Jesus Christ.”

“Jesus hasn’t signed the lease, either,” Babe says helpfully. “Not that it matters, seeing as we aren’t trying to find Jesus. We’re trying to find our friend Joe, and if you could just help us do that—"

They all freeze, staring as a confused Joe Liebgott ducks under the crime tape and enters the room.

Babe is lunging at him all at once, tackling him into a hug that has Joe taking a step back just to maintain his balance. “Oh my god, we thought you were dead, Joe, what the fuck?! How the fuck could you do that to us?” Babe pulls away just as fast and shoves him roughly. “Where the fuck have you been, huh? We thought you were kidnapped off the street and sold into slavery!”

“…What?”

“I don’t know! It’s a weird neighborhood! A lot could happen!”

“So you called the fuckin’ cops?!"

The cop sighs. “Are you Joseph Liebgott?” She asks pointedly.

Joe composes himself quickly. “Yes ma’am.”

“Mr. Liebgott, your roommates were trying to file a missing person report. Where have you been for the last twenty-four hours?”

“I was at a friend’s.” He takes a look around the room, and the looks on everyone’s faces must hit him all at once. “I’m sorry, guys. God, I’m an idiot. I lost track of time. I figured it hadn’t been that long. I’ve been out of the house for longer.” His tone is solemn. For the first time since Eugene met him he isn't holding back a quip or sharp remark, and it's almost unsettling.

“Without contacting us?” Chuck snaps. His voice still quivers a bit. Anger is never a good way to hide nerves. “You asshole. You could have called.”
“My phone died, I didn’t have a charger. I figured it wouldn’t be a big deal. I’m sorry, I’m fucking stupid.”

“You’re damn right you are.”

“I’m sorry, buddy. Come here.” Joe pulls Chuck into a hug, and Chuck sinks into it. There’s the slightest tremor in his fingertips, visible even across the room.

As soon as Chuck pulls away Gene is taking his place, tugging him tightly against his chest. “We were worried,” he says quietly into Joe’s shoulder.

“I know. I’m sorry.” Joe addresses the room at large. “Really, I got so caught up. This won’t happen again. Never ever.”

The cop turns away, maybe to give them privacy. Eugene feels almost sorry for her and her companions. They’d made a pointless trip if ever there was one. She catches him looking and smiles.

“Are your friends always like this?” She asks.

“In the time I’ve known them, this is probably the worst it’s been.”

“Sounds exciting,” she says, and he snorts.

“Yeah, well. We never get bored.” Something about the way she’s standing strikes him as familiar, and he can venture a guess as to where he’s seen it before. “You military?”

She smiles at him again, small and satisfied. “Good eye.” Another cop comes up behind her, taps her on the arm with a file and hands it off. She opens it, skimming the first page. “First Marines. I got out last year. My husband went into teaching, but I felt law enforcement seemed like the logical next step.”

Eugene nods to himself. It makes sense. “Where’d you serve?”

She doesn't answer for a moment, skimming her file. Finally she closes it and smiles at him again. “Same place you did.”

He stops breathing. So much for keeping their heads down. Merriell goes deadly still next to him, and he can practically feel the tension radiating off of him. Still, he’s maintaining the semblance of a disinterested slouch, and Eugene struggles to follow his lead. “Ma’am?”

“Eugene Sledge,” she says, and yeah, it's over. “I'm Sergeant Lena Riggi-Basilone. You’ve been in the news.”

Eugene feels himself straighten unconsciously, can sense more than see Merriell do the same. He doesn't say anything. He doesn't need to. He already knows he's given them away, knows he probably should have seen that coming. He mentally kicks himself. She knows who he is. Hell, half the country probably does. If their families and the evening news didn't guarantee that then half the platoon being forced into police briefings and press conferences did. She hasn't asked him a question, though, and as far as he’s concerned that doesn't warrant a response.

“You came home from Afghanistan,” she continues, “you disappeared from Alabama and now here you are in Philadelphia. You’re a long way from home.”

Again, it isn't a question. He doesn't say anything, staring her down and keeping his face blank.
She stares right back. “Corporal, you're a thin line away from facing felony charges. Are you aware of that? A family in Louisiana says you kidnapped their daughter, and they’d like to know where she is.”

That gets his attention, and he bristles. She isn't the only one who’s seen the news, and he knows the story is pretty clear to the public right now. He opens his mouth to snarl a response, but before he can say anything Merriell is snorting out a laugh at his side, elbowing his arm as he shifts his weight. The brief touch does little to dissipate the tension radiating off either of them. Eugene knows him well enough to know Merriell is about ten seconds away from making a break for the fire escape which, while tempting, probably wouldn't help anything. The millisecond of physical contact is enough to quell his nerves for now, though. They're in this together.

“You've seen the news,” Merriell drawls. “Where the fuck do you think she is, officer?”

“Corporal Shelton,” she says.

He smiles lazily. “Ooh, I’m famous, too?”

“I’m just relaying what information your family sent me,” she continues. “I think you can understand the delicacy of the situation. Your parents are trying to press kidnapping charges. Now, I think everyone is aware of the details after your platoon has come to your defense, but the fact still stands that people have questions.”

“It’s our business,” Eugene says curtly, reigning in the urge to snap at her. “We don't owe them a story and we don't want to be media icons.”

Riggi sighs. “I think it’s a little too late, unfortunately. Everyone already knows you. Any reason why you ran away from home together?”

“Just had to be away for a while.” His mother’s face flashes before his eyes, her hopeful smile as she brought another young lady to dinner. Good for him, good for the family. Debutantes who'd never understand a thing about what he'd done for the last three years. He already couldn't talk about it with anyone, not with his mom or his dad or his brother. No one in upper-class Mobile got it, the same way they’d never really get Merriell or why Eugene couldn’t sit still when he wasn't around. He'd begun to cut himself off from everyone, sinking into himself. He didn't pick up when Burgie or Jay called. Couldn't bring himself to. And compared to Merriell his homecoming was easy.

“So you dropped everything and took a bus several thousand miles, not notifying anyone in your family?”

He’d left a note scribbled on the fridge. That’s more than the Sheltons had gotten. “There’s nothing wrong with that. We’re veterans. We’re adults. I think we’re allowed to go where we please.”

Riggi sighs again. “If you aren't being threatened by your families we’ll have to pass on your location. Short of witness protection there isn’t anything we can do about that, and from what I understand you aren’t in any danger. We have to end this though, for your sake as well as everyone else’s. They’ve been turning this into a media circus,” Riggi says. She sounds a little apologetic. Eugene has a sudden rush of sympathy for her. His parents are difficult to deal with on a good day, and he hasn't heard stellar things about the Sheltons. “Boys?” Riggi prompts.

Merriell’s fallen silent beside him, eerily so. It reminds Eugene of worse times than these--or maybe not worse, just bad in a different way. The stillness is more than he can take, though. He feels suddenly like he’s going to rattle apart in his own bones. None of this was supposed to happen. He reaches up to rub his neck, making sure to bump Merriel lightly with his elbow as he does.
Merriell’s eyes flick up to meet Riggi’s abruptly. “Why’d they file a missing person report?” he asks, tone genuine and soft for the first time since Riggi entered the room. It makes Eugene reconsider his stance on making a break for the fire escape, fiance in tow. Any time Merriell sounds small like that something is terribly wrong. “They don’t want us there.”

“Maybe they realized they made a mistake. Both of your families will be happy to know you’re safe.”

Fat chance. If they'd wanted their sons back Eugene wouldn't have been dragged along to dinners and paraded in front of colleagues, wouldn't have been fielding different women each night and curving inward on himself silently. His parents had wanted what their son once stood for—what their son once was, but was no longer. And Merriell--his parents had never wanted their son at all.

“That’s bullshit,” Merriell mutters, and Eugene bites the bullet and presses their arms together silently, unable to resist any longer. “Bullshit. They don’t want us there.”

Chuck keeps his shoulder pressed against Joe’s even as he’s cooking stir fry and chugging a beer with intense derision, glaring into the pan like the food had done something to wrong him. It’s an impressive feat of multitasking.

Babe goes on lecturing Joe about phone chargers and the importance of communication for about twenty minutes. It’s only when he brings up David that Joe finally cuts him short.

“Don’t blame him,” he says. “It wasn’t his fault.”

“Not his fault? He isn’t exactly blameless in this,” Chuck says, his one addition to the debate.

“I fucked up,” Joe maintains. “It’s my fault. Don’t blame this on him.”

Chuck holds his peace, still glaring at the vegetables.

Eugene just watches. Merriell is silent at his side, silent through dinner, silent when the others park in front of the television for a movie night, Chuck still resolutely at Joe’s side. He silently gets ready for bed and lays silently next to Eugene in the darkness, both of them staring at the ceiling until the sound dies out in the living room as the others go to sleep, too.

When he finally speaks his voice is rough, and Eugene wonders distantly how long it’s been. “We could always run again.”

Eugene swallows. He thinks about the apartment they were going to buy, the little pile of cash they have stowed away. At least Merriell is including him in his plans this time. He’d run from Eugene once too, and as much as Eugene wants to put it behind them it’s not something he can forget. “If I don’t want to leave will you run away without me?”

“No,” Merriell says immediately, tone stronger this time. He rolls over, facing him. “Not again.”

Eugene sighs. They could’ve had a studio here, not in one of Dike’s buildings but nearby. Could’ve worked at the bar all day, spent time getting reacquainted with the family they’d lost. Could’ve taken a few classes, maybe. Worked on reintegrating themselves into civilian life.

They were so close.

Merriell exhales slowly, reaches out and rolls him closer. Tucks Eugene’s head under his chin and
pulls them together under a pile of warm blankets. He hums a fragment of a tune Eugene remembers from months ago, something he might’ve sang in the Humvee or after settling into another makeshift camp in the sand. All at once Eugene feels exhaustion tugging him downward, breath coming shallow and even. Within minutes he’s fallen into a restless sleep, Merriell following close on his heels just as he always does.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is based on the true story of That Time My Freshman Year Roommate’s Friend Didn’t Come Home For Three Days And Didn’t Contact Us Because She Was Busy Getting Dick And We Almost Called The Cops, colloquially referred to as the best fuckin’ weekend of Sarah’s life. Yes, this is a callout. Mad respect to you Sarah, but bring a phone charger next time.

On a more serious note: this fic has been a work in progress for a few months now, and it’s taken many different forms during that time. Like, MANY different formats. There are a lot of fragments of chapters that I’m no longer planning on using, which include about a chapter’s worth of Lieb and Web’s antics during the 24 hours that Joe was off the grid. Does anyone have interest in an interlude chapter of these before we continue on? And for that matter, do you think there are any parts of the timeline that could use other perspectives, for clarity’s sake? That’ll be a standing question for the rest of this—if you feel you’d like to see more of a character or you’re confused about anything, let me know either in the comments or on tumblr and I’ll address it and/or write an interlude for it!
Interlude

Chapter Notes

I hope everyone had a great St. Patrick's Day weekend! It's really the best holiday.

As promised, here's that interlude chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Hey, have you—fuck, what am I stepping on?”

“That’s my leg, asshole,” George gripes.

Joe squints in the darkness of the campus theatre. It’s nearly pitch black, the flickering lights of the screen doing very little to illuminate the rows of seats. Renee claimed the last of the seats near the rest of his roommates, so now he’s here dodging legs in pursuit of the empty seat next to George. He finally makes it and plops down in his seat gratefully.

“How is it?”

“I’m enjoying it. It’s fitting, with our current political climate. I’ve seen it thirteen times already, though. I’ll let you in on a secret. Not as good after the fourth time around.”

“Yeah?” Joe pats through his pockets for his cigarettes.

“Yeah. I’m getting humanities credits for this. I’m not sure why. My class is about the bond between man and nature. Makes no sense.”

Joe regards the screen critically. Brad Pitt is eating a sandwich obnoxiously while Eli Roth beats a Nazi to death with a baseball bat. “Yeah, I don’t see it.”

“No sense,” George repeats. “Not that I mind. Great movie. What are you here for?”

“German. Ten points of extra credit.”

“Jeez. Its kind of ironic, right?”

“A little bit. There isn’t even much German in this, anyway. Pretty sure they’re just giving credit for that one scene in the bar. You got a smoke?”

“Yeah, but I’m not about to be kicked out for smoking in here.” He presses something into Joe’s hand, and Joe traces the shape before frowning.

“This is gum.”

“Juicy Fruit,” George says, blowing a bubble the size of a tennis ball. It pops loudly.

In the row in front of them someone whips around. “Will you knock it off?”

“Oh, because you’re missing so much important dialogue right now?” George asks, raising his eyebrows in mock-concern. On-screen the Nazi soldier is dying a particularly gruesome death by
baseball bat. Joe smiles and unwraps his gum.

“I have a quiz on this for European History and I’m not blowing my grade because you two won’t shut up!” the man in front of them retorts.

“Jeez, alright, watch the movie!” George says. “What is this, anyway?” he says to Joe more quietly. “Is every class in the damn school giving credit for watching this? It isn’t even historically accurate. They’re just giving us an excuse to watch Inglourious Basterds.”

“As if we need an excuse to watch Inglourious Basterds,” Joe retorts. George cackles, the man in front of them sending them another glare. Joe ignores him. “How’ve you been, anyway? That girl you were with was cute.”

Luz snorts. “Yeah, it was a good time. We danced, we made out, we had a great night and that was as far as it went. It’s just as well. I haven’t seen the guy I was trying to get over since—what, the night before we went out? Guess I must’ve spooked him.”

“What did you do?”

“Nothing.” Joe raises his eyebrows, and he holds his hands up defensively. “Seriously! It was late, there was some drunk guy in the café that I kicked out, and just like that tall, dark and handsome is leaving, too! I was just doing my job, but I guess he was intimidated or something.”

“Jeez,” Joe mutters, at a loss. “Well, if he was scared off by something like that he doesn’t have the balls to date you, anyway.”

“Thanks. I think.”

The empty seat on Joe’s other side creaks. He turns to greet the newcomer and is met with startling blue eyes. “Come here often?” David asks cheekily.

“Just for the points. Sobel send you?”

“Extra credit is hard enough to come by. I’m not gonna waste it. What have I missed?”

“Mostly just the Bear Jew bashing in some skulls,” Joe says conversationally. “You missed the best line.”

“What’s that?”

George leans across Joe’s lap. “We will be cruel to the Germans,” he says in a perfect imitation of Brad Pitt’s drawl.

“Shut up!” a new voice in front of them hisses.

David laughs softly. His eyes are turned silver by the light of the projector. It’s very pretty. He leans close to speak directly into Joe’s ear. “Do you have to write a paper about this too?”

“Short response. Why?”

“Come write it at my apartment. We can work on them together.”

Joe studies him. “Is that all we’re gonna do?”

“Guess you’ll have to follow through to find out,” he says, and slides out of his seat and back the way they came.
It takes him all of ten seconds after entering the apartment to find out. The minute he steps through the door he’s pinned to it, David’s lips attached to his collarbone. He’s laughing breathlessly as David presses a string of open-mouthed kisses down his neck.

“Hoobler?” He gets out as he tangles his hand in David’s hair, but David is already pulling away and taking his hand to drag him down the hall and into his bedroom.

“Weekend getaway. He’ll be back tomorrow night.”

“How nice for him,” Joe says, raising his eyebrows. He tugs off his shirt and pants and lands in David’s fluffy bed with a soft poof.

“How have you been?” David is standing on one leg, struggling with the ankle of his skinny jeans. Joe would offer to help, but it’s hilarious to watch.

“Same old since this morning.” He thinks on it. “Well, fielding rumors, too.”

“That wouldn’t be the rumor about you beating up a guy in a coffee shop, would it?”

“Coffee shop? That part’s new.” He watches as David hops for balance on one leg. “All I know is some guy recognized me on the street today. Told me nobody messes with his boys.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. Then he told me he knows where I live and that I better stay in my lane.”

“You’re kidding.” David finally gets his leg untangled and then pauses to look at him seriously. He tisks. “’Fraid not.”

“Jeez. *Fühl dich hier wie zuhause.*”

“It’s a little early to be moving in together, I think.”

David falls into bed next to him, blinking at him with huge blue eyes. “But we’ve known each other for two whole years now!”

Joe cackles, smacking him with a pillow. “Shut up.”

“Why don’t you make me?”

He rolls over to straddle him. “That is literally the cheesiest fucking line and I wouldn’t have expected to hear it from an English major of all people—”

He’s bowled over the next second, and it startles the breath out of him. “I think we had a goal, here,” David says, kissing Joe’s bottommost rib sweetly. The innocence of the gesture throws him off, and he laughs breathlessly.

“Goal? We had some papers to write, if that’s what you mean.”

“Do you want to write your paper?”

“No.”
“You sure?’

“No, no,” Joe says seriously. “I think it can wait.”

“You think so?’

“Mhmm, yeah, I really—yeah.”

He wakes up the next day disoriented, curled into the warmth of David’s side. He has a split second to panic about it. This is not something they do; not sleepovers, and certainly not what can only really be qualified as cuddling: Joe has an arm thrown across David’s waist, his face pressed into the side of his shoulder and their legs tangled hopelessly together under the blankets. Before he can try to gracefully extract himself he realizes David is already up, skimming through the textbook propped up on his chest.

“This says Austrians don’t use simple past tense,” he says by way of greeting.

If he’s going to play this off as normal then Joe might as well go with it; he stretches nonchalantly to free himself, sighing as his back pops. “Not really, no. My ma says it’s the same in south Germany.”

“Does that mean I don’t need to learn it?”

“See, I tried to argue that in class in Freshman year.”

“And how did that go for you?”

He tugs David closer until he puts the textbook down in surrender, sliding back under the covers. Joe takes advantage of the new angle to press his mouth to his chest before answering. “Not well.”

“Great. I guess that means I shouldn’t bring it up with Sobel tomorrow.”

“Don’t talk about Sobel when we’re in bed together.”

He scrolls through his outlook account quickly, reads one email about a class cancellation on Thursday and ignores an email from Dike about how he’s expecting to become much busier in the next few weeks. He’s skimming a notification about school closing due to snow when his phone dies.

He frowns at it for a minute. “I was at twenty percent.”

“What?” David asks.

“My phone is on the verge of total death, I’m telling you. I still had twenty percent.”

“Did you bring a charger?”

“No. Do you have one?”

David wordlessly holds up a chord next to his bed. Joe stares at it for a long moment before setting his useless phone down on the bedside table, rolling back into the blankets. “I forgot I’m in bed with an iPhone user.”
“They have a very user-friendly interface.”

“Nope.” He refuses to hear this, rolling to face away from him. David just takes this as an invitation to be the big spoon. Damn it.

“I like their new ones. They fit in my hands very well.”

“What.”

“Are you just mad because yours doesn’t come in pink?” He wraps himself around Joe tighter. It’s actually very nice. Very safe and warm-feeling, quite cozy. He’d sooner pull his own teeth out with a crowbar than let David know that though, so he puts up a show of trying to get free.

“I’m just saddened that you’re—” he can feel David nuzzling into the back of his neck which, what the fuck why is that giving him feelings, “—that you’re subjecting yourself to a shitty product just because it’s fucking **pink**—”


“You’re a fucking octopus, you know that?”

“No, I think you’re wrong.”

Joe looks up from his laptop, open on the floor in front of him. It’s a comfy floor with a very nice rug, soft and fluffy underneath his blanket burrito. Interior design choices aside, David is still an idiot. “I’m wrong?” he asks incredulously.

“Yes. You’re deluded and incorrect.”

“I’m deluded and incorrect. You’re the one who thinks that—”

“They get stuff done! It’s that simple!”

“—the Howling Commandos are any more effective when they aren’t even fighting Nazis in the first place.”

“They’ve got Captain America.”

“The Basterds have the fuckin’ Bear Jew. He doesn’t need superpowers. He’s got a baseball bat. I think we can accept that they’re cooler just by virtue of being more realistic.”

David is sat at his desk, studiously flipping through his notes. His mouth is hanging open a bit, and Joe studies him for a minute while munching on crackers. They’re organic goldfish knockoffs shaped like bunnies, and Joe isn’t even surprised that that’s the kind of thing David’s apartment is stocked with. They appeal to his Californian sensibilities and that’s the only reason he isn’t judging. He contemplates one before flinging it at David’s open mouth. The little bunny makes contact with the side of his chin. It is, all in all, not a bad throw for a guy hanging upside down from the edge of the bed.

“Ouch! What was that for?”

“Which came first, you or the dictionary?”
“That’s original. I’ve never heard that one before.”

“Thanks. Thought of it myself.” The bunny comes sailing back through the air to make contact with his ear. “Ow.”

“I feel gross. You wanna shower?”

Joe looks up from his notebook, pulling the end of his pen out of his mouth to speak. “Sounds… steamy.”

“You are the lamest person I know.”

“That’s not what you were saying last night.”

“Oh my god.”

He doesn’t mind the beating down of the water on his shoulders, can’t really mind the constant mist that hits his face and makes his eyes feel dry and scratchy. Not when David is like this, leaning against the tiles, water cutting crystal lines down his chest and hanging from his parted lips as he groans. He has a hand in the sopping mess of Joe’s hair, as possessive as it is needy. It’s shitty etiquette and normally Joe would chew him out for it. He really should, if only to keep up appearances that this is somehow simpler than they both know it to be. But the weight of his hand feels right somehow, guiding his head forward again in desperate little motions. Joe should pull back, should snap at him like he’s expected to do, but he can’t. He settles for digging his thumbs into David’s hipbones a little in retaliation.

It only makes him groan louder and squirm a little in his grip. “Fuck--God, Joe.”

He lets go and David whimpers high in his throat, hand drifting sideways to cradle Joe’s jaw. The water is burning Joe’s eyes again, but he can’t look away. David’s lips are trembling slightly in a telltale sign that he’s close, eyelashes fluttering and shaking loose their glittering drops of water. His thighs give a minute quake, muscles in his arms jumping as he clenches his hand in Joe’s hair and comes into his mouth with a bitten-off curse.

Joe works him through it, lets come run out of his mouth onto the shower floor to be washed away by the steady stream of water. He takes a minute to catch his breath, forehead pressed against David’s hipbones a little in retaliation.

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Joe works him through it, lets come run out of his mouth onto the shower floor to be washed away by the steady stream of water. He takes a minute to catch his breath, forehead pressed against David’s hipbone as the water and steam make the air feel thick and sluggish. He thinks about finishing himself off, but time suddenly feels like honey. Part of him is lazy, the other part satisfied just sitting here, and in the meantime moving isn’t worth the effort.

Every moment has to be broken eventually though, so he pulls away after a minute of breathing in the steam and heat to speak, voice scratched. “You have terrible etiquette.”

David snorts. “Is that you asking for something?”

Joe thinks about it--really, really considers it--but he’s still feeling good. Satisfied just sitting here, looking up at David, nothing aside from their nudity sexual about it. “No,” he says finally. “I owed you from last night, anyway.”

“I’ve never known you to turn down orgasms,” David teases.
“First time for everything, eh? There’s always later, if you’re up for it.”

“I might be. Depends on what you have in mind.”

“Always expecting me to have the plan. Way to take initiative, Web.” David rolls his eyes, and Joe shakes his head as he stands up. “C’mon. Where’s your soap? I feel all sticky.”

“No that’s not—little higher.”

“Like that?”

“Too high. Lower, like—yeah.”

“Good?”

“Fuck yes. God, that’s good. Harder.”

Joe digs his thumb into his shoulder and gets a long groan in response. “What do they make you English majors do? Do you guys hike twelve miles a night or something? Run up and down mountains for extra credit?”

“We have a lot of books to carry, I don’t know. God, please don’t stop.”

“What kind of body wash do you use? I feel very soft.”

“You have comic books!”

“What?”

“You totally do! You can’t hide this from me, Webster! I’m looking at them right now!”

“Oh—that’s Fun Home. It’s a graphic novel.”

“Still counts!”

“It really doesn’t. It’s a horror story about being sad and gay.”

“Nuh-uh, this is a comic book. I’m reading this right now.”

“You’re not gonna like it. There are no superheroes in that one.”

“ Fuck you, I bet I’ll like it.”

“…I don’t like this.”

“Told you.”

“Fucking know it all. Shut up.”
“I mean, I guess you have a point,” David says. “Batman doesn’t make any of his own technology, and that’s kind of lame. But I like that he’s just a normal guy, you know?”

“For someone who doesn’t read comic books you sure talk a lot about comic books.” Joe doesn’t even bother to look at him as he speaks, textbook propped against his chest and head situated very comfortably in a pile of fluffy pillows. Next to him David huffs, still staring at the ceiling.

“What, a guy can’t talk about comic books?”

“Not when the guy is delusional and thinks Batman is god’s gift to the human race.”

“What do you want to talk about then?”

Joe rolls his head toward him finally, then twists to straddle his lap. “I’d rather not talk.”

“That’s—yeah, that’s fine.”

“I can’t believe—” Joe blows out a frustrated stream of air, spits out a curse in German with it that makes David smirk, a challenge in his eye. And of fucking course he would see the twist of irony in that. They’ve studied German, cussed each other out in German, goaded each other on in German and through it all it’s kind of become a thing.

Great. Now he can’t even cuss out his asshole of a fuckbuddy in his own fucking language.

“Can’t believe what?” David goads, switching languages, and Joe can practically feel his blood boil.

“You never fucking quit, do you?” he snaps back in German, because fine. David might have an advantage in one language, English major that he is. If he wants to give up his advantage then that’s his choice. “Do you ever listen to yourself speak? You’re so stuck up it’s ridiculous.”

David’s smirk disappears slowly to be replaced by a squint. “Really? I’m the one who’s full of himself? If you weren’t so proud that you couldn’t even take a little criticism—”

“Oh, cause you take criticism so well—”

“God, would you just let me fucking talk? I’m trying to help.”

“Maybe I didn’t ask for your help!”

He gets a full glare for that, and then David is plunking his laptop down on the end table and rolling closer in the sheets, getting right in Joe’s face. “You are insufferable,” he hisses, in English now.

“Resorting to fancy words, Web? Tell me how you really feel.” He laughs humorlessly as David pins his wrists with an angry huff. “Tell me how much you hate me, tell me to fuck off—give me something here. ‘Insufferable,’ fuck, you are so damn—”

“Shut the fuck up.”

Joe’s gotten him riled up, angry and beautiful. His cheeks are stained pink, skin flushed all the way down his neck. Joe is reminded abruptly that they never got dressed through the single points of contact between them: David’s hands on his wrists, their chests, the tangle of their legs. Every line of David’s body is heat and it’s getting to him, making arousal twist low in his gut. He knows he can't
let it show though, can’t give him the satisfaction. No, this is their game, the push and pull of it, and David’s waiting for that last push.

Joe gives it to him: licks his lips long and slow in a way that has David’s gaze catching on them for a minute, meets his glare head-on and mimics his words from the night before in what’s barely a whisper. “Make me,” he says, cutting through the tense silence of it, grinding his hips upward slowly.

Frustration passes across David’s face, quickly replaced by the spark of anger Joe’s become so familiar with. He huffs another breath from between already-parted lips before letting go of one of Joe’s wrists to reach for the lube on the nightstand.

“I--you make me so mad,” he grits out, managing to open the bottle one-handed with a click that seems to echo off the walls. “Why are you so--”

“What?” Joe cuts him off just to see what happens.

Again he gets that flicker of frustration as David slicks his fingers, rubbing two over Joe’s entrance. It makes him sigh, makes his legs twitch in a way he’s not willing to admit you. David watches his face as he does it, then leans forward to nip at his jaw. “I want to fuck you,” he says, but something needy makes its way into his tone.

“Then do it,” Joe says, tone bored. He gets two fingers pushing in at once as a response, making him gasp as the stretch of it goes straight to his cock.

He forgot how good David is at this, too; forgot how well David knows him after two years of running in these circles. Joe knows every chink in David’s armor, knows how to rile him up just like David knows how to shut him up. He’s taking advantage of that now, long drags of his fingers that make Joe see sparks.

Joe finally catches his breath as David ducks again to work on what will probably be an impressive series of bruises. “Is that all you got?”

“Do you ever stop talking?”

“C’mon, Web,” he sasses, just to see the red flare high in his cheeks again. “I know you can do better. Thought you were gonna show me how much you hate me, c’mon.”

He gets another frustrated glare, David’s mouth quirked down at the corners. Joe isn’t sure what to make of it, in all honesty. It isn’t an expression he likes seeing, not even on the face of someone he...dislikes. No, tolerates.

No.

He shoves those thoughts to the back of his head and wrenches one hand free of David’s grip, reaching down to work his cock in the hopes it will get that strange look off his face. His hand is swatted away and David pins it again, grip carefully light. He adds another finger, twisting them before rubbing all three in a way that has Joe’s mouth falling open.

“I don’t hate you,” David grits out, and Joe doesn’t think he’s ever seen him this angry in a long time. He leans forward until their faces are a breath apart, his lips tantalizingly pink. “When will you get that, you fucking insolent jackass?”

Joe can’t look away from his mouth as it forms the words. He’s drunk on arousal and hypnotized by everything David is: his touch, his words, his clever fingers and the way he and Joe smell like the
same soap. “Not anytime soon. Maybe I need another lesson.”

David pushes his fingers forward maddeningly slowly and huffs out a flat laugh, not an ounce of humor showing on his face. Joe can feel the air of it hit his face. “You are incorrigible, you know that?”

And that’s really enough—enough of David and his smug bullshit, enough teasing, enough casual use of SAT words in bed. He hooks an ankle around David’s back and uses all his strength to roll him. He’s lucky he caught David by surprise. It’s probably the main reason why he is able to pull it off, ending straddling David’s waist neatly while David looks at him in shock. “You’re taking too long,” he replies, grabbing a condom from the nightstand and opening it before reaching back to roll it onto David’s cock.

“You’re just impatient,” David gripes, but he’s reaching up to hold Joe’s hips as he says it. Joe just rolls his eyes before sitting down on him in one long motion.

It’s been a week or so since he’s done this. He’s a little out of practice, but he can’t help but relish in the stretch of it, David’s gasp beneath him, the warmth of his hands. He waits a minute as his body adjusts before rolling his hips experimentally, building up to a pace that has David’s eyes going hazy. He’s looking up at him with something soft and worshipful, something that has those pretty lips dropping open as his eyelids droop, and it’s suddenly too much. Joe can’t look at him when there’s something honest shining through.

Not when this is still supposed to be mindless.

He can barely keep hold of the thought, though—David feels perfect inside of him, the cradle of his hands as protective as it is possessive. He chases it desperately, the reason that they’re here doing this. “Weren’t you supposed to be telling me what a jackass I am or something?” he says, but it comes out needy.

David reaches up and hooks a hand around his neck, drags him down until their foreheads are nearly touching. “You—” he gets out, squeezing his eyes shut for a minute as Joe starts to move faster. He’s getting close. Joe can see it in his mouth, in his eyes and the lines of his face. “Joe,” David breathes, the air hitting Joe’s own lips as he says it. David reaches down to get a hand around him, and it’s perfect pressure and perfect rhythm and perfect everything, exactly the way Joe likes it. “Joe,” David says again, honest and clear and almost soft, and Joe is spilling over his chest all at once. David tugs him down so that Joe’s head is buried in his shoulder and then he’s coming too, groaning into Joe’s hair as his hips twitch upward a few last times.

Joe breathes the familiar scent of him for a few moments, and then he gathers his energy to roll off and fall back into the blankets. David slides off the bed and disappears into the bathroom.

“What were we arguing about again?” Joe calls.

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. It was—” It hits him suddenly and he gropes for his laptop, somehow unscathed near the foot of the bed. “Right, I forgot. That thing about the scene in the bar. You know what, I think I’ll add it in after all.”

David comes back out of the bathroom, washcloth in hand and brows raised incredulously. “You’re serious?”

“Yep. You had a point.”
He tosses the washcloth onto Joe’s chest. Joe yelps at the cold. “You are unbelievable. Just like that you change your mind?”

“Yeah, sure. Why the fuck not? I could use one more paragraph.”

David sighs. “Unbelievable,” he mutters. “Hey, are you hungry?”

Sex always makes him hungry. David should know this by now. “I could eat. We should get out of this room, anyway. It’s been all day now.”

David nods. “Alright, let me know when you’re done with that. I know a great bar.”

They end up in a very familiar alleyway. Joe is standing in it this time, and that throws him off slightly—last time he was here he was in his cab, Cobb laughing at him through the glass as he tried his best to prevent a thoroughly drunk Snafu from committing acts of public indecency in the backseat.

What a fucking weekend it’s been.

It’s different now though, standing here midway down the alley. It’s a place he’d never think to look for a bar, yet here it is between a few back doors and a bin or two. Despite its location the storefront is remarkably clean. The alley is paved with cobblestones, carefully cleared of snow. There are planters on either side of the door and somehow the plants within are still green, struggling to bloom in the chill. And the storefront itself is dilapidated in a charming sort of way, the carnival glass windows glittering warmly. CURRAHEE is emblazoned above the door in worn bronze, the top of each letter bearing a neat pile of snow. “Come on,” David says. “You’re gonna like this place.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. Everyone does.”

It’s warm inside, cozy in a homey sort of way. Chatter and laughter swells and ebbs, and despite the crowd they’re able to find two seats at the bar. Joe takes a moment to look around. The space is a long winding thing, a doorway across from them leading into another room where he can see a dart board and a few tables.

“Hey, Web!” someone shouts, and Joe turns to see Hoobler coming toward them. His eyebrows rise when he sees Joe, and Joe gives him a little wave. “Hey, man! Long time no see!”

“Been busy,” he says. The truth is he and Hoobler have never exactly been close—he’s never wanted to complicate things further by befriending his fuckbuddy’s roommate, honestly—but hell if he’s going to say it. Hoobler has always been nice enough. “How have you been? I heard you’ve been travelling.”

“Oh, just visiting family. It’s been good, especially not having to look at this guy for a few days.”

He shoulders David gently, and David laughs at him. “Why am I friends with you again?”

“You literally live with me. You can’t escape it.”


Hoobler grins. “That’d be because I came straight here. I got a text from Compton that there are
some new guys in here betting actual money at darts like a bunch of idiots. Had to see it myself.”

“Really?”

“Yep! And whaddya know? They’re still here. I’ve been setting them up for the big take all night.”

“Big take?” Joe asks.

“Yeah, driving up the stakes every time. I’ve won a few rounds just to keep them on their toes. Not like I had to try very hard. I swear it’s like they’ve never been cheated at darts before. You wanna help for old times’ sake, Web? I think it’ll be over in a round or two, and you gotta help me reestablish our reputation around here.”

David turns to Joe, a question in his eyes, but Joe speaks before he can voice it. “Go. I’ll get us some drinks. You can buy the next round when you win.”

“You sure?”

“I’m sure. Go for it.”

David smiles slowly and stands. “I’ll be right back, then.”

Joe smiles softly after him. He turns back toward the bar, making to flag down the shark-eyed bartender. The area around him clears quickly as a crowd is drawn to the dart board, and one man remains sitting a ways down from him. He has the slouch of a man fifty years his senior, a sneer of only the most seasoned criminal, and the soft cheeks of a nineteen-year-old. And he’s glaring at Joe distrustingly.

“You Joe Liebgott?”

Joe sighs. This shit is getting old real quick. “Who’s asking?”

The guy ignores him. “Martin said you beat up our boy.”

“Who the fuck is your boy?” Joe snaps. The kid is still glaring at him with extreme prejudice. “I don’t know what the fuck any of you people are talking about. I didn’t get into any fight.”

“That’s not what Martin said. He said you got him pretty good.”


This seems to catch the kid off-guard. For the first time he loses his sneer, eyes widening as he blinks. “Uh. I’m actually not sure.”

A man steps out from the curtained doorway behind the bar, dish towel thrown over his shoulder. He takes one look at the kid and snorts a laugh.

“Where is your ID?”

The kid shrugs silently.

“Go find Johnny, Garcia. You know you’re not allowed to be in here.”

Garcia grumbles as he slides off his stool and exits the bar entirely, and the man stops in front of Joe. He takes out two shot glasses, plunks them down on the bar and fills them neatly with whiskey. Before Joe can take one the man picks up both, chases one with the other, and then takes out two
new ones and fills those, too.

“You here with Web?”

“Yeah,” Joe says warily. “Who are you?”

“I’m Nix. Friends call me Lew.” The specification implies Joe is decidedly not a friend, despite the man’s pleasant demeanor. “I own the place.”

“Oh. Well, good on ya. It’s a nice bar.”

“Thanks. Family inheritance.” He gestures at Joe to take a glass and they drink in unison. “What’s your name?”

“It’s Joe. Joe Liebgott.” Joe eyes him warily. This is maybe the strangest encounter at a bar he’s ever had, and that’s saying something.

“Joe,” he says slowly, like he’s trying to get a feel of it. “Right. Joe. I wanna talk to you about our boy over there.”

Joe follows his gaze to where David is flinging a dart at the board with no finesse whatsoever. It nearly misses the mark entirely, only barely making it into the edge of the board. His competitors jeer. “He’s shooting leftie.”

“Yeah, it’s a trick he picked up from one of our friends. He’s smart. You think he’s smart?”

“Very smart.” It’s true. He’s shared class with him for over two years now. Smart is an understatement.

“Very smart. Too smart to be dating a total asshole, so I’ll keep this short. You break him, that guy —” Nix gestures down the bar to where the bartender is standing, “—will break you. Hear that, Ron?”

The bartender looks up from the martini glass he’s diligently drying. His eyes are completely blank. It’s jarring. If the eyes are the windows to the soul, then this guy clearly doesn’t have a soul to speak of. “No. Was it something about how I’m gonna have to fight more people for you?”

“Yep.”

“Okay.”

Joe looks between the two of them before cutting in. “Look, I get it, alright? David’s a great guy. We aren’t dating, though. You don’t have to worry about anything like that from me.”

Nix watches him for a minute, black eyes inscrutable. “Right,” he says slowly. Joe fights the urge to squirm under his stare. “Just something to keep in mind, then.”

The curtain behind the bar flutters a second time and a man pushes through it, studying a clipboard. He brushes his hand down Nix’s arm without looking up. “Who are you harassing, Lew?”

“Webster brought Joe in,” Nix says, putting special weight on Joe’s name.

If it means something to the man he doesn’t let it show, humming noncommittedly. “You break David, Ron breaks you,” he says, still studying his papers.

“Don’t worry about it,” Joe says. “We aren’t even dating.”
The guy’s eyes snap up to meet Joe’s, gaze carefully guarded. “Right.”

“One other thing,” Nix adds, almost as an afterthought. “Did you ever get your phone charged?”

What the fuck. “No. How do you…”

“A couple of your friends work here. You knew that, right?” Joe shakes his head, and Nix laughs. “Okay. Well, they’re looking for you. They’ve been looking for you all day, actually. Might want to get on that.”

“All day?”

“Yep. Since this morning, I’m pretty sure.”

Shit. He digs around for his wallet. “How much do I—”

“Keep it. First one’s always on the house.”

Joe rushes a thank you even as he’s sliding off his stool, moving through the bar just as a cheer resounds through the other room. David and Hoobler are celebrating their win as Joe gets there, and he wraps an arm around David’s neck so he can talk into his ear above the din.

“I’ve gotta go, alright? Apparently my roommates are freaking out or something.”

“What?” David pulls back, surprise written all over his face. “Alright. You sure?”

Joe nods. He starts moving toward the door, and David’s arm slides off his shoulder as the distance between them grows. “I’ve been away too long. Should have called them. I’ll see you around, alright?”

David doesn’t respond before Joe is out of earshot, so he just exits the bar. The snow has gotten icy underneath his feet, brittle and hard. He keeps on the shoveled path carefully as he makes his way to the street. He tries to turn his phone on again to no avail. It is very much dead and there’s nothing he can do about it. He pulls out his pack of cigarettes instead, tugging one out and digging around for his lighter as he turns his feet toward the direction of home.

He doesn’t make it more than ten steps before a familiar yellow car is pulling up alongside him, the sign on the roof shining warmly. The sound of laughter hits him before the window is even rolled down and when the glass lowers he is met with Joe Toye’s laughing face.

“Get in, Liebgott. I’ve been getting calls from your roomies all day and boy, are you in trouble.”

Joe gets in the car, grateful for the roaring heat. He slams the door and Toye is speeding off down the streets, easily twenty miles over the speed limit.

“I’m glad you were there when you were,” Joe says, eyeing Toye’s death grip on the wheel. “I haven’t seen you in a while, Toye.”

“Yeah, well, I been busy. Between class, trying to find a second job, and this bullshit—” he gestures to the street devoid of potential cab-takers, “—I hardly have time for anything else.”

“Second job?”

He nods solemnly. “It’s only a matter of time before they start laying people off.”

“You’re the last one they’d fire,” Joe argues. Toye’s already shaking his head, but he cuts in. “No,
“Yeah, well. I hope none of us are going. That’s all I’ll say.” He drives silently for a minute, whipping the car through residential streets toward Joe’s apartment. “This fuckin’ company and this idiot government. Can’t give us a damn break. Don’t get me started on tuition.”

“Anything else you’d like to complain about?” Joe asks warily. “Got any lovers to scorn?”

“Lovers? No. Of course not. Maybe if I had one I’d be scorning everything else a lot less.”

“You okay, man?”

They come to a halt outside Joe’s building, and Toye looks at him for the first time. His eyes look tired, but he smiles reassuringly through it. “I’m alright.”

“Look, whatever happens we got each other’s backs. Cabbie code of honor. Right?”

Toye nods slowly. “Don’t you forget it. Now get out of my cab.” He gestures at the street, and for the first time Joe notices the squad cars outside of his building. “I think you got some feathers to smooth.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading. I'll hopefully be updating more regularly pretty soon as my workload is finally getting lighter. School is rough, I'm telling you.
Today in Philadelphia: snow is on the ground, winter is in the air, everyone loves a coffee date, and George might just know who Joe punched in the face.

Shockingly, I now have an estimated number of chapters. I know. I'm surprised, too. Looks like there's gonna be seven more full-day chapters with two more interludes thrown in, so buckle up! Back from our interlude and into even more drama! I had a ton of writer’s block this week and so this chapter took ages to write, but here it is.


"You're writing a book about it? Do you think there will be a movie adaptation? Because if there's a movie adaptation I wanna be played by Channing Tatum, for the record. What the fuck are you asking me about it for, anyway? I was barely even there. I'll tell my side, sure, but in all honesty? If you make this into a movie and you base it off of my statement, it's gonna be a lot more like a romcom than a documentary about the strength and unity of gay millennials everywhere, or whatever. Just another coffee shop romcom starring Channing Tatum. Consider yourself warned."

He wakes up to his alarm, groans, rolls over to snooze it and then promptly falls asleep for another ten minutes.

When he finally makes it out of bed it’s to sun shining through his room, the sky outside blue and cloudless. The light bounces off the snow almost blindingly, but it’s a relief after the long weeks of cloud cover and the flurries of snow they’ve been having all weekend.

He rolls out of bed and gets dressed, still half asleep as he walks down the hall to the bathroom. He and Frank’s apartment is a sprawling thing, two floors of one of the converted industrial buildings that so many students call home. With the generous floor plan had come painfully high rent, but they’d fortunately found someone who was willing to move into the upper floor and third bedroom. Alex Penkala claimed the space and brought his two boyfriends with him, filling the third room and cutting the rent into five rather than three. It’s a good deal for everyone: the three of them have a space to themselves, Frank and George can afford a space close to both school and the café, and none of them have to live in a building owned by Norman Dike.

He shuffles through the door and digs through the various bottles on the counter, looking for something that will manage to style the mess of fluff that is his hair into something presentable. He
almost drops the bottle he’s holding when Alex pounds suddenly down the stairs, startling him.

“Hey, man.” Alex calls, wolf-whistling. “Looking good. Who are you preening for?”

“Who says I’m preening for anyone? I don’t need a reason to look good.”

Alex tisks, appearing behind him in the mirror. “Does that mean your guy is still a no-show?”

George just shrugs. “I’m the one who works there, not him. If he doesn’t want to come to Easy he
doesn’t have to.”

Alex doesn’t look convinced, but he drops the subject. George can’t help but be grateful; all anyone
wants to hear about these days is the sorry state of his love life, and it only leaves him with a bitter
taste in his mouth. His coffee shop crush hasn’t shown up in about a week now; that’s a fact, and he
wishes everyone else would just take that information for what it is and stop asking questions.

“Frank gone yet?” Alex asks, bringing George out of his thoughts.

“Yeah, he’s opening today,” George replies, going back to work on a look that’s surprisingly stylish
for someone who’s half asleep and undercaffeinated. “He’ll be back at noon. Did you need
anything?”

“Just his notes for humanities. This book is making no sense,” he waves a battered copy of *Catch 22*
through the air. “I’m not getting any of it.”

“Would it help if you actually read it?” George asks.

“Ha ha. Shut up.” He moves toward the kitchen, and George gives the lazy sweep of his hair one last
appraising look before deeming it good enough and following Alex. “Anyway, you’re up early. I
thought you don’t have to go in until late on Tuesdays?”

“I switched with O’Keefe,” George answers. When Alex holds up the coffee pot in question he
shakes his head. “No, thanks. I’ll get some when I go in. Yeah, kid can never seem to make it to a
morning shift. He always says he’s busy. I think he’s just scared of Frank, to be honest.”

“Hey, Perco can be a scary guy,” Alex reasons. “All four feet of him.”

“I’ll let him know you said that,” George replies, grabbing his backpack and heading to the door.

“You’re a cruel man, George Luz,” Alex calls. George laughs as he shuts the apartment door behind
himself.

It’s a short walk to the café, and five minutes later the bell above the door is tinkling cheerfully as he
pushes through. It’s ten o’clock and the pre-class rush is still going strong; Frank gives him a long-
suffering look from behind the counter as he rings another person up.

“Swap with me,” he says in an undertone as George passes. “If one more person asks me why we
don’t have holiday-themed cups I ain’t gonna be held responsible for what happens next.”

George throws his bag carelessly behind the curtain to the breakroom, grabbing an apron and tying it
behind his back with practiced ease. “Why do I always gotta swap with you? I can take bar.”

“I’m faster. And you’re better with,” he gestures vaguely at the iPad on the counter. “That thing,
whatever that is. I hate that thing. Please run that thing so I don’t have to.”
“Alright, Jesus,” George whines, but he knows Frank’s right. He’s wrestled with the espresso machine enough times to hold a deep-seated resentment for it, anyway. He turns back to the line of people stretched toward the door. “I can help who’s next.”

With both of them working together they manage to get through the line in under five minutes, the shop slowly quieting again as people leave for class. It’s almost back to its studious lull as the last person steps forward, and George snorts when he sees who it is.

“Joseph Liebgott,” George greets. “Nice to be blessed with your presence this morning. Wouldn’t believe what the rumor mill’s been saying about you.”

“I think I would, actually. They saying I’m missing in action?”

“Right on the money. Well, mostly. Technically they’re saying you’ve been kidnapped and had your kidneys sold on the black market.” George and Frank had both gotten that call multiple times yesterday. Their friends had overactive imaginations, sure, but neither of them could blame Joe’s roommates for worrying.

Joe groans. “That’s Babe’s fault. I was at a friend’s.”

Ah yes, the famed David Webster. “A friend’s. Right. That’s who that is.”

“Problem?”

“Oh, no. Of course not.”

The truth is there isn’t any love lost between Joe’s friends and Joe’s fuckbuddy on the best of days. He isn’t a bad guy, not from what George has seen of him—and George goes to Currahee every now and then, so he’s seen a good deal. It’s more that Joe dug his own grave when it came to his fuckbuddy. When they first met Joe talked so much shit about the guy that the rest of them couldn’t help but hate him, too. When Joe actively started hanging out with the guy that dislike never really went away, especially when Joe has a habit of sneaking around and never introducing anyone properly.

Disappearing only added insult to injury. It’s one thing if Joe wants to spend all his time with someone he actively despises. It’s quite another to give his roommates grey hairs over it when they have enough to worry about as it is.

They fall into an uncomfortable silence. Frank slides a latte to a girl waiting by the bar before heading toward the till. He looks Joe dead in the eye, giving voice to all George’s thoughts. “That’s a shitty thing to do, disappearing like that. You probably know that already, Joe, but you weren’t the one who had to deal with everybody while they freaked out about it. And I’m not just talking about Chuck and Babe. They must’ve called half the city trying to find out where you went.”

Joe nods. “Yeah, I know. I lost track of time and the day just flew by. You know how it is sometimes when...I don’t know, when you’re spending time with someone.”

George is ready to argue with that—fuckbuddies his ass, that’s the worst excuse he’s ever heard—but Frank nods solemnly. “You’re a lover, deep down,” he says. Joe tries to protest but he gets cut off. “No, no, you only think you’re a fighter. You put up a good front, too. At the end of the day you do all that shit for love though, and don’t even try to argue over it ‘cause you know it’s true. Ain’t a speck of bloodlust in your veins.”

“Who said anything about love? You’re damn weird, Perco. You know that? One second you’re all dumb and goofy and the next you’re spouting all this spiritual kind of stuff.”
“It’s an Italian thing. We know all about romance and shit.”

“Speaking of,” Joe says, pouncing on the segue. “George, any word from that crush of yours?”

“Still nothing,” George grumbles. “The guy’s disappeared, I’m telling you. He’s avoiding me.”

“Hey, don’t say that.”

“No, no, I know he is. He used to come in every night.”

Joe tisks. “You deserve better.”

“Yeah, yeah,” George says, waving him off. He’s heard that line before. “What if this is it for me though, you know? What if my whole life is gonna be spent behind this counter? It’s a good life but it’s a lonely one.”

“Hey!” Frank whines. “What the fuck am I, huh? A cockroach?”

“You know what I mean, Frankie.”

“All I know is you aren’t living up to your potential here. Baristas are babe magnets, you know? We’re practically the most eligible bachelors on campus. If that guy doesn’t have the time for you then fuck ‘im.”

“I thought we went through this already. I was trying to fuck him. It didn’t work.”

Frank snickers.

“Anyway,” George goes on, “what the hell, right? It’s not worth dwelling on. If he comes back he comes back, and if not then life goes on.”

There’s a jingle at the door as several customers file through, and Joe seems to realize he came here for something other than gossip. “Sorry, almost forgot why I’m here. Any chance you guys could help me get my roomies to like me again?”

“You’ve come to the right place,” George says with a sagely tilt of his head. “Fortunately your roommates are all regulars here.”

“Really?” Joe asks. “Even the new ones?”

“Especially the new ones.”

“Yeah?” Joe frowns. “I didn’t know.”

“Oh, they come in practically every morning before they go to work,” Frank pipes up. “First impressions can be tough. They’re very polite.”

“Huh. What do they order?”

“Small drinks. Extra shots, lots of sugar,” Frank rattles off. He’s already preparing the drinks. “Caramel, on bad days. I’ll put caramel in there. You’re gonna need it.”

“How do you figure?”

“Comfort drink,” George chimes in. “Everybody’s got one. You got your everyday drink, and you got your comfort drink.”
Joe stares. “You’re scary,” he says finally.

George shrugs, smiling. “ Comes with the job. Who else are you buying for?”

“Babe, Gene and Chuck.”

“Babe I know,” George says, tapping away at the till. “Babe’s your classic frappuccino man. He has realized adulthood means you can drink coffee in the form of ice cream and he’s taking advantage of that. Gene is all about practicality, which means—”

“—quad latte, dry,” Frank finishes. “Chuck, though. Chuck can be tricky. He likes to switch it up based on the day.”

“Doesn’t everyone?” Joe asks, perplexed.

Frank shakes his head as he pours a stream of milk. “Like George said. Comfort drinks. Usually people have two or three options they rotate between, but Chuck has literally no pattern. How is he?”

“Well, he’s pissed off.”

“With good reason,” George says, raising his eyebrows.

“If he’s pissed...” Frank drizzles some syrup, trapped in an internal debate. “Usually he’ll go for whipped cream when he’s happy, and extra whipped cream when he’s upset. Probably a white mocha. That’s about as close to a pattern as he has. Which leaves you.”

“Me,” Joe says.

“You switch around, too. What do you want?”

Joe thinks for a minute. “Wet cappuccino, I suppose.”

Frank tisks. “You took a double shift today, then? Gotta stop doing that. It’s bad for the mind.”

“What the fuck.”

George snorts. He and Frank’s magic has no bounds. “Will that be all?”

“No,” Joe says, still eyeing Frank suspiciously. “Chuck is mad at me.”

“Ah. You need all the blueberry scones we have. We can make that happen.”

They wave Joe goodbye a few minutes later, juggling two cup caddies and a huge bag of baked goods. “It sucks about your boy,” Frank says as he wipes down the espresso machine. “Really, it does. I know you guys had something.”

George looks up from his sweeping skeptically. “Did we?”

Frank shrugs. “Nothing else makes sense. Why would he keep coming in for coffee that late at night? He wasn’t here to study or anything. It doesn’t add up to anything else.”

It doesn’t, not really. George knows that much for himself. The shop gets eerily quiet after midnight, the near-permanent scattering of students silent as the grave sitting in front of their laptops or buried in their books. Even the familiar faces don’t say a word, too wrapped up in their own worlds of
stress. George doesn’t mind the late shift—was almost getting used to it last year, propping his engineering textbook up behind the till and skimming through it as he waited for someone to run out of coffee and order a new drink.

This semester everything had changed. This year a new patron had started coming in after his own late shift had ended, sitting at the bar and nursing a single black coffee during the hour it took George to close up shop. Sometimes they chatted, sometimes they sat in comfortable silence and pored over notes on their own respective sides of the counter, George trying not to be too obvious as he stole glances at the guy’s wide shoulders or the dark sweep of his eyelashes. He became a fixture of the café, a near-permanent shadow at the bar, and George had gotten used to his presence.

Night shifts weren’t really the same now that the guy’s disappeared.

“Shit happens, Frank,” he says finally, trying and failing to keep the bitterness out of his voice. “He’s just a customer, in the end. What the fuck does it matter?”

“He’s just a customer that came in every single late-night shift that you worked for the last three months,” Frank counters. “I mean, he asked you your schedule. He never came in when I was working, you know that?”

“Maybe he just likes the coffee.”

“Yeah. Because there’s nowhere else in Philadelphia where a guy can get a single black coffee after midnight, let alone sit at a table for an hour and a half to drink the thing. This is the only place a guy can do that. And lord knows you pour drip coffee better than anyone in town.”

“Jesus, Frank, give it a rest,” George snaps finally. “I don’t know why the fuck he was in here, and I don’t know why the fuck he stopped coming. Can you let it go?”

Frank shuts up, glaring at him sullenly as he wipes down the counter.

The silence lingers for a long few minutes before George breaks. “Alright, sorry. Can we just—”

“—Yeah, forget about it. We’ll let it rest.” Frank unties his apron, hanging it on the back of the door. “Look, I’m already in overtime. I’m gonna head home and try to get something done this afternoon, alright?”

“Yeah, alright,” George says. “Hey, Alex was looking for you. He said he wanted your reading notes or something.”

“For Humanities?” George nods and Frank swears under his breath. “Guess that’s my schedule for the day, then. I don’t got any reading notes for Humanities. I haven’t even done the reading.”

“Jesus. Good luck.”

“Yeah. I’ll need it.”

The bell tinkles as Frank leaves, and George watches him walk past the window toward their building and disappear from sight. He sighs and sets about wiping nonexistent smears off the counter for the fourth time in ten minutes, eyeing the scattered patrons of the café. They’ve all got their noses buried in books, absorbed in their work. There’s what looks like a very awkward tinder date going on near the window, and a girl at the bar is very obviously eavesdropping on their uncomfortable small talk and wincing silently to herself.

George sighs. He finishes sweeping and rounds the counter again as the bell tinkles. “Hi, how are
“Ça c’est bon,” a voice replies sweetly, and George grins as he finally turns to see who it is.

“You’re busy, huh?” he teases, holding a hand out to Anna. “I’m George. Local coffee dealer.”

Anna laughs, pumping his hand jovially. “Anna. It’s good to meet you. I’ve heard a lot.”

“Something with chocolate,” Anna says immediately, turning to Renee to murmur something in French. “Yes, lots of chocolate, I think. Mochas?”

“Two,” Renee nods, already holding out a few bills. When Anna tries to protest Renee waves her off. “Non, non, I pay so I can use my punch card.” She pulls the card out, gesturing at the four holes already lined across the bottom. “See? I am being greedy.”

Anna eyes her in mock suspicion, not quite able to hide her smile. “Renee is the greediest person I know,” she says to George. “This is just how she operates. It’s terribly rude.”

“Oh, I know,” George replies, laughing as he moves down the bar to make their drinks. “Just terrible.”

“George, what’s new with you?” Renee asks. “We have not seen each other in a while now.”

“Me? Nothing at all.” To be honest he doesn’t want to have yet another conversation today about his failing love life and dull job. “Your life is much more exciting. What’s this drama with Ralph you mentioned?”


“Oh, right. Yeah, I forgot he moved in with you guys when Gene left. Is everything okay? Are those two not getting along?”

“They’re getting along,” Anna says, grinning. “They’re getting along very well. Ralph is…how do you say…”

“Pining,” Renee finishes for her. “He is taken by him.”

“Shit,” George says, laughing in spite of himself. “Those two?”

“Mais oui. They stay inside all day flirting. Neither of them is brave enough to talk to each other about it.”

“God,” George says. He tops off their drinks with whipped cream. “I hope they figure it out soon, in any event. Stuff like that is ridiculous. If it’s that obvious to everyone why can’t they just sit down and fix it?”
“That would be too easy,” Anna responds. “They must run a few more circles around each other first.”

“My advice,” George says, sliding their drinks across the counter. “Get them really drunk and just let them work it out by themselves. Nothing like a little liquid courage, right?”

Renee nods, smiling slowly. “Yes. Liquid courage. Thank you, Georgie. I think that may work.”

“You’re very welcome.”

The two of them claim a table in the corner and the café settles back into its usual lull. Satisfied by the peace, George goes into the breakroom to retrieve another cup of coffee before heading to the far end of the bar where a long wooden table is set up. He sets about replenishing their scone stock, pulling out the premade dough and sectioning it to be rolled into disks. They get most of their dough from Lipton, who produces it en masse for everyone in the neighborhood. George used to be confused as to why they only ever got it raw, but he gets it now. There are a good amount of café and restaurant owners who understand the power of the smell of fresh baked goods in their store, and baking things onsite ensures that the smell will linger. Rolling out dough is a simple enough task, anyway. It helps George keep his mind off things.

He cuts the disks into neat wedges and lines them up on trays. He’s just finished putting them in the oven when the bell above the door tinkles. “Be with you in a moment,” he calls, washing off the dough remains before grabbing a towel and making his way to the till.

“Sorry, what can I…”

“It’s alright—no, nothing. I just came to apologize.”

George stares at the man across the counter. He has a nasty black eye, the skin on his brow marred with a tiny gash where it must have split open. It’s all a sickly green-grey color, the trademark shade of a week-old bruise.

“Look, I’m still trying to put together the pieces, but I know I did something that was probably pretty bad,” the guy continues, shifting uncomfortably.

Good God.

“And I know it’s no excuse, but I’d just come out of a bad break up and things got a little out of hand,” he’s going on.

George almost feels sorry for the guy. “You look familiar. Where do I know you from?” he prompts, if only to direct his stammering.

“Sorry. Uh, My name’s Roy Cobb.” He shifts uncomfortably again. “I was in here a few nights ago and apparently I was pretty messed up.”

Memories of the week before flood back: quiet nights with his favorite patron, cleaning up the space behind the counter and getting ready to turn in when the man standing across from him now had stumbled in, drunk and obscene. “Yeah,” he says slowly. “Yeah, I thought I recognized you. Hard to tell under all the bruising, there. You were in what, five days ago?”

Cobb winces. “Yeah, around five days. I would’ve come sooner if I’d known I’d done it, but I’m still trying to put together all the pieces. It’s really a mess.”

“Hey, we’ve all blacked at some point. That’s college, right?” He turns on the espresso machine and
starts pouring ingredients into a cup; George may not fully forgive the guy, but he can at least give him a free latte for the effort. “So did you get the shiner that night too, or have you been busy since then?”

“No. God, no. I got it the same night. I’ve been staying away from alcohol since then.”

“What did you do that was bad enough for someone to hit you? You were irritating in here, but I wasn’t about to go to blows over it.”

Cobb lets out a breath. “Jeez, there goes my last hope. I’d thought you’d done it. Now I’m back at square one.”

“Jesus. You don’t remember a thing?” He pours milk into the cup neatly as Cobb shakes his head. “Well, it wasn’t me. I kicked you out of here, but I’m not about to go punching people in the face just for having bad manners in a coffee shop. If we did that we probably wouldn’t get much business in here.”

“Damn,” Cobb breathes. “I guess that’s one mystery I’ll never solve, then.”

“I wouldn’t go so far as to say that,” George tells him. He thinks it over for a beat, tossing around whether he should even help this guy. He doesn’t owe him shit, but it still doesn’t hurt to pass information down the line. He looks up at Cobb finally as he speaks. “We hear things in here, you know? Lot of gossip. There’s a rumor going around, and I can’t say for sure if it’s true or not. But there’s a rumor going around that someone else got into a fight that same day.”

“Really?” Cobb asks, tone eager and sharp. “Who?”

The eavesdropping girl sitting at the bar looks up sharply from her book. “Joe, right? Sorry, I overheard.”

“Joe?” Cobb asks her.

“Yeah. Joe the cabbie. The really…” she takes a deep breath. “Really, really dreamy cabbie. I’d ride that all night long. The cab,” she clarifies quickly.

Cobb frowns. “Joe Liebgott? Is that who you mean?”

“Mhmm. I think that’s his name.”

“That little shit,” Cobb mutters to himself. “I haven’t seen him since that night, you know? I thought he was just busy, but I bet he’s been hiding out at Webster’s to avoid me.”

George tears his eyes away from where he’s been glaring pointedly at the girl. The spread of false information never leads to anything good. “It might not have been him,” he says. “I talked to him the other day. He said he doesn’t know shit about any of it.”

“I hope so,” Cobb says. “He’s a good buddy of mine. I hope he didn’t punch me.”

“Hey, here’s to hoping,” George says, sliding him his latte. “On the house. I get a lot of shit at this job, but not many people come in and actually apologize for it the next day. So thanks for that.”

“Thanks, man,” Cobb says, sounding genuinely touched. “I’m sorry again.”

“Yeah, yeah. Just lay off the hard stuff, alright? Those bartenders at Currahee aren’t messing around.”
“Don’t I know it,” Cobb says wryly, turning toward the door. He’s about to open it when he turns around again. “Hey, what did I say to you? How bad was it?”

“Honestly?” George thinks back to that night. “Some pretty prehistoric pickup lines. I was more embarrassed for you than anything.”

Cobb winces. “That bad?”

“Oh yeah. You called me sugar maybe four times. I told you to go home and sleep it off and you were…unhappy that I wouldn’t come with you.”

“Shit. Sorry.”

George waves him off. “We’ve had worse in here. Like I said, just don’t give us a repeat performance and we’ll be good.”

“Right. Yeah, sorry again.”

He pushes through the door finally, almost running into Chuck Grant as he comes in. A man George doesn’t know follows at his heels, watching Cobb go in surprise.

“Dammit, not you,” George gripes. “I just finished replacing all the scones you ate this morning.”

“Jeez, Luz,” Chuck says, gesturing behind him in the direction Cobb left. “What did you do to him?”

“I didn’t do anything,” George replies. “He came to apologize. He was in here with some seriously lame pickup lines a few nights ago, and he felt the need to repent for his drunken fuck-ups.”

“Repent? Roy Cobb?” Chuck snorts. “I find that hard to believe. Were you the one that hit him?”

“Not me, no. Actually, you may want to ask Joe about that.”

“Joe didn’t do it,” Chuck says immediately.

Luz raises his eyebrows. “How sure are you?”

“I’m sure. He would’ve told me.” Luz keeps staring at him incredulously, and Chuck rolls his eyes. “Yeah, he’s still on my shit list for yesterday. But he would’ve told me if he’d punched someone in the face, especially if it was Cobb. You know I hate that guy.”

“Hey, he isn’t so bad,” the man next to Chuck says, brown eyes wide. Chuck raises an eyebrow at him and he shrugs. “What? He’s not. He comes into Currahee pretty regularly. He’s a sloppy drunk, but he’s alright when he’s sober.”

“Currahee? Thought I recognized you,” George says, suddenly remembering where he’d seen the guy before. “You work there, don’t you?”

“Delivery guy, yeah. Floyd Talbert. Friends call me Tab.”

“Tab, yeah. I go in there every once in a while, but I’ve never seen Cobb there.”

“He isn’t really a regular,” Tab explains. “He kind of got adopted into Bull and Johnny’s little…gang thing they have going on.”

“Gang?” The guy who’d come in here apologizing about his seventy-year-old pickup lines was no criminal.
“Not really a gang, I guess. They’re more like a very overprotective friend group. We never bothered to hire a bouncer because usually one of those guys is hanging around, and no one wants to mess with them. Johnny took a liking to Cobb. They were up in arms about it the other night. Apparently some guy named Joe punched Cobb in the face.”

“Joe Liebgott?” George asks. Chuck looks at him flatly.

“That’s him, yeah,” Tab says, oblivious to Chuck’s irritation. “He came into the bar the other night. It’s a good thing Webster was with him, too, or else he would’ve been in trouble with Johnny’s boys.”

“Joe said he didn’t do it, though,” Chuck says impatiently. “That’s just a rumor.”

Tab just shrugs. “I’m just passing on what I saw. Tony was ready to hit him until Nix stepped in. I was surprised he even defended him. Nix and Winters aren’t Joe’s biggest fans right now, either.”


“They’re just worried he’s gonna screw David over,” Tab says, and Chuck gives him another surprised look. “What? You didn’t think someone’s looking out for David, too? Everybody’s worried about the two of them because they can’t stop fighting, but it takes two to tango. Plus Joe didn’t exactly make the best impression. Your roommates were worrying about him yesterday, and anyone who makes their lives harder is someone Winters automatically distrusts.”

“He fucked up yesterday for sure,” Chuck relents, “but that doesn’t mean he punched anyone last week. He would’ve told us about it.”

“Guess it’s worth asking him again, anyway.” George says. “It could be we never figure it out, though. It’s his word against whatever rumor is going around, you know?”

“Yeah, I know,” Chuck says. “It barely even matters, in a way. Whatever happened, it’s between Joe and Cobb.”

“If Johnny and Bull can keep their boys in check,” Tab says darkly.

“All we can do is hope, I suppose,” George says. The bell above the door tinkles and O’Keefe steps through in his uniform, a bright smile on his face and his bag slung over his shoulder. George nods to him as he comes around the counter. “Sorry, could I get anything started for you guys?”

“Oh yeah, jeez. I almost forgot why we’re here,” Chuck says, shaking his head. “Could I just do my usual? Tab, would you split a scone with me?”

“Yeah, for sure. Put his on my card,” Tab says to George. “I’ll take a…medium caramel latte, I think.” Chuck mutters something to him, and he shakes his head. “No, I owe you after the—no, I do, I never payed you back.”

“You payed me back yesterday.”

“Well, consider it a gift, then,” Tab says playfully.

They take a seat by the window as O’Keefe gets to work on their drinks, and George pulls a scone out of the oven before plating one and sliding up next to O’Keefe at the bar. “Hey, Paddy, what do you think? Dating? Not dating?”

O’Keefe looks up from the espresso machine, smiling softly. “Well, I don’t know, George. I don’t
They both peek over the espresso machine to where the two are sitting. They’re leaning across the table, heads bent together as they talk and feet barely touching. “They look kind of cozy.”

“I guess so. The table is a foot and a half wide, though. They don’t really have a choice.”

George sighs. The kid is right. “I just want Chuck to find love,” he whines, reaching for the whipped cream to top off one of the cups Paddy is working on. He has no idea how Chuck manages to look that good when every drink he orders is fifty percent sugar and thirty percent cream.

“Maybe he’s asexual,” Paddy reasons as he drizzles caramel artfully over a thick layer of foam. “You can’t assume anyone’s sexuality in this day and age.”

George pauses in his whipped cream spraying to stare at him. “What?”

“I said maybe he’s asexual.” Paddy looks up finally as George continues to stare at him. “What? Did you guys never consider that?”

“No, we didn’t,” George says, though he has to admit he sees the sense in it. Chuck’s gone on dates, sure, but George doesn’t remember him ever holding a relationship. He never goes home with anyone at parties, never seems to care about the gossip about him that cycle through the café every day… “I guess we can’t assume though, right? Not my business.”

“No,” Paddy says agreeably. George finishes with the whip and he tops it all of with an unhealthy dose of chocolate syrup. “Not our place. We just make the coffee. Either way, I hope he’s happy.”

George peers back over the espresso machine to where the two are still talking quietly; Chuck laughs at something, and Tab grins at him. “Yeah, I hope so too.”

The rest of the afternoon passes slowly, people filtering in and out as the lunchtime rush dies down. George spends half of the rest of his shift seated behind the till, a textbook propped up discreetly behind the counter. He finishes two chapters on radio frequency circuits and by the time he’s done with his shift his brain is swimming with it, jittery from dividing his attention between understanding the material and ringing up coffee orders, buzzing with the caffeine rush of constant free drip coffee for café employees.

“Alright, Paddy,” he says finally, untying his apron. “I’m off. You got everything you need?”

“I’m all set,” Paddy says. “It isn’t my first shift alone. I can handle it.”

“Alright, if you say so,” Luz says. “Two hours, and then I think Vest is coming to do the night shift.”

“I’ll be alright, George. It’s always quiet on Tuesdays. Go do something fun.”

“Oh don’t get me wrong, I’m more than ready to leave you,” George jokes. “I think I might go to Currahee. Get roaring drunk and threaten Tab about his intentions toward our boy.”

“Good luck. Don’t get punched in the face,” O’Keefe calls as George walks out the door.
“Hey, no promises,” George calls back.

He walks back to the apartment quickly, climbing the stairs and opening the door. In the living room Alex is gesturing wildly, book in one hand and notes open on the table in front of him. Don has his head in Alex’s lap, reading his own Econ textbook with disinterest. Frank sits across from them, his own copy of *Catch 22* open in his lap.

“—But I just don’t get what the fuck he’s saying, anyway, you know?” Alex is saying. He waves broadly at his notes again. “I mean, what the fuck does that monologue even mean? He’s miracle ingredient z-247? What the fuck even is that?”

“I don’t think it’s supposed to make sense,” Frank says reasonably. “That’s what Moose said, right? If it’s a book about how absurd everything is, then the fact it has no meaning is just another aspect that makes it absurd.”

Alex blows air through his teeth. “I fucking hate this. Why do they make us study this kind of stuff, huh? I can’t get it.”

Frank nods sympathetically. “I feel the same way about math requirements. That’s the curse of a college education, eh? They want us to be well-rounded, but some of us just aren’t built that way.”

“You’ll get it,” Don pipes up. “Absurdism makes literally no sense. It’s just like you. You and Joseph Heller are two like-minded, crazy individuals. You’ve got to see eye to eye at some point.”

“Leave me alone,” Alex groans, but he brushes his free hand through Don’s hair once. “You don’t have to wade through all this nonsensical World War II bullshit.”

“Hey, if you want to trade books with me be my guest. I’ve been waist-deep in supply curves for three months now.”

George laughs to himself as he kicks his shoes off, dropping his bag next to the door. “Still struggling through those notes?”

“I’ll say,” Alex replies. “Signing up for that class was a mistake.”

Frank looks up at George, closing his book. “How was work?”

“Same old. Chuck came in with someone new.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. The delivery boy for Currahee. I thought we could head there in a bit. It seems to be the destination for college kids these days.”

“Yeah, I’m down. I could use a drink,” Frank says. He studies his notes silently for a minute. “Any sign of…”

“No,” Luz says quietly. “It isn’t the night shift, though. He doesn’t come during the day.”

Frank just nods. “Alright. Well, give me some time to finish this up. We can go in a bit.”

“Alright. Did you eat?”

“I made about three gallons of Bolognese. There’s some left if you want it.”

That’s one benefit of having an Italian roommate: comfort food is produced in mass quantities most
days of the week. Between that and George’s encyclopedic knowledge of Portuguese soups instilled by his mother the five of them never go hungry. They share the grocery bill, so it all evens out.

He gorges himself on spaghetti while Alex and Frank continue to pick apart their reading, Don piping up with a quip every now and then. He reads a third chapter of his textbook, mimicking Don’s disinterested slouch: long readings like this are more tedious than anything, and as long as he can say he did it he’ll be proud of himself. At some point Skip comes back from class, flopping into his armchair with a plate of pasta and a world-weary slump to his shoulders.

“Hard day?” George asks.

“Just long. I burnt myself in lab today—”

“Are you okay?” Don asks.

“Yeah, it’s fine. School soldering irons are like greased pigs though, you know? Why they gotta make them so slippery? Anyway, I’ve got a paper due tomorrow, so it’s gonna be a long night.”

“Jesus,” George says. “I guess you wouldn’t want to come out with us tonight, then.”

Skip looks at him quizzically. “On a Tuesday?”

George shrugs. “Just a few drinks. We want to check in on Currahee and see what’s going on. There’s been a lot of chatter.”

“Fuck. I wish I could. I’ve been meaning to check that place out before it becomes all clogged with underclassmen trying to pass off their fakes.”

“Next time, then. We’ll probably wind up back there soon.”

“Alright, yeah.”

Frank closes his book finally. “You ready to go?”

George looks down at himself. He’s still in his uniform, dark jeans and a black t shirt that’s somewhat clean and presentable. “I guess so. Do you think I need to change first?”

Frank shrugs. “Not if you don’t want to. Our uniforms are pretty nondescript.”

“Okay. I’m ready, then. It’s not like we’re going to be seeing anyone we need to impress anyway, right?”

He should’ve known not to jinx himself like that.

They walk to the bar. It’s only a mile or two, and the weather is too nice to pass up: the sky still blue and the sun just setting, fresh icicles glittering on the sides of buildings. By the time they get to the side alley where Currahee is located it’s dusk, and their cheeks are pink from the cold. Frank opens the door gratefully and the two of them shuffle inside, going straight to the bar.

Ron looks happy to see them—or as happy as he ever looks, anyway. “Boys,” he greets. “We haven’t seen you here in a while.”
“We’ve been busy,” George says. “What’s good on tap?”

“Eh, we just got some ridiculously strong Belgian thing Brad recommended,” Ron says offhandedly, glancing at the tap handles. George still isn’t really sure how Ron became a bartender here, though he imagines it was probably a personal favor from Nix. Ron doesn’t drink much, isn’t particularly knowledgeable about their selection, and his low alcohol tolerance is something people don’t bring up unless they want to get hurt. He makes a good cocktail, and George figures that’s probably his main strength.

“I’ll go for that,” Frank pipes up. “Two pints?”

Ron nods, reaching for the glasses. “So what’s bringing you two in tonight?”

“Just checking in,” George replies. “Seeing what’s new around here, you know. It’s been a busy few weeks for everyone, and we wanted to see how things were going here. There’s been drama, after all.”

“Who, the newcomers?”

It’s vague enough that he could mean anyone, and that’s probably on purpose. George may only be vaguely acquainted with the new residents of Dike’s building, but he doesn’t live under a rock. The two are all over the nightly news. Trust Currahee to protect its own, especially when people come asking questions.

“I was talking more about this thing with Cobb, but yeah. Shelton and Sledge, too. They mentioned they’ve been helping out around here.

Ron nods as he fills the glasses. “Big help. They come in the morning and stay until we start getting customers. We’ve knocked out a lot of basic repairs thanks to them, and I’m pretty sure Dick and Lew are trying to find a way to adopt two twenty-one-year-olds as their legal children.”

“Jesus. Anyone recognize them?”

Ron gives him a hard look, but then flicks his eyes up to the television hanging in the corner. It’s playing some sort of nature documentary rather than the news or a sports channel. “Blue Planet doesn’t include missing person reports.”

“Well, that’s something.” George had no idea the two of them were so popular, or that they’d found a family in Currahee. It’s good to know they have people in their corner. “Who all is here tonight?”

“Usual crowd, mostly. Compton’s playing darts with a few tourists. Harry is drinking with Nix, and I think Dick is with them. Johnny and Bull took most of the boys out, but they left Garcia here to make sure Compton doesn’t piss anyone off too bad.”

“Compton’s playing darts, huh? You think he could use some help?”

Ron gives him a shark smile. “I’m sure he wouldn’t be opposed.”

George finishes his beer during the first round. It’s good; strong and dark and tasting vaguely of cherries. The alcohol goes straight to his head, and he should’ve known the kinds of beers Nix stocks are ridiculously alcoholic. His laughs are coming a bit more freely, cheeks warm and limbs just a little more loose than usual as he helps Compton cheat some tourists out of two hundred dollars. They aren’t pleased with their defeat and almost come to blows over it, but a sharp look from Garcia
and his pal have them holding their peace, grudgingly agreeing to a rematch.

“We need more drinks first, though,” George says. “Or at least I do. Frank?”

“Yeah, me too. What’s this beer? It’s good.”

“God, I don’t know if I even need another. Not if we’re looking at getting in a fight when we beat these guys again.”

Frank stops walking abruptly as the pass into the room that houses the bar, and George swears as he walks straight into his back.

“What the hell?”

“I think we’ve already got enough trouble in this room,” Frank says, voice serious. George looks past him and freezes.

It’s his nighttime patron from the café, hunched over at the bar with a tumbler between his hands.

“I’ll take care of drinks, alright?” he’s telling Frank before he even realizes it. He takes his glass without looking away from the man across the room. “Go back and check if Compton needs anything.”

He ignores Frank’s calls behind him, walking past stools and clusters of people and sitting down next to him wordlessly. He’s missed seeing his face every day, missed his big eyes and honest smiles. More than that he missed his presence. It feels like a piece slotting back into place to have him close once more.

Those dark eyes slide away from the smooth wooden counter, widening with surprise when he looks up to see George sitting there next to him.

“Joe Toye,” George says, doing his best to keep his tone light. “Where have you been, huh?”

He doesn’t think he’s ever seen Joe drunk, but he certainly must be on his way there now. His eyes are shinier than usual, hair falling out of its usually neat styling. He’s looking at George like George is something amazing—like his even being here is an astonishing feat, some sort of blessing. George certainly came up here suddenly, but he isn’t sure he’s deserving of a look like that either way.

“Georgie,” Joe says, low and raspy and with one of his tiny smiles, and boy oh boy did George miss that voice.

“That’s all you got? You’ve been gone for days. I was worried.”

“I had to take care of some things,” Joe says, still staring at him with wide eyes.

“Oh yeah? Things like what?”


George huffs. Even in his slightly drunken state he isn’t fooled by that, but he’ll let it slide. “You could’ve dropped by. I missed you.”

Did he just say that? Apparently he did, because Joe is staring at him again. “Yeah?” he says.

“Yeah. Sure.” Ron places another ridiculously strong beer in front of him, and he takes a few gulps gratefully. “I got used to having you around. It was weird, you leaving so suddenly like that.”
"I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have disappeared. I should’ve let you know."

They’re close, leaning on bar together like this. George has his elbow propped up on the counter and Joe must have turned toward him slightly at some point, shifting his slouch over until their arms are centimeters apart on the counter.

Their knees are touching. George doesn’t know when it happened, but now he can’t focus on anything else.

“It’s alright,” George says quietly, and he doesn’t think he imagines the way Joe’s eyes flick to his lips and then away just as rapidly. “Just don’t do it again, alright? Come drop in now and then.”

Joe’s brow furrows nearly imperceptibly, a frown dragging down the corner of his lip—and great, now George is the one who’s struggling not to stare at his mouth. He looks back up at his eyes instead, and that’s almost just as bad. “You deserve to be around good people,” Joe says quietly, blinking at him slowly. “You’re good, Georgie. You’re so good. You deserve to be around good things.”

His words aren’t making much sense. The room around them has disappeared and it’s just the two of them now, he and Joe and his endless eyes and the words between them and their knees touching under the counter. “Then you should stick around,” George ventures. “You’re good things, too.”

Joe’s frown deepens. The slant to his mouth is a crime and George wants to fix it. “I want to be good things,” Joe says, a little nonsensically. “I want to be better. I’m trying.”

“I don’t know what you’re trying for,” George tries to joke. “You’re already ridiculously perfect.”

Joe is still frowning though, not looking at him. “Not good enough.”

“What’s gotten into you?” George asks quietly. “Joe, you’re the most hard-working, dedicated person I know. You’re going five hundred miles an hour doing ten things at once, and you still have time to sit with me every night and listen to me tell stupid stories about my day. You’re kind and motivated and smart—” Joe scoffs, and George presses on. “No, I’m serious. And you’ve never once doubted that we should be friends, or that you’re good enough. What’s brought this on?”

“It doesn’t matter,” he says, waving George off before tightening his posture as he finishes his drink.

George misses him. It feels like a twisted stump in his chest. He misses him when he’s sitting right next to him, watching his throat bob as he swallows, feeling the press of their knees under the table. An hour and a half is a long time to sit in a coffee shop after midnight, especially every night for a whole semester, and through it all they’ve become—friends, at least. Maybe something more. Hopefully something more. It isn’t like George can tell, when Joe won’t even look at him.

It’s all wrong—the tightness of his posture, the way he won’t even look George in the eye half the time. Before he can stop himself he reaches out and grabs the lapel of Joe’s leather jacket, rotating him carefully on his stool until they’re facing each other. Joe goes with it, and that at least lets George know his touch isn’t unwanted even if Joe is regarding him with a look that’s half wary, half surprised.

Now both their knees are touching, one of George’s wedged between both of Joe’s.

“I’m serious,” George insists. “What happened?”

“George,” Joe says, shaking his head minutely. They’re close, so close. Joe smells like whiskey and
something intoxicating and spicy, smells like the cold air outside and the roar of a furnace in winter. He leans closer, gaze dragging across his lips again. “George,” he repeats, almost to himself, and George reaches out in a sudden burst of bravery and takes his hand.

It’s only because he’s watching Joe’s face so closely that he sees the way his eyes twitch half-closed briefly, eyebrows furrowing and mouth tightening in a wince of pain.

George frowns, looking down at Joe’s right hand where it’s cradled between both of George’s own. He turns it over carefully and suddenly he’s wincing too, reaching out to brush a thumb feather-light over Joe’s knuckles where they’re discolored the trademark grey-green of a fading bruise. The first two are split a little, marked with small scabs, and the side of his hand is a nasty color. George distantly hopes he didn’t fracture anything.

He’s startled out of his thoughts by Joe pulling his hand away abruptly, thrusting it into the pocket of his jacket to dig around for his wallet. “Like I said,” he says. “You deserve to be around good people.”

“What the—Joe!”

He leaves a few bills on the counter and just like that he’s gone. The noise of the bar rushes back to George suddenly, and he sags on his stool.

What an idiot he’d been. Of course Joe Liebgott hadn’t punched anyone in the face. He’s always the first to brag about any time he’s gotten into a fight. If he’d punched Roy Cobb he would’ve told everybody straight away. It wasn’t Joe Liebgott who had punched him at all.

It was Joe Toye.

But why? George isn’t stupid enough to think it was because of jealousy over Cobb’s truly prehistoric pickup lines. He isn’t hopeful enough, either. It had to have been something else.

Frank sidles up to him suddenly. “What the fuck was that?”

“I have no fucking idea,” George replies, “but I don’t think this is going to be my last beer of the night.”

They make it home an hour later, drunkenly helping each other back to their building. George showers and brushes his teeth on autopilot, chugging a few glasses of water in a post-drinking ritual he’s ingrained into his system since he entered college. His mind is still spinning but the cogs are significantly slowed down by the drag of alcohol in his system, and that at least is a blessing. He knows he’ll drive himself crazy with all of this otherwise.

He flops into bed, the world spinning sluggishly around him. He thinks of Joe’s lips, the warm brown-black of his eyes. Thinks of his broad shoulders and strong arms, his big hands and the undeniable gentleness with which he carries himself. The low rasp of his voice. The exhausted twist that sometimes mars his mouth.

George rearranges his massive pile of pillows around himself, pulls one against his chest and tugs a blanket up to his eyes until he’s engulfed in soft warmth, drunk and content. He doesn’t want to spend any time tossing and turning tonight—what he needs is a dreamless, alcohol-induced sleep. He pulls his blankets tight around himself and within minutes he’s drifting off into that state between sleep and waking, image from the night still floating through his consciousness.
The grey-green bruises on Joe’s hand, warm and rough between George’s own.

The familiar smell of his jacket.

*I want to be good things*, spoken low and softly.

It’s his last thought before sleep finally pulls him under: Christ help him. Someone save his soul.

George is in love.

Chapter End Notes

Augusta Chiwy is a ridiculously overlooked historical figure and a very cool person on top of it. Also I once again struggle to make Roy Cobb an actual bad person, so I have settled for just making him a very gross and flirty drunk. We all know one.

The referenced passage that Penkala is so bitter about is in Chapter 2 of Catch 22, somewhere in Yossarian’s rant to Clevinger about how everyone wants to kill him. Which Clevinger doesn’t understand, because it’s World War II and they’re in the air force and obviously everyone wants to kill everybody, that’s kind of the point of the war. I loved this book when I first read it, but a lot of the people in my class were literally enraged by sections like that because they didn’t make any sense even though that was the point. So: shameless inclusion of yet more World War II literature!

Finally, Delirium Red beer is not to be trifled with. It’s difficult to find in the US but I’m sure Nix’s suppliers have found a way.

Thank you for reading!
Welsh

Chapter Summary

Today in Philadelphia: Harry’s truck is a drama free zone, his heart is full of boundless love, his determination is unparalleled and his hands are shaking with nerves.

Chapter Notes

Hope you all had a great Easter/April fools!

For the sake of this AU Dick, Lew and Harry are the oldest at around 26 years. They all finished their undergrad and then did active duty through ROTC, and they got out fairly recently. Kitty is the same age and she’s finishing up her last year of grad school. And then Ron and Lip are a little younger at around 23, and Tab is somewhere around 21 and a junior in college like the majority of our other characters.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Welsh, Harry. 1/26/2018. Interview and transcript by Evan Wright. CURRAHEE, Philadelphia, PA.

“No, it isn't my bar. It's Lewis Nixon's, you know him? He inherited it from his grandpa. Winters manages the books. You should probably be talking to them, though good luck getting ahold of them if they don't want to be found. They're private people. As for our clientele, I think you probably know the list. Sledge and Shelton used to come do repairs a lot when they first showed up. We had a good base of customers. It used to just be college kids back then, you know? Toye and Luz are still around every few days. Webster still comes by, Liebgott and his buddies still come by. I don't have much to say beyond that. I'm really not the best person to ask about any of it. You should give one of those guys a call. I need to get home to my fiancée.”

The rest of his life begins on a Wednesday.

He wakes up sore with a corduroy-patterned crease on one side of his face. His back is a mess from spending another night sleeping on Lew and Dick’s shitty couch and his mouth feels like something crawled in and died there at some point in the night. He wishes he could say this was an uncommon occurrence. He stretches, face scrunching up as his back gives a few loud cracks, then reaches toward the coffee table for his phone.

Ten o’clock. Fabulous.

He has an unopened text from Kitty—just a simple affirmative to his message from last night that he was sleeping over at the bar—and really, he doesn’t deserve her and never will. He puts it back down before standing up and wandering the apartment, but when he finds neither of his friends he just pulls out a spare shirt from his backpack, brushes his teeth and heads down the dim wallpapered
stairwell to the bar below.

The Nixon family never really considered this building an asset. Lew’s parents had repeatedly tried to convince his grandfather to sell it off, though he’d held on to the bar and the loft above due to nostalgia. He’d known it would find a loving inheritor in Lew, who took the space for the gift it was. Lew’s grandfather was right. It really was a beautiful bar, full of memories and classic charm.

His parents had also been right, unfortunately. With its near-ancient fixtures and lack of updates in the last fifty years the property is something of an economic liability.

Harry trots down the stairs and opens the door at the bottom, stepping out into the storeroom. Somewhere something is cooking and it smells amazing. He pushes through the curtain at the far end of the room, coming out behind the bar. “Who’s making food?”

Lip waves a spatula at him. “You want some? You look like you could use it.”

“Fuck yes,” he breathes. He’s handed a plate of eggs and potatoes, Lip gesturing at him to hold it still before topping it off with a pile of bacon. Across the bar, Ron looks at him imploringly and Lip rolls his eyes before dumping some more onto his plate, too.

Harry settles at the bar and starts inhaling his food. Next to him, Dick and Lew are watching in amusement. “I didn’t think we’d gone that hard last night,” Lew states.

“I don’t know how you do it,” Harry complains. “You have a night like that and then the next morning here you are bright and early, going over finances.”

“Up with the sun. Just part of the adult life. Managing a property is no easy feat,” Lew says, tapping the binder that’s open between he and Dick. “You know. Property taxes, inventory checklists. That sort of thing.”

“Jesus. I’m glad you two are managing all that. Just give me grunt work. I don’t even want to look at the books.” He shakes his head, shoveling more potatoes into his mouth. Talk about a power couple; the three of them are the same age, and already Lew and Dick have accomplished an almost terrifying amount in their lives.

Dick watches him do it, eyes dancing. “At this point we’re not even sure we want to look at the books, either. They aren’t pretty at the moment.”

“How bad?” Lip asks, frowning.

“Oh, they could be worse,” Lew says, tone flippant. “Things are tight, but we can keep operating as usual for now. It’s a good thing we got the major repairs and the kitchen done early. We won’t have to close anytime soon, and we can still afford to keep up with restoration. For the most part we should be able to keep everything in stock.”

“It’s the future I’m more worried about,” Dick adds. “Things have been tight like this for too long, and I’d feel better with a little room to breathe. What we need is just one good day.”

There is a groan from one of the booths. Harry turns around to see Tab sit up on the newly-restored leather, rubbing his eyes.

“Good morning, sleeping beauty,” Lew calls.

Tab looks around, disoriented. “What the fuck,” he says. “I only had, like, one beer last night.”
“That new stuff is strong,” Lew sympathizes. “Any beer Brad recommends is something to be careful with.”

“I’ll say.” He wanders behind the bar and Lip looks up from where he’s leaned across the counter, deep in quiet conversation with Ron.

“There’s food on the stove. Help yourself.”

“Thanks, mom.”

“You’re welcome, son,” Lip retorts, tone dry as the Sahara.

Harry snorts.

They all look up when a cold wind blows through the bar, the door swinging open as Eugene and Merriell enter. Both of them look weary in a way Harry hasn’t seen since they first came here, fresh off a Greyhound and lugging around packs almost as big as they were.

Lip is frowning almost as soon as he sees them, chronic worrier that he is. “Boys,” he greets. “How have you been?”

“Same old,” Merriell answers tiredly.

“Any word?”

Eugene shakes his head, and Harry sighs.

They’d all been filled in on the situation the day after it had all played out—the cops coming to one of Dike’s buildings, its visitors being found, their location passed on to their families. Harry had heard the story first from Merriell yesterday morning right after it had happened, and then again from Chuck when he’d dropped by to see Tab yesterday afternoon. Both iterations had the same bottom line: the truth is out, but with their old phones gone and few portals left for their families to contact them through all the two can do now is wait and see what happens, or else find a new place to run off to.

Neither of them wants to leave. Harry knows that much.

“All we can do is wait,” Merriell says. “In the meantime, we’re here to stay busy. Got nothing better to do.”

Lew blows a breath through his lips, tapping the binder before closing it and pulling out a clipboard. “Well, fortunately for you there’s still plenty to get done around here. We’ve got the bar to paint, the rewired lights to install, a few mirrors to replace, upholstery in the other room—”

“We don’t have the fabric yet,” Harry cuts in quickly.

“It hasn’t shipped?”

“No. We ordered the fancy stuff, remember? It’s period-appropriate and all that. They’re still shipping it from Europe.”

“Damn. Okay, that’s off the list then. I’m inclined to say the wall behind the dart board could use some love, but we all know that’s a lost cause. Tabletops and bar tops are a big one, and then there’s the elephant in the room.”

“Yeah. It’ll take a lot of time though, and I’m not sure that’s in the cards for us right now. How long do you think we could stay closed without going into the red?”

“Right now?” Dick flips the binder back open, studying the lines of numbers. “If we were closed we wouldn’t have to worry about restocking, which has been our biggest cost recently, but if we’re assuming we’d still be spending money on repairs during that time… I’d say the most we could do is two consecutive nights. Like I said, we need one good night before we’ll have enough wiggle room to manage any large-scale repairs that will require closing for a long time.”

“We should put aside at least three days for the floors,” Harry says. “I don’t think we can do it any faster than that, especially if we want to do it right.”

Nix nods. “Alright, so that’s off the table, at least for now. All the rest of that is still an option for you two, though,” he says to Merriell and Eugene, who nod. “Dick and I will be helping out around here today, so let us know if you need any supplies and we’ll put it on the order list for tonight.

“Sounds good,” Eugene says, already looking a little happier.

“Tab,” Dick calls down the bar. “You don’t have classes today, do you?”

“Just in the evening.”

“Alright, I want you on a supply run with Ron.”

“Supply run?” Tab asks. “It’s Wednesday.”

“Yeah, Brad called this morning. Apparently that order we sent in on Sunday finally went through, so it’s a big shipment.”

“Great,” Tab groans. “I didn’t bring my jeep.”

They all look to Ron, who shrugs. “Ray’s working on my car right now. It was making that noise again. Besides, it can barely fit a regular order.”

Harry can feel it coming: the dreaded question. It’s like the calm before the storm. He’s long since been able to feel it in the air, can predict exactly when it will happen. He is once again about to be called on as the Truck Friend. All eyes turn to him.


“What about your car, Lew?” Harry asks, already resigned.

“I can’t go to New Jersey. You know I get hives when I go to New Jersey.”

Dick has a tiny amused smile on his face, but he doesn’t acknowledge Lew and instead turns to Harry. “The Subaru is full of upholstery equipment, anyway. I hate to say it, but I think they might need the truck.”

Harry sighs heavily. “Yeah, fine. I’ll drive as long as you don’t make me carry heavy things. I think I fucked up my back sleeping on the couch.”

“Thank you, Harry,” Dick says. “As for you, Lip—”

Lip looks up expectantly.

“Never mind. You don’t work here. I keep forgetting. Alright guys, let’s get going.”
Merriell and Eugene head to the other room to assess the situation with the lights; Dick picks up the binder to put away and Lew walks into the storeroom.

“Let me call Kitty before we go, guys,” Harry tells the men left in the room. “I still need to check in after yesterday.”

“Take your time,” Tab says through a mouthful of bacon.

Harry flops backward across the seat of a booth, digging out his phone. Kitty’s smiling face lights up the screen before it unlocks, and he scrolls quickly through his recent calls before clicking her name. It rings twice before she answers. “Hello?”

“Hey, it’s me,” he says, studying the ceiling above him. They really need to work on polishing the tin tile ceiling. With a little elbow grease on the raised edges it would really be something. “Just checking in. I’m still alive.”

“Good to hear,” she says drily, and god does he love her. “Long night?”

“Yeah, but it was good. We were trying out some new stuff from Brad and I guess we got carried away. Sorry I didn’t make it back.”

“Hey, you know the deal,” she says, and he does. During the first weeks of bar restoration he would often pull all-nighters here, and Kitty never held it against him—she was guilty of losing track of time in the math building frequently herself. Neither of them ever begrudged each other those nights of hard work, but they had a deal that any time one of them didn’t make it home they’d be responsible for cooking—and cooking well.

“I know. I’ve got a few things to take care of around here, but I’ll be home tonight. What do you want to eat?”

She hums noncommittely into the phone. “Surprise me.”

“Alright, will do. I love you.”

“Love you, too,” she says, and hangs up.

He taps his phone against his chest for a minute, thinking. He has more than one surprise in store for her that he’s been sitting on for a while now, and he knows he has to pull out all the stops. She doesn’t have class tomorrow and if everything goes according to plan he’ll be taking the day off to celebrate. Good food and good wine are essentials tonight.

He’s jolted from his thoughts by Tab coming over and prodding his boot. “Are you moping?” he asks.

“No, just thinking.”

“Oh. Good. You’re no fun when you’re moping. Can we go?”

“Yeah, yeah.” Harry stretches again as he stands, then grabs his jacket from the coat rack in the break room. When he comes out Tab is standing by the door ready to go, Ron leaning over the bar as he wraps up his conversation with Lip. “I don’t know why you’re in such a rush, Tab,” Harry continues. “It’s still morning. We’ve hardly made a dent into the workday.”

“Chuck said he might stop by later,” Tab says. “I don’t want to miss him.”
“He always comes in at three. Literally every time. You won’t miss him.”

“I like to be sure.”

On the other side of the room, Lip is pushing a bag to Ron across the counter. “Before I forget,” he’s saying. “I’ve owed Ray these for weeks for helping me shop for cars. Thanks for the recommendation, by the way.”

“No problem. He’s always helpful when it comes to mechanics,” Ron replies.

“Ron, come on,” Tab groans. “Brad said noon!”

Ron turns to shoot him his signature shark glare before turning back to Lip. “I’m sorry, I have to go. I’ll be back in the afternoon.”

“Yeah, boy.”

They walk outside, the morning chill biting and bitter. Harry pulls his scarf closer around himself. If Ron feels the cold he doesn’t show it, his breath coming in clouds as he follows them down the alley.

“I like Chuck,” he says, tone level. “He seems like he’s good for you.”

“You think so?”

“Yeah. He seems to care about Eugene and Merriell, too. Loyal people are good to keep around. You don’t want friends that will turn on you.”

It’s about as complimentary as Ron ever gets: sweet up until it becomes vaguely ominous. He and Tab spend enough time together on supply runs these days that Tab doesn’t even acknowledge the strange wording. “Friends,” he grumbles instead, shoving his hands into his pockets.

“What?” Harry asks. “You don’t want to be friends?”

“No. Well, it’s not that…” Tab sighs. “I can’t tell what he wants from me. He’s giving me mixed signals, you know? One second he’s all sweet and flirty, but then sometimes he just randomly shuts down.”

They reach Harry’s truck where it’s parked at the end of the block, a crappy tan and white thing he helped his dad fix up as a kid. It isn’t pretty on the outside, but he knows the engine is sound and that’s all he really cares about. “You should just give it time,” Harry says as he digs through his key ring. “Good friends give you strength platonically, even if they don’t do it romantically. You shouldn’t undervalue the power of that.”

He gets in the car and reaches across to unlock the other door. Tab gets in and squeezes into the middle seat, Ron taking shotgun. “Is that what Kitty is? Your romantic strength?”

“Kitty’s all my strength,” Harry corrects, starting the engine. “She’s also my smarter side and better half.”

“Jeez. If you love her so much why don’t you marry her?”

Harry turns to look at him. Tab stares back, eyes suddenly wide and worried as if he’s afraid he’s overstepped. Wordlessly, Harry pulls the visor above his head down. A tiny felt box falls into his lap and he holds it out to him.

Tab takes it and opens it. His eyes widen when he sees the ring inside. “Jesus,” he hisses. “How long
“Since before you got your GED,” Harry retorts, putting the box back into its hiding place and throwing the truck into gear. He’d known he’d wanted to marry her since high school, if he was being honest. He’d set a savings account aside while he and Kitty were sophomores in college with an engagement ring in mind. The time had never felt right, but it feels more than right now: it feels perfect. Six years later he’s finished his time in the army, he and his best buddies have somehow all landed in the same city where his girlfriend of eight years is going to grad school, and he has a cool new job on top of it. That savings account was more than topped off by his last army paycheck and everything feels like it’s finally coming together.

“Wow,” Tab breathes. “When are you gonna pop the big question?”

“Tonight, if everything goes according to plan. Which I really hope it does.”

He directs his focus to the road rather than let his nerves build up about it. There’s no use worrying; not yet.

“How about you, Ron?” Tab asks. “Any romance advice?”

“Don’t love,” Ron says flatly.

“What? Really?”

“Yeah. Don’t do it. But if you have to, choose someone good. Someone who cares about other people, who helps their friends when they can and makes you a stronger person. Someone…warm.” He clears his throat awkwardly. “Uh, Chuck is alright.”

“Wow, Ron,” Tab says drily. “I never knew you were such a sap.”

“Slander me again and I’ll get Compton on the phone.”

“He’s only got, like, two-thirds of a law degree. I’m not threatened.”

Ron gives him a signature shark glare. It has no effect. They’re all immune to it by now.

Tab leans across Ron’s lap to peer through the window as they cross the river, the trusses rising around them like some sort of industrial jungle gym. They pass Camden, buildings fading into trees.

“I’ll never understand why they chose Gloucester City to land, of all places,” Harry says. “It’s in the middle of nowhere, it isn’t exactly the most charming area, and they don’t get any foot traffic.”

“I wouldn’t call it the middle of nowhere,” Tab says.

“I think being removed from the city is the idea,” Ron replies. “They both wanted a little space. Besides, they aren’t exactly struggling for customers. They supply some bars in Camden, and people in Philly are willing to make the drive.”

“Well, some of us,” Harry mutters.

Tab elbows him. “Exit, exit. Get off.”

“Geez! Do you want to drive?”

“Can I? I was hired to drive deliveries around, you know.”
“That was rhetorical. You’re not driving my car.” Piece of shit or no, he’s still fiercely protective of his truck.

Tab sighs. “Ron, can I demote myself to dishwasher? I feel that my professional driving skills are highly underappreciated.”

“No. We already have a dishwasher.”

“Really? Who?”

“The dishwasher.”

Harry snickers under his breath, eyes on the road as he dodges potholes. They bounce over the railroad tracks. A ways away he can see the Delaware sluggishly drifting by, the bridge rising in front of them. In its shadow is a squat brick building, painted a dull grey and completely bare except for two truck bays on one wall and a few barred windows. Harry pulls into the lot, parking lateral to the building. One truck bay is half-open and when he gets out of the car he can hear clanging over the muffled din of what he vaguely recognizes as Soft Cell.

The clanging cuts off abruptly as they near the door, ducking underneath it. There is a car parked in the middle of the space, and Ray slides out from under it at their entrance. His eyes widen when he sees Harry. “You. You owe me twenty bucks,” he shouts over the music.

Harry grumbles good-naturedly, pulling out his wallet and handing a few bills over. “I don’t even remember what that’s for,” he yells.

“And that’s exactly why you shouldn’t gamble when you’re drunk. Whole team today, huh?”

“I’m just the chauffeur,” he replies. “Neither of these two brought their cars today.”

“Well, I’ve got one of them right here,” he yells, gesturing to the car parked a few feet away. “Ron, I don’t know what happened to the thing but it’s kind of a mess. Should be done tomorrow.”

Ron nods sagely. “Thanks. This is for you.” He holds out the bag.

“You made cupcakes?”

“No. You don’t want a cupcake I make. They’re from Lipton.”

“That guy. I told him he doesn’t owe me. He’s too generous.”

“It’s his only flaw.”

“Jeez, Ron. Tell us how you really feel.”

Ron looks vaguely nauseated, and Tab jumps in to save him from replying. “Is that ours over there?” he calls, gesturing to a stack of crates and barrels.

“Oh, yeah. That’s all yours. It’s a good thing you brought the truck. Jot that down as the last time Brad ever puts up with shipments coming in late. All of a sudden everyone’s backed-up orders are coming through and they’re getting three times as many boxes as they expected.”

“I actually had a question for your better half,” Harry says loudly.

“Better half? He could be so lucky,” Ray snorts. “What, are you trying to steal him away or something?”
“I’m trying to get married, but not to him. I need something fancy for tonight.”

Ray’s eyes light up. “No shit? You’re popping the question?”

“Yep. I could use something nice, a good red maybe.”

Ray cackles before raising his voice even further to shout through the building. “Bradley, Harry’s looking for a red wine! We need your Napa expertise!”

Brad trudges down the stairs at the far end of the room a moment later, turning the stereo down to a reasonable volume along the way. “You know not all of California is wine country, right? Oceanside isn’t even remotely close to Napa Valley. Besides, they specialize in chardonnay.”

“Just the fact that you know that kind of overrides everything you just said.”

Brad sighs, but a corner of his mouth kicks up in a smile. “What are you after, Harry?”

“Just looking for something special for tonight. I’m gonna propose to Kitty,” he adds, and just saying it out loud sends a jolt of nerves and excitement through his chest.

Brad nods thoughtfully. “Come to the back. I’m sure we’ve got something.”

They leave the others behind to load the truck, stepping into the warehouse section of the building. The room is lined wall to wall with shelves of bottles, boxes stacked in each corner. It’s dark, the light from the windows only bright enough that he can make out the labels on each bottle. A red flag bearing the Marine Corps emblem hangs from the shadowed ceiling along the far wall, the American flag right next to it. They pick through the shelves carefully, Harry watching his feet in the darkness.

“So you’re getting engaged, huh?”

“Trying. I don’t see the point of putting it off anymore.”

Brad snorts, skimming through the rows of bottles. “She’s been waiting long enough. It’s been what, nine years?”

“Eight, technically. We broke up once in high school.”

“Like I said. Long enough.”

Harry squints at a bottle, trying to decipher the cursive Italian. “Eh, someone told me once that you should never get married before you’re twenty five. I thought I’d be doomed to fail if I asked sooner. Plus I was still in the service. Didn’t feel right, asking her while I was away.”

“That twenty-five thing is probably true, although anyone who can wait for you through a war is probably a keeper,” Brad snorts, though his tone is devoid of the usual bitterness whenever he talks about anything vaguely related to his romantic history. “Especially someone who still loves you when you come out the other side.”

Interesting phrasing, there. Harry can’t help but agree either way. “She’s put up with a lot. I don’t want to make her wait for me again.”

“Are you sure about this?”

“I’m sure.”

“Good.” He pulls a bottle off a low shelf, running a thumb over the label before handing it over.
“Try this one. Make her a nice steak. Should work out well.”

Harry squints at the French script, simple and plain on a cream-colored label. “This isn’t from Napa.”

“Like I said, they specialize in Chardonnay. Never take a wine recommendation from Person.”

“Hey, he’s not bad. Nix thinks his whiskey advice is very trustworthy.”

“He drank plenty of it in the backwater trailer park where he was spawned. I’d hope he’d know at least a thing or two,” Brad says, but his tone is fond.

Harry snorts. “Thanks for this. How much do I owe you?”

“It’s a gift.” Harry tries to protest—he doesn’t know much about wine but he knows an expensive bottle when he sees on—but Brad just waves him off. “I’m serious. Consider it an early engagement gift from both of us.”

“She hasn’t said yes yet.”

“She will.”

When they step back into the loading bay Ron and Tab are loading the last of the boxes into the truck, Ray talking loudly as he helps them.

“All I’m saying is we need a little warning, you know?” he’s saying. “I mean, one week? I need time to prepare my hostess abilities, man. I need at least three weeks to really channel Martha Stewart to that level.”

“Ray, you don’t need to host,” Brad calls down to him. “You don’t even live here.”

“He doesn’t live here?” Tab asks, frowning as he puts a box down and wipes his brow.

“No. He’s just been sleeping on my couch for the last three months.”

“Seriously?”

“Yes, and that’s exactly the problem!” Ray practically yells. “He’s coming here to crash on your couch! Where am I gonna sleep, huh? The floor? Like some sort of heathen?”

Brad opens his mouth with what will undoubtedly be a multi-sentence insult spanning every subject from Ray’s mother to his county’s graduation rate and alcohol habits. Harry speaks before he can start his tirade. “Who are we talking about now?”

“Shit, we didn’t even tell you!” Ray says. “Our hotshot reporter friend is coming to visit. Evan Wright. I don’t think you guys ever met.”

“Huh. Here? In Jersey? That’s a little random.”

“Are you suggesting he isn’t here to see my beautiful face? Are you slandering our fine quality of living in this beautiful city we call home?” Ray asks, gesturing widely to the bare brick walls and the pothole-covered road outside.

“Once again, Person, I’ll remind you that you don’t actually live here,” Brad says.

“Yeah, yeah. I wish I could say he’s coming to Jersey because he misses us, but we both saw right through that one. He’s got a story in Philly he’s chasing.”
Tab snorts. “Tell him good luck with that. Those bridge tolls will get you every time. He should’ve found somewhere to stay on the other side of the river.”

“Apparently he can’t. You guys got some kind of event going on over there. Everything’s booked.”

“The National Lindy Hop Competition,” Harry realizes, nodding. He’d almost forgotten about it. He doesn’t know how. It’s the reason for Merriell and Eugene’s living situation, and it hasn’t done any favors for traffic either. “Everything’s full.”

“Yeah, that’s what it was. I never knew prehistoric dances were such a big deal, but there you go.”

“Is that what Wright is in town for, Ray?” Tab asks. “He’s gone from following a bunch of marines through a warzone to reporting on the best dance moves from ninety years ago?”

Ray snorts. “God, no. I think it’s more of the same, actually. He said there are a couple of vets wandering around that caught his eye. He wants them for an interview, and word is they’re in Philly right now.”

“You don’t say,” Harry muses, keeping his face carefully blank. “Wandering vets, huh?”

“That’s what he said,” Ray replies, picking up another box.

Ron passes him as he comes back toward the ever-shrinking pile, but he passes it entirely to come stand with Brad and Harry. “I thought he’d had his five minutes with war reporting,” he says, shark eyes meeting Brad’s own. Harry’s always found their friendship a bit unnerving. It’s like watching two computers silently trade binary.

“It’s the story that caught his eye,” Brad replies. “Have you been watching the news? Something about kidnapping and taking a stand for the gay rights movement. I haven’t been following it very closely.”

“We don’t watch much of the news anymore,” Harry says before Ron can reply. Ron turns his gaze to him instead and Harry silently wills him not to speak up. “It’s been nothing but Blue Planet reruns at Currahee. Every time something about politics comes up on the news Dick gets this really pinched look on his face.”

“I heard some stuff about it,” Tab pipes up. “Last I heard they were still missing, though. I didn’t know they were in Philly. Tell Wright best of luck finding them, I guess.”

Harry makes a mental note to find a way to thank him for that later.

“From the sounds of it he’ll probably need it,” Ray replies. The truck is finally full, the floor of the loading bay empty once more save for the extensive array of tools around Ron’s car.

Ron pulls an envelope out of his jacket, handing it off to Brad. “That’s yours, then. Lew wants you two by sometime. He says it’s been too long.”

“Yeah, we’ve been meaning to make it over. As soon as this thing with the reporter is done with we’ll be there.”

“Thanks for this, again,” Harry says, holding up the bottle. “Means a lot.”

“Good luck tonight,” Ray says. “You won’t need it, but good luck.”

Something prickles in Harry’s throat. It’s one of the few genuine comments he’s ever heard from
Ray and it hits him soundly in the chest. “Thanks. I’ll talk to you guys soon.”

They pile back into the truck, Harry carefully tucking the bottle under his own seat before starting the engine.

“Why didn’t you just tell them?” Tab asks as they pull out of the parking lot. “They’d probably get it.”

“Probably,” Ron answers before Harry can. “We can’t take any chances, though. Not when there’s a reporter hanging around.”

Tab still looks troubled. “They wouldn’t tell him.”

“They probably wouldn’t. They’re good people, but you can never know for sure what will slip out unless you don’t give anybody the story in the first place.”

“We need to keep everything close,” Harry adds. “The fewer people that know, the better. Reporters will come to Currahee eventually, and when they do we all know what the story is.”

“We don’t know anything. This is a workplace. We come to work, and we don’t care what our coworkers do after the day ends. If our coworkers are running from their pasts that’s none of our business,” Ron says, voice emotionless.

“Exactly.”

“Is anyone going to believe that?” Tab asks skeptically. “Currahee isn’t exactly the most professional working environment. It’s pretty obvious we’re all wrapped up in each other’s lives.”

“Yeah,” Harry sighs. “Yeah, it is. That’s probably what will make this all work in the end, though.”

“‘We stand alone,’” Ron quotes, only a little mockingly. “Currahee looks after its own. We trust each other, and that will go a long way.”

Tab nods to himself. “I hope that’s true.”

“What do you mean? Why wouldn’t it be?”

“I just mean with the finances and all. Everything Lew and Dick keep talking about. I know it isn’t our business, but aren’t you worried they might not be telling us everything?”

Ron shrugs. “If it’s bad to the point we should be worrying then they’d let us know.”

“That’s a lot of trust. Maybe they just don’t want us to worry.”

“Tab, it’s alright,” Harry says. “Seriously. I’ve seen the charts. Besides, they aren’t gonna let anybody go. They’d sooner tank the whole bar.” One good night. That’s what they’d said. Just one good night and everything will right itself; no one will need to worry about anything anymore.

“We’re getting there. Things are a little tight right now, but it’s nothing we won’t be able to weather.”

“If you say so,” Tab replies as they pull onto the freeway, the engine roaring as they speed home.
If Tab’s spirits were low on the drive home, they noticeably brighten upon their return to Currahee. He gleefully unloads boxes from the bed of the truck, and when Harry returns from parking it in its rightful spot down the block he’s behind the bar he’s happily humming while scraping gum off the bottom of a table. His change of mood is no surprise to anyone, the routine of the past week becoming beyond predictable. As three o’clock approaches he’s helping Lipton make lunch and chatting with Merriell, who’s busied himself reinstalling a sconce into the wall behind the bar.

“He’s just a good guy, I don’t know,” Tab says, stirring a pot of soup. He dodges Lip as he slides by with a loaf of bread in either hand.

“You ain’t seen him before coffee,” Merriell snorts. “That boy is a mess in the morning. Can hardly form a sentence.”

“If you’re trying to make Tab like him less I don’t think it’s working,” Lip says as he passes, laughing to himself.

Tab frowns at him. “Of course it isn’t. I wouldn’t dislike someone just because of a caffeine addiction. Hell, do we know anyone who doesn’t have a caffeine addiction?”

They all turn in unison to Dick, who’s just entered the room with his inventory clipboard in hand. He freezes in his tracks. “What?”

Tab rolls his eyes. “Okay, but you get my point.”

“I ain’t trying to get you to do anything,” Merriell continues. “He’s grand. He just ain’t a god. You walking after him like he hung the moon ain’t gonna do nothing for either of you.”

Harry stares at the tin tile ceiling, flopped over on the same booth as he was this morning. Merriell’s words are always twisted over themselves and tangled in metaphors as if his accent weren’t difficult enough to decipher already. He thinks he’s getting better at getting the big picture of it all, though.

“Do you mean it’s about humanity?” Merriell nods emphatically at him. “Love is about appreciating quirks and flaws as much as it is about finding a way to fit around them, right? To mesh.”

“Yeah, exactly.”

The leather across from him squeaks as Dick takes a seat. “You’re all very logical about this. It isn’t dangerous to be a little head-over-heels in the beginning. If you can think of it logically that early on is it really love?”

“Well, I never,” Merriell drawls, looking up from his work. “Winters, you of all people getting all sappy and lovesick on us.”

“Jeez, who said anything about love?” Tab says defensively.

“I think it’s just the general mood,” Lipton says soothingly, finally abandoning his post and nudging Harry’s legs off the booth to come sit next to him. “Everyone’s feeling a little romantic cause of Harry, here. Congrats, by the way.”

“She hasn’t said yes yet,” Harry says. He hasn’t even asked her yet. Jesus.

“She will.”

“Merde—” Merriell leans around the doorway, one hand still steadying the sconce. “Cher, mon petit choux qui j’adore, c’est foutu. J’espère que tu ne l’as pas fait une erreur—”
“I think I know enough to rewire a lamp, Mer,” Eugene says, coming in from the other room. “Or at least I hope so. It didn’t seem that hard.”

“You speak French?” Tab asks.

“I understand enough to know when I’m being told I fucked up,” he shrugs, turning to Merriell. “I don’t want to state the obvious, but did you try turning it on?”

“No,” Merriell drawls. “I didn’t try to turn on the light, Eugene. All this time I’ve been wondering what’s wrong with the thing and I ain’t even tried flicking the damn thing on.”

“Jeez. I double checked the wiring on all of them yesterday. I didn’t miss anything.”

“You’re sure of it?”

“I’m sure.”

Merriell frowns at him. “Then why ain’t it working?”

“I don’t know! I hate to say it, but it’s not me, it’s you.”

“Guys,” Tab supplies. “There’s no bulb in it.”

Both of them groan. Dick snickers, leaning across the table conspiratorially. “How many of our highly esteemed employees does it take to screw in a light bulb?”

“If the three of them can manage it on their own I’ll be impressed,” Harry retorts dryly.

Lew appears in his field of vision in front of the ceiling Harry is still examining, plopping down across the table next to Dick. “Jeez, Lip,” he says as he looks toward the bar counter where the trays are lined up. “How many baked goods do people go through in a day?”

“I know you mean that rhetorically, but you would not believe the amount of scones this neighborhood eats. That isn’t even counting the quantity of dough they’re buying on top of that. It’s enough to feed an army several times over.”

He gets up and walks back behind the bar to switch a few trays in the oven. Lew snorts, shifting to watch the pandemonium behind the bar. Harry gives in and sits up to follow his gaze: Merriell is still bickering with Eugene quietly as he drills the sconce back into the wall, Tab stirring a pot inches behind them while Lip arranges his trays neatly in the oven to maximize space. When Ron comes in from outside Lip smiles at him cheerfully, throwing a muffin through the air in an arc. Ron catches it neatly, bemused.

“Would you make sure that’s edible for me?” Lip asks, closing the oven finally. “Easy Co wants some new baked good options and I’ve been experimenting, but I need a second opinion.”

“What kind is it?”

“It’s got, um, apple spice with a little honey.” Lipton runs a hand over the back of his own neck. “I know that’s your favorite flavor in basically anything ever, so I figured I should try it out on someone who knows their stuff.”

Ron gives him a tiny smile, following him back to the booth and sitting next to Lew while Lip nudges Harry’s feet over again to resume his old spot. “Thanks. I’m sure it’s amazing.”

“How come I never get free baked goods?” Harry gripes. Ron appeases him by dropping a chunk of
muffin into his mouth. It’s still warm, buttery and fragrant with spices. “Thanks. Fuck, that’s good.”

A cold breeze sweeps through the room as Chuck enters the bar.

“Chuck!” Tab calls. Or cheers, really. Ah, young love.


“Oh, that’s Lip. He’s the bun man. He handles Ron’s buns.”

“Someday you’re going to get tired of making that joke,” Ron calls, somehow making it sound like a threat.

“Not today, evidently,” Lip says.

“You bake The Scones?” Chuck asks him, somehow saying the capital letters.

“That I do.”

“It’s nice to meet you. I’m a big fan of your work.” Actually the kid’s practically bouncing with glee, but he manages to get a handle on it admirably.

Lip waves at the counter. “A bunch just came out. Help yourself.”

Lew turns back to their table as Chuck and Tab begin to talk amongst themselves at the bar. “It’s like Grand Central in here these days. Where the hell did we pick up all these people, huh?”

“Hell if I know,” Harry replies. “Remember when it was just the three of us and some cleaning supplies?”

“Ah yes, the good old days. Just three army bros and 20 years worth of cobwebs and dust to clean up.”

“We’re a far cry from that,” Dick says thoughtfully. “It looks good around here. Once we have the floor fixed it’ll almost be good as new.”

“One good night,” Lew reminds him. “It’s all we need.”

One good night. How hard could it be, in a city as big as this? Sure, they don’t exactly have a storefront, but even in a rundown alley it shouldn’t be this hard to warrant a boom in business. They already have a good base of loyal clientele; all they need now is for word to get out, be it through tourists or social media…

“A party,” he blurts suddenly. “We need to have a party.”

“Beg pardon?” Lew asks, but he’s already smiling. He gets it.

“A big party. Everybody is already in a celebrating mood, right? There are so many tourists in town for the dance thing—”

“National Lindy Hop Competition,” Dick provides.

“Right, yeah. Why don’t we have a big party? The press is already in town for the competition. If we get word out to enough people that all the visitors start coming here, pretty soon the press will get word of it too. It’ll be a bump in publicity and all we’ll need to do is get them in the door.”
“A party,” Lew parrots. “That could work. How do propose we get word out?”

He opens his mouth, but no words come out. He’s far removed from social media these days; fortunately Tab is there to back him up from across the room.

“We can make a Facebook event, for starters. That might work.”

“Drink vouchers for competitors,” Ron supplies. “Can we afford that?”

Dick hums, eyes flicking up as he reviews the numbers in his head. “We could probably offer the first drink free. Only to competitors, but if we get enough of the main stars in here everyone else should follow and hopefully make up for the difference.”

“Perfect,” Lew says. “A party. Yeah. That could work. What day does the competition end?”

“The final ceremony is on Monday,” Eugene calls from across the room. Everybody looks at him, and he shrugs. “What? That stupid competition made us homeless for three nights. You think I wouldn’t keep track of the dates? Put the party on Saturday. Sunday is just for reviewing footage and dances, so everybody will have a day to recover after.”

“It’s almost like they planned it just for us,” Lew says, awed. “This could work.”

“Good thing we got that big shipment in today,” Dick adds. “Will we be ready?”

He looks around the table; they all nod. “As ready as we’ll ever be,” Harry says.


He spends a few hours helping Dick plan for the event, buzzing out of his skin the entire time. At five Dick finally looks at him sternly, putting his pencil down and looking up from the famed binder. “Go home, Harry,” he says softly.

“What? It’s barely even five. We can—”

“It’s Wednesday. We’ve got a few days to figure this out. Besides, you’re rattling with nerves. You have more important things to do.”

He nods. “Yeah.”

“Don’t look so nervous. She’s going to say yes.”

“How are you so sure?”

Dick raises an eyebrow. “Because I’ve seen you two together. It isn’t rocket science.”

“Go home and propose to your girlfriend, Harry,” Lew says, reaching across the counter to take Dick’s hand in his own and clink their own rings together softly. “It’ll be worth it. You’ve waited long enough.”

He sighs heavily, mostly just to hide how rattled he feels. It’s ten times worse than any test anxiety he’s ever had. Hell, he isn’t sure that jumping out of a plane for the first time had him this nervous. “Alright, alright, I’m going. I’ll see you guys tomorrow,” he says, grabbing his jacket and heading out onto the street.
He stops at the butcher to buy steaks on the way home, as per Brad’s instructions. They cost an arm and a leg that he hardly minds paying. He drives home lost in thought, mind careening as he thinks up what he’s going to say. He’ll cook her dinner, maybe light some candles and then say his piece.

If all goes to plan, by the end of the night they’ll be making wedding plans.

By the time he finally gets to the door of their apartment he feels too warm, fingers shaking a little as he digs through his pocket for his keys, grocery bag held in his other arm. He can feel his heart pounding almost painfully in his chest, and it’s suddenly difficult to get any air. He takes a few deep breaths just to calm himself, remembering everyone’s words all day. She’ll say yes. They’ve known they were a sure thing since they were eighteen years old. Of course she’ll say yes.

He goes over his speech in his head again one last time—she’s everything to him, his best friend and his first love and his soulmate all wrapped up in one. He’s loved her since the day he met her, he’s wanted to be with her forever since they were teenagers, and during that year they weren’t together those feelings were only solidified. She’s everything to him and he wants to be by her side forever, in the eyes of God and the law—

The door swings open. “I could hear you banging around through the door. Did you forget your keys again?”

All his thoughts grind to a halt.

She’s got on some old sweatpants from their high school. He can’t remember if they were his or hers originally, but they’re soft to the point of being threadbare and the words on the side are nearly faded beyond recognition. There’s chalk dust on one leg from the boards she and her colleagues are so frequently jotting equations on, and her fingers are faintly white with the stuff. Her hair is in a messy bun, the odd strand escaping to brush her neck or the side of her face, a few specks of day-old mascara clinging to her eyelids like errant freckles.

Love is about appreciating quirks and flaws as much as it is about finding a way to fit around them. That’s what he’d said earlier, what Merriell had illustrated and Dick had agreed with; it rings as true for them as it does for him. She’s everything to him not because she’s perfect, but because they’re perfect together. Because against all odds they found each other, and in all their facets and cracks they somehow fit.

Before he even knows what he’s doing he’s dropping the grocery bag to the side and getting down on one knee. “Kitty,” he says breathlessly.

“…Oh my god.”

“I’ve waited way too long to do this.” He’s laughing suddenly. It’s uncontrollable; he can’t stop himself and his eyes are prickling and his nose feels stuffy suddenly and god this is a mess. He pulls the little box out of his pocket and then she’s laughing too, eyes watery. “I’ve loved you for as long as I can remember. God, I love you. Will you please do me the honor of being my wife?”

“He—yes, get up, yes, yes,” she says, and tugs him up by the front of his jacket to kiss him there in the hallway.

And really, he had a plan. This was all going to go so smoothly. It was going to be very romantic and though-out and according to plan. He can’t help but think this is even better: the two of them laughing against each other’s mouths, their cheeks wet as he pulls away a little to put the ring on her finger. “I had a plan,” he says, almost defensively, and it sparks another round of breathless laughter
as she kisses him against the disgusting off-beige wall of the hallway.

A door creaks open a few feet away, and they break away from each other to see their elderly neighbor leaning into the hallway with his characteristic disapproving frown. Kitty waves the hand bearing her ring gleefully.

“Mr. Haney, we’re engaged!” she says, voice breaking halfway through for another hiccup of laughter.

“That’s very nice to hear.”

“We’re getting married!”

Mr. Haney gives them a rare smile and mutters something about kids these days. “Congrats, kiddos,” he says, closing his door.

Harry bursts out laughing again. “We’re getting married,” he parrots. Kitty lets out this graceless snort-giggle he can only qualify as charming.

“Come inside. You owe me dinner.”

They call everyone they know. They call their moms, their dads, their siblings; Ron and Lip and Dick and Lew. For an hour their apartment is a call-center, a feedback loop of excitement as each new person hears the news.

Then Harry makes them steak, and they eat it in bed while drinking what’s probably a ninety dollar bottle of wine.

“Spring,” Kitty says at around one in the morning, when they’re both flopped over under the blankets and a good ways beyond tipsy. “That’s as long as I’ll wait for you.”

“What? Eight years wasn’t long enough?”

She snorts. “Eight years was plenty. That’s why I don’t want to wait any longer.”

“I’m just saying. We could plan it really fast and make it in time for a winter wedding.”

She looks at him, lost in thought. “We could plan it in two months, easy. Especially if we divide and conquer.”

“That’s what I’m thinking. If we worked together we could be married by March.” It’s so tempting to start planning right now if only to make it come faster…

“I graduate in late April.”

…but there’s that. He sighs. “You’re gonna be busy.”

“So are you.” She nudges him. “I know what the bar means to you, and I know money’s been tight recently. We’ve both got a busy few months ahead.”

“Are you upset?” he asks her, suddenly worried, but she just scoffs.

“Upset? God, no. I waited for you this long. I can wait a little longer. Besides,” she spreads her hands above them as if envisioning a marquee above their heads. “Summer weddings. Think of all
the flowers. If it’s warm out we could even do it outdoors.”

He smiles at the thought. With the worst of winter looming before them it sounds like heaven.
“Summer weddings, huh? What do you say, June?”

“June,” she says, and he doesn’t need to look at her to know that she’s smiling. He can hear it in her voice.

When they finally fall asleep for the night it’s wrapped around each other in a tangle of limbs, the empty bottle sitting on their bedside table and one of the glasses knocked over to spill its last few drops into the carpet to form a stain they’ll laugh about in the morning. Harry dreams of flowers, of warm summer air and champagne bubbles popping in the sunlight.

He hasn’t dreamt in a while. It feels good.

Chapter End Notes

Speirs is a basic bitch who appreciates stereotypical fall flavors. Pass it on.

I literally have no idea whether I should add Gen Kill to the tags and I ultimately decided against it because this is really the only chapter where characters from that will make an actual appearance. They’re really only background characters for the rest of it. So yeah, consider that a purposefully-ambiguous subplot that’s kind of chilling in the background!

Also I cannot even think about marriage without tearing up. It’s honestly my biggest weakness. Proposals? Instant tears. That one scene of The Office? Just. Death to me. I was dead. So this was written and edited with my eyes ¾ of the way closed and I am sorry if there are any errors as a result!

Anyway, this is our final fluffy chapter before things get dramatic and angsty with our apartment gang again. David is up next! :D
Chapter Summary

Today in Philadelphia: David is hasty to jump to conclusions, Joe needs to think before he speaks, and the employees of Currahee are going to commit a homicide.

Chapter Notes

General warning for people communicating badly and then handling their issues poorly. Don’t abuse substances, people. Talk through your feelings and don’t handle conflict the way these fools do.

I have changed chapter titles for the sake of clarity. I am absolutely in awe that we’ve made it this far—we’re past the halfway point now and that blows my mind. I’ve never written much of anything before, let alone something this long. Thank you for your continued support on this roller coaster!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Webster, David. 1/27/2018. Interview and transcript by Evan Wright. CURRAHEE, Philadelphia, PA.

"It's a good story. I was thinking about writing it myself, though to be perfectly candid it's too close to home for me to be altogether comfortable with the idea. The truth is we're all still processing what happened. I'm sure the others have told you the same thing, or if not then they've indicated it in their own way. If I could be so bold as to give you a word of advice—it's a story of love, not whatever it's been turned into by the papers. All of us, everybody there that night, we did brave things and stupid things and heroic things. In the end though, we're lovers and not fighters. That's the spirit of the movement as a whole, and that's what the press and everyone else fails to understand."

He wakes up to teasing bites against his throat and is laughing before he’s even fully awake. He shoves Joe off without even opening his eyes, and then he can hear Joe laughing too before a warm weight is flopping back down against him. David cracks his eyes open to look at him and Joe is already looking back, chin propped up on David’s chest and hair a mess of fluff. David reaches up to brush a hand through it before he can stop himself. It’s probably a shade too affectionate for what they are, but when Joe leans up into the touch he figures he’s excused.

The carefully-maintained boundaries between them have blurred at an alarming rate this past week. David only has himself to blame—or rather, himself and his useless building. At some point yesterday the radiator in his apartment rolled over and died, and as a result the space is freezing cold. It isn’t uninhabitable. Hoobler is still staying there and David really should be doing the same, but when Joe had extended the offer of a warm place to sleep David couldn’t find it in himself to turn it down.
Of course, it’s still only complicating matters further. It’s only been a few days since Joe slept over at his apartment for no reason other than that he didn’t feel like getting up. That in itself wasn’t unheard of. they stay the night occasionally, but out of the last seven days they’ve only slept apart for three of them. David feels touch starved when Joe isn’t around and overwhelmed when he is, and it’s throwing him dizzy and off-kilter.

Joe is still looking up at him, eyes sharp as always, lips quirked up in a playful smile. “Web, stop thinking.”

That’s probably good advice. “Like you?” He says, putting his worries on the back burner for a moment so he can fall back into the familiarity of their banter. “You don’t seem to think very much at all. How is that working out?”

“Ugg, shut up,” Joe groans, rolling off of him dramatically and rubbing his eyes. “You're insufferable.”

“I’m almost proud of you for using five-syllable words this early in the morning.”

“Almost proud? You should be very proud. I haven’t even had any coffee yet.”

“We could go to Easy if you want,” David offers, stretching. “We still have an hour before class, and a drink is the least I owe you for letting me stay here last night.”

Joe is nodding at him, a slow movement with a slow smile to match. “Yeah, that’d be good. Ten minutes, alright?”


“I’m gonna get a cup of coffee in the meantime. You want anything?”

“No thanks. I’m not a caffeine addict like you.”

“And you call yourself a college student,” Joe teases, tugging on a t-shirt and padding out the door toward the kitchen.

David smiles to himself, sitting up in bed. Outside, the snow is falling once more. The streets are clear but mailboxes and cars are all buried in a heavy cloud of white, the whole world soft and bright. He doesn’t look forward to going out there, but if it’s for a morning of he and Joe’s familiar back and forth it will no doubt be worth it.

He can hear Joe’s voice from the kitchen, bickering over the coffee pot with his roommates. David was never officially introduced to them, and with the addition of two new ones last week he can barely put a face to any of the voices he hears. He gets up to look for his clothes, listening all the while.

“You are a goddamn blanket thief, cher, and I won’t stand for it,” someone is complaining loudly. “Not in Philadelphia, and not in the dead of winter.”

“It’s barely December,” someone drawls in response, and David snorts to himself as he finally finds his pants under the bed.

“I don’t care what month it is. It’s too fucking cold up north. Ship me back to the fuckin’ desert at this rate. How do you people live up here?”

“Extra socks,” a voice answers, and David can recognize this one at least. There aren’t many people
on campus who haven’t met Eugene Roe. “You need four pairs on your feet, minimum. Just keep stacking them ‘til you get warm.”

“Genie, there ain’t no sock in the world that’s gonna keep you warm in this. I don’t know how you’ve survived up here so long. I’m freezing to death, and no sock is gonna prevent that.”

“That’s why you need four of them.”

His shirt is found underneath a pillow and he sets about looking for his shoes, thinking all the while. He knows Chuck fairly well from their years of class together. He and Roe know each other too, though not well. Roe knows everyone to some extent. David wouldn’t go so far to even call them friends. And then there’s Heffron, who David has never spoken to and has only caught glimpses of a handful of times. The other two roommates have only been here a week and it goes without saying that David doesn’t know them either, though he’s heard his fair share of stories from Joe.

The same lazy drawl from before seems to be as curious about him as he is about them—strange, the two groups on either side and Joe in the middle, the seawall keeping it all contained. “Who you got hidden away back there, Joe?” the voice says, half teasing and half bored.

He can hear Joe’s scoff from here. It makes something warm spread through his stomach, the familiarity of him. He can picture him standing at the counter: the long line of his neck, the sharp wit behind his eyes, every sound and breath that leaves his lips. The restless drumming of his fingers and delicate bones of his wrists.

“That would be David,” Chuck’s voice replies.

“The fuckbuddy?”

“Mhmmm.”

David stills in his clothing search, stepping closer to the door and holding his breath so he can hear better. Nothing good ever comes from eavesdropping, but he can’t help himself.

“He’s been staying over pretty frequently. You gonna introduce us?” a new voice cuts in, local accent thick and distinctive. It can only be Heffron.

“It ain’t like that,” Joe replies quickly. “We’re just fuckbuddies.”

Every ounce of warmth in David’s chest disappears, replaced with something heavy and cold. There’s a long silence. “Right,” Heffron says finally. “If you say so.”

“What are you saying?”

“Nothing, nothing. I’ve just never heard of someone spending an entire day lounging around their fuckbuddy’s house. Or worrying about what their best friends think about their fuckbuddy.”

It’s all of David’s worries from the last few weeks summarized into a few simple sentences; part of him is glad someone else sees the twisted mess of it all the same way he does, but the reaffirmation of it all just makes his heart pound with nerves. He holds his breath as he waits for Joe to reply, but Roe gets there first.

“Leave him alone, Heffron. You heard him. It ain’t like that.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m just teasing.”
He finishes getting dressed quickly, not wanting to hear any more. None of that is new information; he and Joe had agreed to be something purely physical, and anything he desires beyond that simply isn’t an option. It still stings, hearing it out loud. It was too easy to get lost in this.

His skin is still buzzing in Joe’s wake, the need to have him close again making his blood fizz. He needs space to get his head screwed on straight. They’ve been too close this week, and in that closeness David got tangled up in the strings that aren’t even supposed to be attached to all this. He needs room to clear his head and remember they were never meant to be one unit.

He jams his feet into his shoes, throws his backpack over his shoulder and swings the door open, almost crashing into Joe as he returns from the kitchen. They’re chest to chest suddenly, close enough that David can feel the heat radiating off of him, can smell his shampoo and the coffee in his cup. It sets his skin alive again and he’s restless with the urge to touch him conflicting with the need to run.

Joe’s eyes are wide in surprise, the usually sharp quirk of his mouth soft and downturned. “Are you leaving?”

“I’ve got a quick meeting with Sobel before class,” he gets out, and even manages to make it sound cheerful and apologetic. All he wants is to get out of here.

“You sure? I thought—”

“I’m sorry. I only just remembered it’s today.” He plasters on a smile. “I can’t believe I almost forgot! Foolish of me.”

“Web,” Joe says softly. It sends a pang through David’s chest, and when he chances a glance up Joe is studying him, brows furrowed and familiar gears turning behind his eyes as he tries to make sense of it.

David doesn’t give him the chance. He smiles at him one more time, even if it feels too tight on his face. “I’m sorry,” he gets out, and it comes out all wrong—quiet, not nearly as chipper as he’d have liked. He pushes past Joe before he can say anything else, reaches the front door in three quick strides and hurries into the hallway.

He takes the stairs in double time, mind reeling all the while. Two years they’d pushed each other, teased each other from being enemies into almost being friends, learning each other’s taste and breath and bodies all the while. And they were good; they were so good. They know each other with the rare sort of intimacy that only comes from competing and outdoing one another, from predicting each other’s moves and then thinking up ways to counter them a mile ahead. They know each other in every sense of the word, and maybe that’s why they can clash so violently in one minute and come together so beautifully the next.

They could be good again, if David can learn to put this behind them. He should have known that other than a burgeoning friendship they’re exactly what they’ve always been: rivals and nothing more. There is no place for anything else in their relationship.

He rounds the corner from the stairwell and crashes into someone head-on.

“Goodness,” the man says, stumbling.

David rights himself quickly. Fortunately neither of them fell from the impact, but it was a near thing. “I’m sorry,” he says. “Are you hurt?”

The man dusts himself off absently, righting the duffel slung over his shoulder. He’s staring at David

“I’m fine,” David says quickly. “Just have my head in the clouds.”

“You sure?” the man asks kindly. “You seem upset.”

He’s wearing fine leather shoes, out of place in the snow. David looks at them so he doesn’t have to look at the man’s face. “I’m fine,” he says. “I’m sorry for running into you.”

He hurries past him quickly. He only gets a few steps away before the man is calling out to him. “Hey, wait!”

“What?” David calls.

“Could you help me find a room? I’m looking for a Eugene Sledge.”

“Don’t know him.”

“Well, he’s staying with some buddies. Babe Heffron. Ah,” The man pulls a notecard from his pocket, squinting at it. “Charles Grant and Joseph—”


“Thanks,” the man says, nodding once.

It’s only once he reaches the street that he realizes his own foolishness. The man seemed to know who he was looking for, though he didn’t know them personally. Sending him up to the room like that probably wasn’t wise. He works his phone out of his jeans and unlocks it, scrolling through his contacts. His finger hovers over the call button for only a moment before he hits it.

It rings twice before Joe picks up. “What did you forget?” he asks by way of greeting.

“Nothing. There was someone looking for you in the lobby, though. It seemed a little odd.”

“Someone looking for me is odd? I’m insulted, Web. You know I’m very popular around town.”

David rolls his eyes, uncaring that Joe can’t see him do it. “No, I mean it was suspicious. He had all your names written on a notecard and everything. I mean, he called you Joseph.”

“Ew.”

“Yeah. He’s on his way up. Weird accent, expensive shoes, and his hair is kind of blond and curly.”

There’s a rustle of static over the line before Joe speaks again, voice muffled and distant like he’s talking to someone far away. “Hey, Shelton? Sledge? Either of you know some guy with—”

His voice cuts off abruptly and David holds his breath, bracing to run back into the building. “Joe?”

There is distant chatter through the phone line as if someone is having an argument in the background, and then Joe is back as quick as he left. “Yeah,” he says, voice tired and annoyed. “He’s here. It’s my roommates’ friend.”

“Everything okay?”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m sure they’ll work it out.” The sounds of distant chatter continue, and
David has half a mind to tell him to hang up—clearly he has more important things to be worrying about. Before he can Joe speaks again. “Are you okay? You seemed kind of off this morning.”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” David says quickly.

“You sure? You’ve been acting weird recently and—”

“Joe,” David says, tone firm. “I’m fine, alright? It’s okay. I’ll see you in class.”

He hangs up before Joe can respond. If he has to deal with one more person asking him that today he thinks he might lose his mind.

He sets to plodding down the street, mindful of the patches of ice on the concrete. The cold air feels good on his cheeks, fresh and clean. He doesn’t mind winter, not really. There’s an ethereal beauty about it that cannot be denied even if the relentless cold always gets to him at some point.

With nowhere else to go he walks straight across campus to the building where their German class meets. There’s still half an hour before class begins, so he climbs the stairs to the very top floor of the hall and finds a spot to sit in the window.

It’s an old building, one of the oldest on campus. The windowsills are made of heavy oak and the glass of the windows is warped with age. A draft is sneaking through; he can feel it through his jeans, a cold breath against the side of his thigh. Outside snow is falling in lazy, heavy puffs. It muffles the sounds from the road, already quiet in the early morning. This floor of the building is almost entirely deserted. If he was looking for space to think, this is it.

He rifles through his bag for something to do, fingers meeting the spine of a book. He tugs on it until he’s holding his battered copy of *Catch 22*, the pages soft with use and colored with the highlighters and pens of at least four previous owners. He flips the pages thoughtfully against one thumb, pages flashing by like a flip book. He can’t bring himself to read; not when his head is already too full with words. Instead he digs through his bag some more until he finds a pen and a piece of paper—an old receipt from some errand he’s long since forgotten doing—and begins writing against the back of the book.

He’s so caught up in it that he almost misses class. It’s only when he chances a look outside and sees Chuck’s car pulling into the parking lot six stories below that he realizes the time. He sticks the receipt—now covered with verses and fragments of thoughts—between the pages of the book, stuffing it into his bag before jogging down the stairs.

He slides through the door just as class is starting. For once their actual professor is standing behind the podium, and he greets them all as David sits down.

“Hello everyone. Your TA could not be here today. Unfortunately Mr. Sobel lives a ways outside of the city and he’s been snowed in. I’ll be teaching in his place today.”

He can feel Joe’s eyes on him from across the table, but he doesn’t bother looking up. “Professor,” Joe says, “Will you be handling meetings today, since he’s gone?”

He’s too smart for his own good sometimes.

“No,” their professor replies. “I have an engagement after class, unfortunately. He said he’d reschedule all of the meetings individually. Did you not get an email from him?”
“I haven’t checked yet today,” Joe says flatly. David can feel him watching him again. “I’ve probably just missed it.”

“Alright then. Guys, everyone get a partner. We’re going to go through the exercises on page 231.”

Chuck turns to Joe, but Joe gives him a hard look and Chuck turns to the girl next to him with a roll of his eyes. It leaves David and Joe as partners instead, and David sighs inwardly as he flips his book open.

“So. Meeting, huh?” Joe asks blandly in German.

“Yeah.”

“How’d that go? Your meeting with Sobel. Seeing as he isn’t here and all.”

David looks up at him finally. “Joe, leave it alone. It isn’t like that.”

“Yeah? What’s it like?”

“I just need some space, okay? I need some time to think.”

“And what exactly are you thinking about that’s so fucking important you have to lie about it, Web? Cause all you had to do was say that and I would’ve got it. What’s the big deal?”

“I told you, I need to figure it out!”

“Figure out what?”

“I don’t know!”

The room around them goes abruptly quiet and he realizes belatedly that those last words had come out in English, and a lot louder than he’d intended. He and Joe are leaning across the table into each other’s space, their books open and forgotten between them and their faces inches apart. David leans back abruptly and takes a few breaths, the murmur of voices returning around them as their professor frowns in their direction. He turns back to his book and reads the prompt aloud in German.

“Reading comprehension: what other books or tales did the story remind you of?”

Joe looks at him incredulously. He wants to finish their conversation; David can guess that much, but like hell he’s going to humor him. It’s one talk he can survive without having. He glares across the table at him until Joe swears under his breath, huffing.

“Fine. The Odyssey, I guess.”

The reading was about a woman sitting on a rock on the Rhine, singing a song that caused sailors to crash their boats in search of the source of the sound. His answer is uncharacteristically on-point; for all his strengths, a wide knowledge of classic literature has never been Joe’s strong suit. David frowns. “You read Homer?”

“Fuck no. I read Percy Jackson. You know that’s the answer he’s looking for, though.”

David shakes his head, turning back to the book and clearing his throat before reading. “In the fourth stanza—”

“David.”
He looks up, giving Joe a halfhearted glare. “What?”

Joe sighs, looking away in frustration. “What are you trying to figure out?”

“I don’t want to fight with you, Joe,” David sighs. “Can we just get through this class?”

“Come on. We know this shit already.”

It’s true. They’re miles ahead of the class and they both know it. Joe’s been speaking a mess of slang-riddled Austrian German since childhood, David is determined to stay one step ahead of someone who’s practically fluent out of sheer competitive spite, and the two of them have been bitching each other out in the language as soon as they could string a sentence together—in fact, that was probably the thing that had David’s German improving at a rate that had even Sobel reeling. Last night they’d done the homework together, David reading aloud and Joe half asleep with his head in his lap under the guise of practicing listening comprehension. After the lights were out Joe had whispered the story back to him, how the book was all wrong because that wasn’t how his mother had told it to him when he was a kid, and David had fallen asleep with his words still echoing in his ears.

Joe’s right. They know this shit. They’re good at this shit. It’s kind of their thing.

That’s not what he says, though. “It never hurts to practice.”

“Seriously?”

David looks at him silently.

“Why won’t you just talk to me? What’s the issue?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“It kind of does. You’re acting weird. Is it that much of a crime that I’m fucking worried about you?”

“Joe,” he says finally, patience wearing thin. “It doesn’t matter, alright? It isn’t your place to worry. That’s not what—” he gestures vaguely at the space between them, “—this is. I’ll handle it myself.”

They’re far ahead of the class, but they’re not that far; Chuck must overhear some of that, because he gives David a sharp glare. Joe’s expression closes off rapidly and he turns back to his book, heedless of his best friend’s concern.


The rest of class is uneventful. They reread the story a few times, Joe’s eyes glazing over with boredom. By the time the clock finally strikes eleven he looks ready to fall asleep, though to be fair so does everyone else.

Joe lags behind Chuck as everyone packs up. Within moments David and he are the only two left in the room, and it’s only then that Joe finally turns to him.

“I’m sorry for pushing, okay? Whatever it is.”

David waves him off. “It doesn’t matter.”

“It matters to you.”

He doesn’t even begin to try to parse that; doesn’t want to. The implication behind it has something
sharp and heavy settling between his lungs.

“Look,” Joe continues. “I know they’re supposed to be fixing the radiator at your place tonight, alright? But Chuck says he’s got plans tonight, and I guess the rest of my roommates are going out to deal with some family issues. You can come over if you want. We can talk this shit through if that’s what you need.”

It’s never when his roommates are home. David’s used to the pattern by now. Maybe he should be more critical of that, but he can’t find the energy to care. “Midnight on a Thursday,” he says. “I know the pattern.”

Joe frowns at that, and David pushes past him and through the door before he can think about why. This is what Joe wanted, all of it. He never wanted any feelings in this, and that’s exactly what he got. He has no right to be upset about that now.

David takes a deep breath of the cold air outside, feet taking him in a random direction. He doesn’t have another class for a few hours and suddenly the very idea of being alone with his thoughts is stifling. He turns toward Easy abruptly, pulling out his phone. Want a coffee? He texts Hoobler quickly.

*I’m in a study group.* David’s phone pings a second time with an emoji of a skull, and then Hoobler is typing again. *Easy in 20?*

*Yeah,* he types back.

He crosses campus quickly, hands in his pockets to protect against the cold. By the time he gets to Easy his hair is dotted with snow. When he steps inside it instantly melts, leaving his head cold and damp.

“Luz,” he greets, trying and failing to shake the worst of it out.

“Woah, woah. What happened to you?”

David frowns. Surely none of the day’s woes are showing on his face—he’s caught up in it, but he thought he was doing a good job of keeping it all concealed.

Luz is laughing now, but it comes out less cheerful than usual and great, now he looks worried, too. “Relax, I was kidding. I just meant the snow in your hair and what I’m pretty sure are yesterday’s clothes.” He studies David for a minute, worry creasing his forehead. “Jesus, you ain’t alright, are you? What’s got you down?”

“I’m fine,” David says. Luz squints at him so he adds, “Really!”

“If you say so,” he says doubtfully, shaking his head. “What can I get you?”

“Um. Medium mocha, I guess.”

That has Luz frowning even more as he taps away at the till. “Bad day, huh?”

“I told you, I’m alright.”

“Sure. You’re ordering your comfort drink because you’re alright.”

David shakes his head and puts a few bills on the counter as Perco comes out from the store room, seemingly resuming mid-conversation with Luz. “So you were say—oh hey, Web—you were saying
what again?"

“You really couldn’t talk to me about this earlier?”

“I was busy!”

“Uh-huh, you’re always busy in the back as soon as the morning rush comes in.”

David snorts.

“Aw, just tell me!”

“Alright, jeez. So he’s drunk, right. He gets all flirty.”

“Aw, you’re joking.”

“No! Scout’s honor,” George insists, switching the espresso machine on. It groans loudly as he fills David’s cup.

“You were never a scout, George,” David says.

“You don’t know that.”

“Tell the damn story!” Perco practically shouts.

“Alright! Jesus Christ,” Luz swears. “So he’s getting all flirty, and I swear we’re getting somewhere finally. He’s talking about how, I don’t know. I deserve good things or some shit like that.”

“You’re fucking kidding.”

“Am not! That’s what he said! And I’m trying to tell him that hey, he’s pretty great and maybe he should be my good thing, you know? And I take his hand, and that’s when I see his knuckles are all bruised up like he’s punched a guy’s lights out.”

That twist has David frowning. Usually when George has a story like this it goes in a decidedly more lewd direction. “Who are we talking about?”

“Joe,” George says, and then at the face David must no doubt be making he clarifies, “Joe Toye. The cabbie.”

David nods to himself. “Joe Toye. He punched Cobb, then? Everybody was talking about how Lieb did it but I can see how they’d get confused with the names.”

George takes one hand off the espresso machine to point at him. “Yes! Exactly what I’m saying! It’s the only explanation I can see. It just makes no fucking sense. Why’d he do it?”

Perco scoffs. “I don’t know. Cause Cobb was hitting on you? And Toye happens to have dibs?”

Luz raises an eyebrow. “That isn’t even funny.”

“I’m serious!” Perco says, throwing his hands in the air. “It isn’t that much of a stretch!”

“Bullshit. Those pickup lines Cobb used are probably older than my grandma. Besides, Toye hangs out around here enough to know we don’t exactly keep the most pacifistic of company. Why would he avoid me after something like that?”
“Georgie, I don’t know, okay? No fucking clue.”

David frowns. “It’s probably not about you at all.” George looks at him quizzically, and he rushes to clarify. “I mean, you said yourself that you didn’t do anything. If he’s avoiding you it’s either between him and Cobb, or him and his own doubts. I’d go with the latter,” he adds as an afterthought. “I doubt Cobb could prevent him from seeing you if Joe really wanted to. Cobb isn’t really that convincing.”

“Huh,” Luz says, then repeats it as he piles whipped cream ridiculously high in David’s cup. “Huh. You’ve got a point there.”

David shrugs. “Who knows if I’m right.”

George slides him his coffee and they all look up when the bell chimes, Hoobler entering with the cold breeze.

“David,” he calls, plunking down next to him. “What’s going on, dude?”

“Same old. What’s new?”

“Study group was idiotic as all hell. I think if these guys spent less time on twitter while studying they’d probably have mastered chemistry by now, but what can you do? It’s basically just a friend-hang-out-group at this point and honestly I’m fine with that.”

David smiles. Trust Hoobler to find the silver lining.

“Oh, also: the landlord came by and he says he can’t fix the radiator until tomorrow. Something about a missing part. So it’s still gonna be cold as fuck in there tonight, unfortunately. He swears on his life that it’ll be up and working before noon tomorrow.”

“Damn,” David mutters. Another night either freezing his ass off or sleeping with Joe.

“Hoobs, did you want anything?” Luz calls across the counter to him.

“Uh, yeah—what is that?” Hoobler asks David, peering at his pile of whipped cream. “Can I have that?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Ooh, but with syrup on it, too. I got a free drink.” He pulls out a punch card. “Check me out, huh? Caramel and chocolate, I’m not paying.”

“You’re gonna get diabetes.”

“Yeah, and for free!”

David takes a slow sip of coffee as the espresso machine starts groaning again. Hoobler watches Luz work for a moment before turning back to him.

“Okay, what’s up?”

David puts his mug down. “What?”

“You heard me. What’s eating you?”

“Nothing.”
Hoobler raises his eyebrows. “Spill. I know you, dude.”

He takes another bracing sip of whipped cream before answering. His thoughts have been distracting him all morning. It’ll help to just get it into the open. “It’s Joe,” he says, and Hoobler’s expression darkens.

“What did he do?”

“He didn’t really do anything,” David says quickly. “Honestly. He didn’t.”

“I don’t believe you. He’s always doing something.”

“Okay, well. I guess he hasn’t introduced me to his roommates, and that’s kind of been bugging me. Do you think that’s weird?”

“After two and a half years of you guys sleeping together?” Hoobler says, raising an eyebrow. “I guess that’s a little weird.”

“Yeah.”

“What do you want to meet his friends for?”

“It just seems like the kind of thing that should happen,” David says. The question throws him off a little; the answer seems obvious. “I mean, you said it yourself. Two and a half years have gone by, and he’s never introduced us or anything.”

“You never introduced him to your friends, either,” Hoobler says, taking the mug Luz slides to him gratefully and taking a sip. “I mean, I thought that was the way you two were operating.”

“I took him to Currahee,” he points out.

Luz chokes on air. “Seriously?!”

“What?”

“That’s as close as we get to meeting the parents out here. You haven’t even met the guy’s roommates yet and he’s having drinks with Lew and Dick?!”

Words like that it sounds foolish. “We’ve been hanging out a lot,” he says defensively. “Besides, it’s a good bar.”

“Yeah, I know,” Luz says. “You’re right. You just surprised me, you know? I mean, fuck. I thought you two hated each other.”

Hoobler nods in agreement, and David bristles. It isn’t the first time he’s heard it; from his friends, from his roommate, hell, even from Joe himself. “We don’t hate each other,” he says. “Maybe we did in the beginning. It’s been years, though.”

“Alright,” Hoobler says soothingly. “It’s just the way you talk, you know? You guys are always sneaking around like it’s something scandalous. I always figured it was just the old love-hate fuckbuddy kind of deal. I mean hell, David. You don’t talk about him much, but when you do it’s always about whatever he’s done to piss you off on any given day. I never thought you two were friends.”

There it is: that same old theme. He thought he and Joe were getting somewhere. Through all this time they’ve just been running in circles after all. Joe doesn’t feel it; that much is becoming clear. No
one else around him sees it, either. His mind has been playing tricks on him.

“Hey,” Hoobler says. “What are you so glum about? You’re dodging a bullet here. The guy’s a jerk.”

“I know. I just thought maybe we were getting somewhere,” he mutters.

“Do you want to?”

David doesn’t answer; he turns his mug in a slow circle on the counter.

“David, do you want to?”

“Yeah. Maybe. Yeah, I think I would’ve liked to,” he says quietly. He pictures the sweep of Joe’s eyelids as he reads, hair falling into his eyes; the freckles scattered inexplicably across his lower back and the scar on his knee from a bike crash when he was a kid. The way he speaks English, sharp and dry; he forgets entire verb conjugations in German at random but has an encyclopedic knowledge of crass words and phrases that never seems to fail him. “I would’ve liked to try.”

Hoobler fills his cheeks with air then lets it all out at once. “I’m sorry,” he says sincerely.

“It’s fine. It’s never gonna happen. I’m gonna see him tonight. I’ll tell him we’re done.”

Behind the counter, Luz blinks in surprise. “Just like that? Two and a half years, and then just like that it’s over?”

“There’s no point dragging it out, is there?” he asks. He feels hollow suddenly, carved out and cold. “I mean, if it isn’t going anywhere for either of us I might as well stop wasting both of our time, right?”

Luz is watching him with sad brown eyes; Hoobler contemplates the point for a long moment before speaking again. “I guess you’re right,” he says finally, voice quiet. “I mean, it’s your decision to make. If you don’t think there’s any chance things are gonna change…”

“They aren’t. It’s been two years. If things were going to change they would’ve done it by now.”


“It’s a Thursday. I have class in the morning.

Hoobler tisks. “Alright, suit yourself. But this weekend we’re gonna go to Currahee, we’re gonna get fucking trashed and we’re gonna start fresh. We can’t miss it.”

“Miss what?”

“You didn’t see?” Hoobler opens his phone, pulling up Facebook and showing him the simple announcement. “They’re having a party on Saturday. I think it’s gonna be cool.”

“You don’t say. A party?” It’s the first good news he’s gotten all day, and it makes him feel a little better. “Hey George, did you see this?” he calls across the room to where George has migrated.

George looks up from the table he’s scrubbing down. “What?”

“Currahee’s having a party on Saturday.”
“Shit. A party, huh?” he grins. “Every night’s a party at that place. If they’re officially calling it that then it’s bound to be wild. Hey, Perc!”

“What?” Perco yells from the back room.

“Currahee’s having a party!”

“Really?”

“Yeah!”

“What for?”

“It says it’s for the National Lindy Hop Competition,” Hoobler reads. “Or at least there are special honors for competitors.”

“Fuck, I’m gonna get so wasted,” Perco says, sticking his head out from behind the curtain. “This week has sucked ass. The only way we can end this well is by getting trashed with a bunch of nationally-renowned dance stars.”

“Agreed,” David says. He thinks about the shade of pink of Joe’s mouth, thinks about the night ahead, and then drowns his sorrows in his cup of chocolate and cream.

He goes to class. It doesn’t go well.

He’s distracted the whole time, barely able to focus on the reading. His heart isn’t in it today; he can’t find it in himself to pick apart the symbolism in Camus when his mind is a thousand places at once. He flips restlessly through his copy of *Catch 22* underneath the table instead, eyes catching on little scraps of paper and skimming the words on them as he does. It’s a summary of the last week, organized chronologically between the worn yellowing pages of text: a receipt here, a vocab quiz there, all with lazily scrawled rhymes and phrases on the back ranging from bored to cheerful to romantic—to today. Whatever today is.

Dismal. That’s a good word.

He’s thinking all of this as he sits silently through class, as he goes to the library, as he stares blankly at the pages of his reading for half an hour before giving up and closing the book, pulling out his receipt from Easy and scrawling on the back, a few new lines to add to his collection.

He remembers that he hasn’t eaten anything all day yet he can’t bring himself to search for food. The idea of eating anything makes his stomach lurch uncomfortably and he’s already sick with nerves as it is. He needs a drink, needs a cigarette. Something to calm the tremor in his hands.

He pulls out some old flashcards and covers the back of one in ink instead.

By the time he wedges it into a new page in his book it’s dark outside and the library is emptying. He starts and checks his phone. Somehow several hours have slipped past him and it’s seven o’clock. He sighs and packs up his things slowly. He needs to get this over with before it eats him whole. He steps outside and onto the street, breath clouding the air as he tugs out his pack of cigarettes—his last one, only for emergencies, he’s almost quit, really he has—and lights it before setting off in the direction of Joe’s apartment.

It’s a long walk, and he takes the time to gather his thoughts. It’s nearly impossible, with the way his
mind is racing. The building is quiet when he gets there but he can see a light shining down from Joe’s floor. He takes the stairs double time, his hands shaking and a lump in his throat. The sooner he gets it over with, the better. It’ll all be over and then they can both go on living their lives.

He reaches Joe’s door finally, knocking on it curtly. He can hear rustling and the sound of footsteps on the other side and then it’s swinging open.

“David,” Joe says, eyes wide.

He should just tell him right now and then leave—shouldn’t even go inside. It would make this all so much easier. He can’t, though. He can’t get the words out past the stupid lump in his throat, so instead he just croaks, “Hi.”

Joe frowns. “Are you alright?”

David nods silently. It makes Joe’s frown deepen, and he reaches out to tug David forward and into the apartment with a gentle hand around his arm before he closes the door behind him.

“What’s wrong?”

He can’t do it; can’t tell him. Not like this, when he already looks so fucking concerned. All David wants is to touch him, bury his face in his neck and take in his warmth. Surely no one would begrudge him that one last time. “It’s Thursday night, right?” Joe is still frowning at him, so he drops his stuff by the door and crosses to Joe’s room. “Do I have to remind you we have a routine?”

Joe follows him, at a loss for anything else to do. “Yeah, we have a routine. You just…I don’t know.”

“What?” David asks. All the lamps in the room are off, only the blue light from outside illuminating the space. It’s barely light enough to make out Joe’s face. He strips off his sweater and flops down into the warmth of Joe’s bed. Joe lays down carefully next to him.

“I don’t know. You seemed upset earlier, and now you’re being all weird.”

“ Weird?”

“Yeah.” Joe licks his lips, seemingly lost in an inner debate. Finally he reaches out and tugs David closer until he’s half-lying on Joe’s chest, their faces inches apart. “What happened?”

“I’m fine. Nothing happened.”

Joe tisks and runs a hand through David’s hair. “You can tell me.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“So something did happen.”

“Can we just drop it? Please?” He tries to keep it from sounding like a plea. “We can talk later.”

Joe hums sadly, tugging gently at his hair in a way that has electricity shooting down his spine and his entire body relaxing against Joe’s between one breath and the next. “What can I do? Let me help, at least. What do you need?”

David closes his eyes. Joe is sharp and clever when he’s rude, but he’s devastating when he’s kind. He’s always had a big heart. Rivalry and aggression had brought them together, but the genuine sweetness that Joe can’t ever quite manage to hide is what kept David coming back. “I just need
you,” he murmurs into Joe’s neck, pressing a kiss to the skin there as Joe’s hands turn his body to jello. “Please,” he adds sweetly, and that’s what does it.

Joe takes him apart slowly and carefully, dragging each movement out until time is a blur, slow and sluggish. He shushes every sound that makes it past David’s lips, holds him close enough that the air between them takes on a life of its own as they shift and breathe and murmur to each other.

He fucks him just as carefully, if you could even call it that—and David doesn’t think he could. It’s far too gentle, too slow and sweet. Their foreheads are pressed together and Joe has a hand beneath the curve of his neck, rubbing little circles into the base of his skull that have a hum starting in the back of his brain. It’s so good it stings, so gentle that it aches. He can feel Joe’s breath against his lips and it would be all too easy to lean up, to close that centimeter between them finally, in this last moment. He can’t. That’s never what they’ve been to each other, and the thought has his eyes burning. He turns his head to the side and gets a sweet kiss to the corner of his jaw instead.

“David,” Joe whispers into the skin below his ear, rubbing the back of his neck and pushing into him, slow and sweet. “You’re gorgeous,” he says, and it brings that lump back to David’s throat. “Look at me.”

Every one of his nerve endings is aching, electrically charged and yearning for contact. He pulls Joe closer and buries his face in his shoulder instead of answering, breathes in his familiar smell and runs a hand down the divot of his spine and commits every part of this to memory. Savors every touch and lets each second drag out for an eternity so that when all of it is over at least he’ll have the memory of how it was. How they were. How good they could have been, sweet and affectionate even as they encourage each other forward, perfect rivals as much as they are perfect lovers. He could scream with it, the unfairness of it all; the sound builds up in his chest but never makes it out. Pleasure races through him, drawn out and achingly good. A sound makes it past his lips and Joe shushes him, biting gently at his neck.

Nothing can last forever—not even that, the mind-numbing pleasure and heart wrenching sweetness. Not the chemical reaction that they are, not the contradiction of kindness and fire that Joe is.

They lie across the mattress, after. Joe is breathing long and deep next to him. David can feel the mattress shift with every inhale, can almost feel the warmth of him from here. They don’t touch or banter; David can’t bring himself to, but it must seem out of character because a minute later Joe is rolling into his space to nose into the hair above his ear.

“You okay?” he murmurs.

David thinks back on the events of the morning: running out of the apartment in a flurry of motion, knot in his chest from the feeling of being foolish enough to get lost in this. He doesn’t feel like he’d been wrong now, laying here in Joe’s arms while he breathes into his hair. He feels cherished, maybe even loved.

That’s the danger of it, he supposes. That’s what got him into this mess.

“Do you ever think about the future?” David asks him finally, speaking quietly so his voice doesn’t quiver. Above him the ceiling is alight in squares of blue cast by the window. Whenever a car passes on the street below a yellow beam streaks across the water stains and turns the blue cast of the peeling paint briefly golden.

Joe huffs out a breath that could almost be a laugh; tugs him a little closer and tangles their legs together. “Yeah, sure.”
“What do you see?”

“I don’t know. We’ve got a year and a half of school left, so…” He thinks about it for a minute, breathing slowly evening out. “More of the same, I guess.”

More of the same. David nods to himself. More of whatever this is, the never-ending conundrum of whatever they are and aren’t to each other, everything always just two steps short of falling into place or falling apart.

More of the same.

“I need to go,” he says, voice thin. He sits up, but Joe follows him through the motion.

“Go? Now? It’s alright, David. I don’t mind you staying the night.”

He doesn’t mind; he never has. He’s probably never wanted it either, though. David shakes his head. “No, I mean I need to go. I need to be…”

“Web, what’s the matter?” Joe asks quietly. David shakes his head, and a minute later two fingers are turning his jaw. “Look at me. What’s going on?”

“That’s nothing.”

Joe won’t drop it though, even when David shakes his head to dislodge his fingers; now a warm hand is cupping his cheek. Joe’s breath catches when his palm meets moisture.

“David…” he brushes a thumb along his cheek to catch a stray tear. It’s too tender of a gesture for what they are, and it makes David’s chest burn to think it’s a taste of something he’ll never have. “What is this? Did I do something?”

That sends a bubble of laughter through his chest. It comes out bitter and raw. “No,” he says, pushing his hand away and standing up to throw his clothes on hurriedly. The parallels to this morning are not lost on him, and it makes him laugh again. “You didn’t do a damn thing, Joe.”

He turns to go. Just as he steps into the living room Joe catches his arm, and his half-open backpack spills books across the floor. The crash of it is loud after the quiet of the night. He gathers them quickly and shoves them back into his bag, barely even bothering to make sure he has everything before slinging it over one shoulder. The light is on in the kitchen and it casts enough of a glow into the room that David can make out Joe’s face; his eyes wide with worry, lips half-parted over words that won’t come. “You didn’t do a damn thing, Joe.”

He can’t fix this. Can’t fix David or his stupid need to get attached. He can’t make David stop falling head over heels for someone who’ll never feel the same. The words are piling behind David’s teeth suddenly and he can’t keep holding them back, but at the same time he has no way to give voice to everything he’s feeling. Words have always been his greatest strength, but right now with the command of two languages and pent up feelings from two years it’s all too much.

He huffs in frustration, then reaches out. Joe flinches as if he’s expecting a blow; instead David just pulls him closer by the back of his neck, watches his eyes go wide this time from surprise before he presses their lips together.

Two and a half years he’s dreamed about kissing him. He never imagined it like this; like salt and the sea, warm and sad as he tries to keep a dam on his emotions. He can feel it all threatening to burst open and he isn’t sure if he’ll scream or cry when it does. He settles for this instead, channeling all of his doubt and anger and fucking devastation at what he’s about to do into this. Their first and last
kiss.

Joe’s fingers curl softly around his bicep, and David can’t tell if he means to pull him closer or push him away—doesn’t know which one he dreads more, in all honesty. He pulls back abruptly before he can find out, and Joe is standing there wide-eyed, his lips cherry-red.

David wipes his mouth, then his eyes. “I don’t think we should see each other anymore,” he says, tone firm and solid for the first time since he came here. “I think you understand why.”

“What?” Somehow Joe looks even more shocked at that.

“We’re fuckbuddies, Joe,” he says tiredly. “That’s all we ever were. You said it. I think we reached the end of the line.” He grabs his jacket from beside the door, sniffs against the lump in his throat and wills his voice to remain level. “I’ll see you around, alright?”

For once in his life Joe is dead silent and motionless. David doesn’t look back before he shuts the door.

He wanders the streets in a daze, not wanting to go home. He has no desire to sleep, much less in an apartment that’s barely forty degrees. He lights a cigarette and walks aimlessly. After a long few minutes his feet fall into the familiar path to Currahee.

The place is blessedly empty when he gets there, only a dozen or so patrons scattered through the second room. He opens the door with numb fingers and steps inside and Hoobler’s eyes are on him instantly, watching concerned and quiet from where he’s sitting at the bar. His mouth ticks down in a worried frown. “David?”

Lew takes one look at him and sighs, shoulders slumping as he puts down the glass he was drying. “Oh, kiddo.”

David just shakes his head. He knows what he must look like: hair a mess, eyes red and face blotchy. He’s never been a graceful crier. Add in the sex hair, windburned cheeks and smell of cigarettes clinging to his jacket and he’s probably a walking disaster.

Whatever he’s picturing, the reality must be ten times worse. Lew comes around the bar to pull him into a hug just as he starts crying for real, shaking against him with silent sobs. “It’s alright,” Lew says. “Come on, it's alright. Whatever he did, it's gonna be okay.”

Ron appears behind the bar, face serene and movements gracefully dangerous as always. “Who do I need to kill?” he asks.

“Ron, get him a drink, alright? Something warm.” He rubs a circle into David’s back over and over; it’s something to concentrate on, and after a long moment he can feel his breathing start to even out. “There you go. You’re okay.”

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“Ron, get him a drink, alright? Something warm.” He rubs a circle into David’s back over and over; it’s something to concentrate on, and after a long moment he can feel his breathing start to even out. “There you go. You’re okay.”

David nods numbly. Lew finally pulls away to lead him to the seat next to Hoobler, who takes over back patting duty. Johnny is sitting on Hoobler’s other side at the end, expression murderous.

“It’s that fucker Joe, huh?” he asks sharply. “First Cobb, and now this. I’m gonna kill that son of a bitch.”

“He didn’t punch Cobb,” David says tiredly, voice tinny and wobbling.
“Huh?”

“He didn’t do it. It was the other Joe.” He thinks back to his conversation with Luz at Easy that afternoon. It feels like a lifetime ago. “Lover’s quarrel, I think,” he adds belatedly.

“Either way, he’s gonna get it for this. The fuck was he thinking?”

“Johnny,” Lew says sharply.

Bull steps in from the other room, expression going from jovial to dark in a second. He takes his usual place a half step behind Johnny’s shoulder, the silent, foreboding shadow behind Johnny’s endless pugnacious energy. “The fuck happened?” he asks quietly.

“That fuckin’ bastard Joe,” Johnny says.

Bull scoffs, taking a puff of his cigar. “He gonna die,” he says, almost inaudibly and to no one in particular.

Lew gives them both a warning look. “Bull, you know you can’t smoke in here. Both of you, out. Go find Dick, alright? Plan homicide somewhere else and give us some space.”

Bull grumbles something under his breath, but the two of them leave the room. Lew sets about making something at the stove, and Ron slides David a mug across the counter before giving Hoobler a look.

Hoobler sighs. “What’d he do?”

David pulls his mug closer and takes a sip. Rich chocolate hits his tongue, followed with the cool sweetness of peppermint schnapps. He cradles the warmth of it between his palms. “He didn’t do anything,” he says. “It was all me. I was the one that got attached. We agreed there would be no strings. I was the one who got stupid about it.”

“David,” Hoobler says. “None of this is your fault.”

“It is,” he says, taking another drink. He can feel his eyes watering again but he doesn’t even bother to wipe them. “It isn’t his fault, so it must be mine.”

For the first time since David’s met him Ron looks sad; it makes him look much older than his twenty-five years. Before he can say anything Dick comes in from the other room.

“David,” he says. “Johnny told me. How are you?”

He shrugs, sniffling.

“Hoobler, did you two ever get your radiator fixed?”

“They’re coming tomorrow,” Hoobler says, hand still rubbing circles on David’s back.

Dick nods. “Alright. You two can stay here tonight if you’d like. We don’t have much, but at least the place is warm.”

Lew plunks a sandwich down in front of him, and David eyes it warily. “I don’t want it.”

“Have you eaten today?”

David shakes his head.
“Eat. You’ll feel better. Come on, take care of yourself.”

He can barely see the other room from where he’s sitting, but he sees Johnny and Bull huddled in a corner with a few of their lackies David isn’t sure he can name; Garcia is there, and Hashey and a young kid David thinks is named Miller. When Ron notices them he leaves his place behind the bar to join their huddle. David turns away from them and slowly starts eating.

Half an hour later he’s curled in a pile of quilts on Lew and Dick’s couch, just buzzed enough that falling asleep is as easy as sinking into a warm bath.

He dreams Joe is sitting on a tall rock, basking in golden light as the darkness of the Rhine rushes by below him. He’s singing something under his breath, snatches of a song David can barely hear. If he heard just a fragment more of the melody or just a few of the lyrics he could put a name to the tune, but as it is the rushing of the water is drowning out the sound. He needs to get closer, needs to hear his voice and see the way his lips shape the words, the way the golden light is no doubt catching on his eyelashes and the ends of his hair. David drifts nearer and nearer on the current, eyes fixed on the man high above him as everything else in the world fades away. The current is bringing him closer and closer, and then all at once he’s thrown into sharp rocks at the base of the cliff and falling into the cold darkness of the river until everything is crushing and weightless at once.

He jolts awake abruptly.

Outside the snow is falling, thick and relentless in its suffocating silence. Hoobler is breathing in his usual familiar cadence of whistles, curled up in an armchair with a heavy blanket tucked around his legs. David is warm, a world away from the crushing darkness from his dream, surrounded by friends. He takes a deep breath and watches the snow fall outside the window for another long moment. Then he shuts his eyes again, willing his mind to calm.

Sleep drags him under again, and this time he doesn’t dream.

Chapter End Notes

(Led Zeppelin’s Communication Breakdown blares in the distance)

This took so frickin long and writing it made me really depressed, so I’m not really sure how it ended up as long as it did. Thank you all for reading this monster of an angst chapter!

The story they’re reading for German is about a siren named Lorelei, who lured sailors to their doom on the Rhine.

Questions/problems/concerns/comments/complaints? Any and all of that is food to me and I’d love to hear what you have to think!
Interlude II

Chapter Summary

While David was having a day-long emotional crisis a visitor arrived in Philadelphia.

Chapter Notes

Another missing scene!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Navigating Philadelphia is a lot worse than anyone had warned him.

It could be that it’s a busy month, what with the competition in town. His cab driver from the airport had informed him with no shortage of bitterness that dancing was supposed to be a dead sport. No one expected the ‘motherfucking Olympic sized crowds’ to show up, and so the city council hadn’t prepared for the sudden influx in tourism over the course of just a few days. As it was the cabbies were suddenly buried in frustrated customers trying to wade through the traffic of several thousand dance enthusiasts that was hopelessly clogging the streets. His cab driver was sporting a greenish bruise on his knuckles and the air of someone who needed an extended vacation on a beach somewhere.

Now, after the chaos of getting through the chaos of the airport, the drive with his angry cabbie and a literal run-in with a harried stranger in the lobby, he takes the stairs to apartment 506 double time. The strap of his duffel is digging into his shoulder painfully and he’s on twenty five hours no sleep now—he never could fall asleep on airplanes, no matter how well the corps taught him to catch shuteye when he could—but he’s had a lot worse. There’s something he needs to do and he can hardly give up when he’s so close to his goal.

He almost misses the door. The numbers look like they were stenciled onto the wood decades ago, the curve of the six worn off to the point it looks more like a C. Around the doorframe the paint of the walls is peeling in large chunks, and toward the floor it’s discolored with dirt and black scuff marks of shoes. There is no carpet, but that seems to be more for sanitary reasons than any stylistic choice. The linoleum looks more or less clean, though grime is accumulating in the corners of the beaten rubber molding.

He raps on the scuffed wood of the door a few times and suddenly everything is abruptly still. He didn’t realize he could hear the low hum of voices until they all cut off at once, leaving the hallway eerily silent. While before the worn-down hall had at least seemed occupied, now it seems suddenly desolate and unwelcoming. He knocks again.

The door swings open abruptly.

“Hi,” the man on the other side says, frowning at him. The door is barely open, his body blocking the rest of the room from view.
“Hey. Heffron, right?”

That just makes his frown go from irritated to hostile. “Do I know you?”

“We met in Alabama when we were kids. It was a long time ago. I’m Sid Phillips.”

“Phillips,” Heffron says slowly. “Yeah, I know you. You’re a friend of the Sledge family, right? Listen, we don’t know anything about—”

Somewhere a voice behind him calls, “Hey, Sledge? Shelton? Either of you know some guy with—”

Heffron rolls his eyes, turning to cut the speaker off with a glare. In doing so the door inches open further. Sid gets a peek of the room behind him—two men sitting at a kitchen table, one with a phone pressed to his ear, both of them watching him suspiciously. Sid barely notices them, eyes widening as he catches a glimpse of the third man standing behind them. He knows he had a goal in coming here, but the shock of success still has his breath catching.

Sid hadn’t known Snafu well in camp, but the man he’d known briefly three years ago is almost unrecognizable now. He’s clean for the first time since Sid met him. When Sid had known him overseas he’d been the shadowed specter of Kilo company, pale even in the desert sun and somehow always scrawny and more sleep-deprived than everyone else. He was a loner with a reputation for sticking to a few close friends and lashing out at anyone else who got too close, someone Sid did well to avoid. Sid had left just as Eugene had arrived, and upon his homecoming Eugene had insisted Snafu was nothing like the image he projected. Sid never was entirely convinced of it, having trouble reconciling his friend’s stories with that lingering image of the ghost wandering through their ranks.

It’s certainly hard to reconcile now that the man is before him, clean and well-rested.

Snafu slides off his perch to come closer, steps slow with swagger. There’s a bright red mug in his hands—PROUD VETERAN OF YOUR MOM, Sid reads. Maybe he hasn’t changed so much after all.

“Well, well. Sid Phillips,” he says, dragging the syllables out long and lazy. “They send you up here to bring their baby boy home?”

The man on the phone rolls his eyes before resuming speaking to whoever is on the other line. Heffron turns back to Sid, no longer blocking his view into the room but definitely not welcoming him in, either. This is really not what he expected upon learning his friend was hiding out in an apartment in Philadelphia, but all he can do at this point is roll with the punches.

“Not necessarily. It depends on how this goes. I just want to talk to you and Eugene.”

Shelton takes a sip of coffee. “Who says he’s here? There’s only one Eugene that I can see, and he ain’t a Sledge.”

The dark-haired man at the table rolls his eyes and mutters something in heavily-accented French that has Snafu barking out a laugh. That’s Eugene Roe accounted for, then; he ticks the name off his mental list, trying to link the remaining faces in the rooms to the people in the police report. Grant and Liebgott remain unaccounted for right along with Sid’s errant best friend.

Said best friend steps out suddenly from a wide doorway to the right, and Sid jolts.

He looks well. That’s the first thing Sid notices; Eugene had come back from war sunburned and scrawny, his eyes dull and his face shadowed. Here his face isn’t quite as sallow and he seems to have regained some of the weight he’d lost. For the first time since before the war the dark bruises
underneath his eyes are almost gone. His hair is shiny if in a spectacular case of bedhead, grown out rebelliously in a mess of fluff that is most certainly not regulation. He has on some sweats and a t-shirt that are very clearly thrift store finds, the elegance and style of his old home nowhere to be found. If Sid didn’t know better he could’ve mistaken the two of them for another pair of harried college students just waking up for the day.

It’s a domestic sight, a peaceful sight. He looks happy and Sid suddenly has a lump in his throat.

“Let him in, Babe,” Eugene says quietly, mouth pressed in a familiar stubborn line as he looks Sid over. “It’s not like we weren’t expecting this.”

Heffron doesn’t look thrilled about the situation, but he steps aside to let Sid through. He takes in the space. It’s a shabby room but clean and well-loved, cluttered with textbooks and notepads. There’s a pile of shoes at the door, and the sofa in the middle of the room is battered and strewn with mismatched worn blankets in a way that speaks of coziness and found-families.

The apartment is laid out like a capital L; what Sid thought was a doorway must lead into a kitchen, and the table sits halfway between there and halfway between the large living space. The back wall is lined with windows and the other two bear doors that seem to lead to bedrooms; through the curtain he can make out a rail that indicates either a fire escape or balcony. One last person comes out from the kitchen with a bowl of cereal, sitting down at the table next to the man who’s finally hanging up his phone.

“Who was that?” he asks as he chews.

“Web,” Phone Guy answers. “Making sure we’re okay. He ran into him in the stairs, apparently.”

“Hmm,” the newcomer answers noncommittally. “He seemed upset this morning.”

“Yeah, you’re telling me.”

“No, like he seemed weird upset. Not just pissy as usual.” There’s a pause as he chews more cereal. “You should maybe look into fixing that, Joe.”

Phone Guy is Liebgott, then. That makes his friend Charles Grant by process of elimination, unless they have more people hidden away somewhere.

“Let’s focus on the matter at hand, alright?” Liebgott says loudly, addressing the room at large. “Me and Chuck gotta go to class in a bit, so I’ll just come out and say that whatever’s happening here? He ain’t staying the night.”

“I second,” Grant pipes up, shrugging at Sid apologetically. “No offense, man. We just don’t have any fucking space.”


“You can try and get us to come back all you want, Phillips. It ain’t gonna happen,” Snafu drawls. Sid shakes his head. “I’m not here for that, either.”

“Why are you here, then?” Eugene asks flatly.

“I—” he clears his throat nervously. “I, uh. I wanted to make sure you were doing okay.”

Snafu scoffs. “Really?”
“Okay. Yes, and they sent me to get you guys to come home but you don’t have to if you don’t want to—”

Snafu rolls his eyes. “There it is.”

“Come on. You saw this coming. You knew I at least had to try.”

Eugene sighs and looks up at him from where his eyes were previously trained on the floor, mouth thin and shoulders set. “We’re not going with you.”

No matter how much he’s changed over the years he’s been overseas, his boundless stubbornness when he refuses to budge on an issue has been the same since he was four years old. Eugene never lost the righteous fury of his childhood. If anything he only grew into it.

Sid sighs. “You don’t have to come with me. They sent me here for that, but I’m not gonna drag you back against your will. Can we talk, though? Please?”

Snafu is still staring him down, eyes assessing and expressionless. “You really think you could drag us against our will even if you wanted to?”

Sid shrugs. “Like I said, that’s not what’s gonna happen here.”

Eugene studies him for a moment longer before he relents, mouth twisting down as he gestures to the table. Sid sets his duffel down near the door and crosses the living room as Grant and Liebgott leave, presumably to get ready to go. Liebgott stops him as their paths cross halfway to the kitchen, catching his chest by the tips of his fingers and leaning close.

“If you fuck with them,” he says quietly, “we will fucking end you. Do you understand me?”

Sid blinks, but Liebgott just stares him down. There’s an edge to his expression Sid can’t identify, some sort of hostility he can only liken to a cornered animal. He’s starting to see it in all of the permanent residents, though it’s notably absent from Eugene and Snafu themselves. While they’ve already seemingly accepted their fates their roommates are still caught between fight and flight. Sid can only be grateful that Eugene found a group of people who would look out for him—so many people they know would’ve turned he and Snafu away at their door, yet here in this shitty apartment a thousand miles from home he’s found a new family ready to go to war over it all. The week has been an emotional roller coaster, but here and now Liebgott’s threat has a weight lifting from Sid’s chest.

“Okay,” he says, and Liebgott lets go of him with a tiny satisfied smirk.

“Okay,” he mimics, pushing through one of the doors leading away from the living room.

Sid shaking his head before crossing into the kitchen, taking a seat at the table. It’s a crowded space probably only meant to fit four chairs. As it is there are six, the last two looking vaguely as if they’d been pilfered from a classroom at some point. Eugene slides him a shark-adorned mug of coffee and they all sit down, four sets of eyes watching Sid with varying degrees of expectancy and hostility.

It’s Roe who breaks the silence finally. “Remind me who you are?”

“Sid Phillips,” he says quickly. “I served with Snafu for a little while, and Eugene and I are friends from childhood.”

“Yeah, I met him a few times when I was a kid,” Babe adds. “We spent a few summers in Alabama and he was around a lot. I didn’t think you’d take the Sledge’s side over your own friend’s.”
“I didn’t. That’s what I’m trying to tell you guys. They sent me here to bring you back, but if you
don’t want to come I won’t make you.”

“Why didn’t they just come themselves?” Eugene asks flatly.

“They couldn’t find lodgings.”

“We know that much. Everything is booked,” Snafu says. “The National Lindy Hop Competition is
fucking everybody over.”

It’s probably more a stroke of luck for them than anything; getting into Philadelphia as a visitor has
become almost impossible in the last few days, and Sid is almost sure they would’ve been swarmed
by family members and journalists by now if it hadn’t been for that fact. “You’re fortunate that you
have a place to stay here. It might just be the perfect situation if you want to avoid the world for a
while.”

“That doesn’t seem to be working out so well. You got here, didn’t you?” Snafu retorts dryly. “How
about you, Phillips? Where are you bedding down, huh?”

He sighs inwardly. “All the hotel rooms are booked out for guests, but they retained space for
competitors.”

Heffron shrugs, frowning. “Yeah. So?”

“So the Sledges couldn’t come up because there was no space for them.”

He watches the pieces click together slowly; Snafu and Roe’s eyes go suddenly wide, and Heffron
just barely manages to hide a snort. “Sid,” Eugene says, “Did they send you up here because you’re
the only one who knows how to Lindy Hop?”

“Yes?” he says. “I may have a side mission while I’m in town.”

“Which is to compete in a national dance-off?”

“Essentially, yeah. It’s not so bad though, right? I know how to Lindy Hop.”

“Barely. Mama signed us up for that class when we were seven years old.”

“And I really took a shine to it!” Sid insists. “Besides, it’s certainly paying off now. If she hadn’t
done that I wouldn’t be here.”

“Lucky us,” Snafu grumbles.

“So you came to bring us home,” Eugene says. “You came to compete in a dance competition. What
else is on the list? It kind of seems like you’re already halfway done with your itinerary.”

“Eugene, come on,” he says in an undertone. “Come on, let up. I’m not your enemy here, alright?
Would you stop trying to frame it like that?”

Eugene looks at him flatly. “You know what this looks like.”

He does know, and that’s the problem. From where Eugene’s standing it sure looks like he’s on the
wrong side of things. He was sent here to bring Eugene home, but they’d all known being in
Alabama had done nothing for his emotional state after the war. The Sledges had known, Sid had
known, and Eugene himself had most certainly known. He’d come here to get away and the person
he could trust, the person he loved more than anyone, had been the only one who’d been offered a
seat in the car. Maybe this is why. Maybe he thought Sid would never let him get too far, not really.

But that’s not right.

“I know what it looks like, but that isn’t how it is,” Sid says. “Hell, Eugene. I couldn’t convince you
to do something you didn’t want to do when you were six and I can’t now. Are you safe living
here?”

“What?”

“Are you safe?”

Eugene frowns, taken a back. “I’m safe,” he says finally.

“And are you happy?”

“Of course I am.”

“You weren’t happy back home.”

Eugene gives him another flat look, this one vaguely amused. “Not really, no,” he says sarcastically.

It’s a joke, really. They’d all known it. Sid should’ve known it sooner, should have done something
sooner. As it is Eugene had found his own solution. “If you’re happy here and you’re safe here then
I have no business bringing either of you anywhere else. Alright?”

Eugene sighs, tension Sid didn’t even notice he held suddenly seeping out of his shoulders. He looks
to Snafu silently and gets a brief nod, solemn and quiet. “Alright,” Eugene says.

“Good. Can we talk shop?”

“Talk shop?” Heffron cuts in. “What more is there to talk about? We repaired our friendships and
now we’re all good, right?”

Sid hums. “Not unless you want the most recent updates from the south.”

“Updates?”

“Yep. Thought it might help with all the keeping off the grid type stuff.”

Roe looks up from the table, chewing his lip. “That could help.”

“There you go.” Once again he has all their attention, though this time his listeners are a lot less
hostile. “The cops who were here a few nights ago took your words as official statements. The
woman in charge, officer Riggi? She’s been in contact with both families. Apparently the Sheltons
are taking the L and moving on.”

“Figures,” Snafu snorts. “As soon as they got a way to contact us they gave up the chase.”

“Yeah, news on that front is decidedly not good, by the way,” Sid continues hesitantly. “Honestly, it
probably would’ve been better if you’d been found sooner rather than later. You’ve really only been
missing for what, a little over a week? But as it is, that’s been enough time to sway a lot of people
against both of you.”

“Sway them against us?” Eugene parrots skeptically.
“Yeah,” he says, and sighs. This isn’t good news to deliver, but then that is what he’s here for. “Eugene, your dad’s standing in the community sheltered you from most of it on a local level. It still isn’t looking great for either of you, though. Especially you, Snafu.”

Snafu’s face is still impossible to read, his unwavering watch on Sid’s face completely inscrutable. Fortunately Eugene is doing enough emoting for the both of them. He runs a hand over his face, familiar sharpness in his eye. “What are they saying?”

“Usual chatter. You been watching tv?” Eugene nods tightly and Sid continues. “It’s mostly just stuff about how you betrayed the military. Burgin’s remarks have been helping with that somewhat, but that doesn’t mean it’s over by a long shot. And then there’s other stuff along the,” he pauses, unsure how to bring up such things in the still peace of the morning, “you know, expected stuff that’s still going on.”

“Spit it out, Phillips,” Snafu bites.

“Bigots, homophobes, a lot of radical maniacs,” Sid says quickly. “Some people are calling for them to bring back DADT, which is never gonna happen. And hey, it’s alright! You have plenty of allies up here, and there are a lot of people on your side in all this. It’s coming to an end.”

Snafu snorts. “Sure. Alright, is that all?”

“No. Eugene,” he starts, once again trying to find a way to phrase it without being cruel. “Your mom misses you.”

Whatever Eugene was expecting, it wasn’t that. He stares at Sid blankly.

“She wants your contact information,” he goes on. “She wants just one way to talk to you. She’s really broken up about everything.”

“She should have thought about that earlier,” Eugene says quietly, tone sharp.

“She didn’t know what to do.”

“About what? About the war? Was it that I didn’t want to talk about it, or was it the fact her son is a ___”

“Stop! Okay?” Eugene is still staring him down, ready to fight. He may be vastly improved from the man who returned from the desert, but breathing hard and angry like this he isn’t anything close to the boy Sid had chased butterflies with as a kid. “Cut it out. You get why this is hard for her.”

“Hard for her, yeah.”

“Look,” Sid sighs. “When you came back I didn’t even recognize you, alright? I barely knew who you were. You changed over there. You didn’t say a word about any of it. I had to learn about you and Shelton from the nightly news, Eugene.”

Eugene does look vaguely guilty at that; Snafu only looks faintly amused.

“The point is, we’re all different people. She was doing her best, but she didn’t know how to help you. All I know is none of it worked. Here? In Philadelphia? You seem better here, both of you. You seem happier. She may have been misguided in the way she was trying to help you, but that doesn’t mean you need to cut her out forever. She meant well with all of it.”

Eugene raises an eyebrow. “Even with the blind dates? The galas? All of that crap?”
“Even with that crap,” Sid says, though it comes out a little strangled. “I mean, that was seriously misguided, but she was trying. She didn’t even know you like guys.”

“Just one guy,” Eugene corrects quietly, but at least he’s smiling now.

Sid’s phone buzzes; that’s his alarm going off. “I’m glad we got to talk early. Is there any chance we can meet up tonight to finish this up? I’ve got a meeting to go to.”

“Meeting?” Snafu asks, already grinning.

Sid rolls his eyes. “Okay, it’s a warm-up practice brunch for contestants.”

Eugene snorts.

“Oh, leave me alone.” Sid digs through his pocket, fingers finally closing on a calling card. He’d rejected them as a novelty when his mother had first had them made, but they’ve been coming in handy more and more often these days. He slides it across the table to Eugene. “Call me and we’ll meet up, alright? I heard you got rid of your old phone and I don’t think you have my new number.”

It’s a calculated move; this way he doesn’t have Eugene or Snafu’s numbers, putting the power of communication solidly in their hands. Eugene must appreciate the sentiment because he nods solemnly. “We’ll call you. Good luck with the competition today.”

“Oh, I won’t need it,” he says as he gathers his things.

After a few last goodbyes he’s out the door, jogging down the stairs to step out onto the street and try to wave down one of the many angry cabbies. Call him an optimist, but even with his main goal a resounding failure he can’t help but chalk this day up as a success. They managed to have a somewhat peaceful conversation for the first time in months, he knows Snafu and Eugene are safe, and he’s seen firsthand the network of people they have on their side. Things are going surprisingly well.

With a weight off his chest he slides into a cab, giving the address for his hotel. All he can hope for now is that the competition goes just as smoothly, and then he’ll be home free.

Chapter End Notes

I am sorry this took forever to post! I was gonna put it up at the same time as the next chapter, but turns out the next chapter is going to be massive and hard to write. Same with the one after that. We’re coming up on the climax here, people! So consider this a holding chapter while I work on making the next one super snazzy and great. I will be doing my best to stay on schedule now that finals week is on the horizon and we’ll see how everything works out!
Chapter Summary

Today in Philly: drama is a lifestyle which Gene would rather not live, and yet here we are.

Chapter Notes

Finals are over, my skin is clear, my crops are watered and I am writing again.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.


"He's my best friend. He always has been. We've had our problems, but having people in your life who understand you the way we understand each other...that's a gift you can't take for granted. It took me three years to realize that. Now there are people out there trying to frame us all as heroes, and I don't mean to disrespect you. But you ought to know some don't see us as heroes at all. Our pictures are in the papers. People know our faces, the faces of our friends and our loved ones. There are folks who would try to hurt us, and he'll never be able to go home, I doubt either of us will. You can have my story and frame us as martyrs all you want, but you ought to know what it's gonna cost us."

He wakes suddenly and completely, going from dead asleep to totally alert within the space between seconds. He extracts his face from the cloud of orange hair it’s buried in to roll over and look out the window. The sky is still a dark blue-purple, their plant a silhouette against the dim light. Sunrise is a long way off yet.

Babe shifts next to him, letting out a sleepy grumble. “Gene?” he calls, voice rough and low from sleep. “What time is it?”

Gene cranes his neck to look at the clock, the green numbers almost painfully bright in the dim lighting. “Four,” he replies. “Go back to sleep. You don’t need to be up yet.”

“Neither do you,” Babe retorts, yawning widely and snuffling deeper into the blankets. It’s adorable; he’s adorable, and Gene smiles at him fondly. “It’s so early it doesn’t even qualify as morning. Why are you awake?”

“I don’t know,” Gene answers honestly, absently brushing a few strands of hair off Babe’s forehead. “Something must have woken me.” A whimper, he thinks; a scared, hurt noise that had his fingers twitching to help as he’d jolted awake. Perhaps someone was dreaming. All is quiet now, save for the familiar rhythm of Babe’s breath. “It’s gone, I think.”
Babe curls around him, tugging him further into the warmth of the blankets in a tangle of limbs. “Go back to sleep, then. This is an inhumane time of day to be up.”

Gene thinks about the textbooks stacked up on the bedside table, the notebooks in his bag and the pile of flashcards he needs to memorize before Wednesday. Four o’clock is as good a time as any to start picking away at work, especially when he’s feeling as alert as he is. But even as he thinks it sleep is once again tugging at his eyelids, aided by the warmth of their bed and the weight of Babe’s arms wrapped around him.

“Oh, okay,” he replies quietly, curling closer until they’re pressed together and warm under the pile of blankets. Within minutes he’s asleep once more.

The next time he wakes up the sun is shining and somewhere in the apartment something is shattering. Quite spectacularly, from the sound of it.

“’Sthat?” Babe mutters.

Gene is moving before he’s even fully awake. Knowing his roommates it could’ve been either something completely mundane, or a life-threatening disaster in the making. He wiggles his way out of Babe’s hold and picks up a sweatshirt from the back of the desk chair, tugging it on before pressing a kiss to the inch or so of Babe’s forehead visible above the edge of the blankets. “Guess we’ll find out,” he says.

Babe grumbles sleepily in response.

He pads silently toward the kitchen. Merriell is seated at the kitchen table with his feet curled up onto the chair and a book against his knees. Gene looks him over quickly, but there aren’t any signs of damage. “Ça va?” he asks anyway and gets a shrug.

“Wasn’t me. It was Joe.”

Gene rounds the corner and then backs up quickly. Shards of glass are strewn over the floor. “Woah, hey. Drop something?”

“It’s alright. I’ve got it,” Joe says, tone pinched and quiet. There’s a rivulet of blood rolling down his right hand; Gene’s moving before he can think about it, tiptoeing quickly through the glass on the floor to get to him.

“Did you step in any?”

“No,” Joe grumbles petulantly. “I told you, it’s alright.”

Gene frowns, studying him out of the corner of one eye as he digs through the cabinet under the sink for the first aid kit. His face is drawn, his eyes underlined with dark shadows. Joe has never been one to handle lack of sleep well, tiredness turning him short-tempered and clumsy. Not only is it a bad sign that he looks so exhausted, it’s an omen in itself that he’d go without sleep in the first place.

Gene tears open a pad of gauze and dabs at the side of his hand quickly, squinting at the cut. “You’re lucky you didn’t get any pieces in it,” he comments, holding the pad in place with one hand while he digs around for a bandage. “What happened?”

“Put a mug down too hard, I guess,” Joe mutters, gesturing at what must be ground zero on the counter. The handle of the mug is still there, surrounded by a starburst of shards. “Don’t know my
own strength, eh? What’s the verdict, doc? Am I gonna make it?”

Gene gives him a flat look. “It ain’t bad, but it ain’t exactly shallow, either. I don’t think we’ll have
to amputate today,” he adds sarcastically. He pulls the pad away to get a better look. It’s a triangular
gash on the side of his hand, no doubt deep enough that he’ll end up scarring. It’s still bleeding
steadily, and Gene presses the pad back down quickly. “You alright?”

“I think you can see that for yourself.”

“You know what I mean, Joe.”

“Just tired. Don’t worry about it.”

“Why ain’t you sleeping?”

Joe gives him a solid effort at a bitchface. It isn’t effective without his usual fire, and Gene stares
right back until Joe relents. “Just stuff with David, alright? It doesn’t matter.”

Gene sighs, securing the bandage and closing the kit as Joe sets about collecting the shards off the
counter. It isn’t like him not to talk about his conflicts, especially when one David Webster is
involved; usually he’s more than happy to complain about the man to anyone who will listen.

Gene is about to point out as much when Chuck enters the room, hisses at the sight of glass and
backs out again. He comes back a second later with a broom and begins gathering the mess in a
dustpan. “You alright, Joe?”

“I’m fine.”

“Did you sleep?”

“Leave it,” Joe says tiredly.

Chuck sighs, but he doesn’t bring it up again. He turns instead to Merriell, squinting at the book
propped against his knees. “Snaf, what is that?”

“Catch-22. Found it under the couch,” Merriell answers, holding it up a little so Chuck can see the
cover. “I saw you reading it the other day. Wanted to see if it’s any good.”

Chuck frowns. “Same book, yeah, but that one isn’t mine. My cover came off yesterday.”

“Came off?” Gene asks.

“Came off, got ripped off when I shoved it into my bag, whatever. Same thing.”

“Oh,” Merriell says. “Must be yours then, Joe.”

“Why would it be mine?”

“Do you see anyone else here who’d be writing in the margins in German?”

Joe frowns, walking through the path in the glass so he can get a closer look at the pages. “It isn’t
mine. I’m not even in that class. It’s gotta be David’s. He dropped a bunch of stuff last night. Here,
give it.”

He reaches to grab it, but Merriell jerks it out of range. “I ain’t done reading it!” he yelps, cradling it
close to his chest.
“Come on, I know it’s his. Who else’s could it be?”

“It could be mine. You don’t know.”

“You literally just implied it isn’t.”

“Well now I’m implying it is!”

“You don’t even speak German!”

Gene reaches forward and snatches it from Merriell, who accepts his defeat with grace. “Careful, Genie,” he says in French. “Could be any number of things written in there.”

Gene gives him a warning look before a slip of paper squeezed between the pages catches his eye. A receipt maybe, the back covered in looping blue cursive. Most of it is in German, but his eyes snag on a few lines of English he skims against his better judgement.

Swallowing saltwater; you are the sea’s  
Brine beneath my tongue, lungs  
Struggling for air in the undertow, I’m  
Being dragged below by the tide.

He looks away quickly, snapping the book closed. Whatever any of that means, it isn’t meant for him. “How long you been reading that, huh?” he hisses at Merriell as he hands the book across the table to Joe.

“Hardly at all! I was trying to read about Yossarian’s gay-ass crush on the chaplain but those papers kept getting in my way! It’s not like half that stuff even makes a lick of sense,” he adds defensively.

Joe opens the book, pulling out a crumpled receipt as if it’s made of gossamer and skimming a block of German text quickly. His cheeks go suddenly, violently pink.

“What?” Merriell asks.

“Nothing. It’s nothing interesting. Grocery lists, that sort of thing.” He closes it gently between the pages before all but running out of the room.

“Aw, come on. Share with the class!” Merriell goads, following him quickly.

Chuck rolls his eyes after them, finishing up his sweeping and pulling out his phone as the two keep arguing in the living room. “This place is turning into a madhouse,” he says to Gene. “I’m getting out of this apartment today.”

“Where you going?”

“Doesn’t matter.” Gene raises an eyebrow, and Chuck shrugs. “Alright, I’ve got a friend who lives nearby. Gonna live on his couch all day. I need a break from this place. I love you guys, but this crowd is gonna kill me.”

“Would that be the same friend you been texting nonstop for the past week?”

“Maybe. Doesn’t matter. The point is I have somewhere to go that isn’t here.”
Gene nods thoughtfully. “You got the right idea, keeping friends like that. Four of us in here was already a stretch.”

“You know what they say. Four is company and six is a crowd,” Chuck snorts, picking up his cup and leaving the room. “Let me know if you want to get out of dodge, too. I can drop you off if you want to go somewhere before your class.”

Gene follows him, ducking between Merriell and Joe still arguing in the living room. He leaves them to their bickering and crosses back to his room, closing the door behind himself as quietly as possible. It’s pointless with all the noise outside. Not even Babe could sleep through something like that. Gene flops unceremoniously back into the pile of blankets and Babe reabsorbs him into the cocoon immediately.

“What’s that all about?” he grumbles.

“Usual bullshit. Mer found one of David’s books or something like that, so now they’re arguing over who gets to keep it.” The noise in the living room swells, and he does his best to wedge his face between Babe’s neck and the pillow beneath him. “I’m gonna go crazy if they keep going on like this. There ain’t enough space for all of us in here.”

“Why don’t you go back to your old place?”

Gene pulls away from his hiding spot so he can look his boyfriend in the eye. Of all the things he was expecting to hear that wasn’t one. It stings a little to have something like that spoken in a place so warm. “I can’t, remember? Julian.”

“God, no. I don’t mean move out,” Babe rushes to correct, horrified. “Jesus, Gene. Do you want to move out?”

He shakes his head. No way, no matter how crowded it gets here. They may have their problems but he loves his roommates, quirks and all. He loves Chuck’s surly silence in the morning; Joe’s odd hours and weird cabbie stories; Babe’s sunshine and fire, his complete cluelessness when it comes to the kitchen and complete understanding when it comes to Gene. He cares about their guests, Sledge with all his graceful composure and quiet righteousness and Merriell, who in his years of absence had felt like a missing limb, a wound that had refused to heal.

“Never,” he says to Babe, who scoots across the pillow to kiss the tip of Gene’s nose.

“Good. But that doesn’t mean you can’t visit them if you need some space. I mean, hell. When was the last time you saw them, anyway?”

“The movie, I think,” he says, closing his eyes. That sounds about right; Sunday at the campus theatre.

“Go visit them. It would be good for you,” Babe insists. “You need time away from all of this.”

“It’s more important that I stay here until class. Especially if those two are fighting.”

“Gene,” Babe says. “It’ll be okay. They’re fine. You need to look out for yourself too, alright? Besides, it’ll probably be good for them to solve a problem themselves for once.”

That’s a fair point. “Alright,” he says, but makes no effort to get up. They can afford a few more minutes of laying here.
Babe’s point is proven right when Gene steps out of the room fully clothed ten minutes later to find Joe and Merriell have directed their energy at the television. In lieu of fighting with each other they’re now working together to roast the morning news anchor.

“I don’t know where they found this guy, but he can’t be older than I am,” Joe says. “They should hire me instead. I can read a teleprompter.”

“They call this news?” Merriell retorts. “Hell, not only is he struggling just reading the thing but it ain’t got anything interesting on, anyway. There’s shit happening in this city and he just wants to talk about traffic maps.”

On screen, the anchor shuffles his papers. “Now, as for weather we’re looking at another two inches of snow tonight—”

Both members of his audience boo loudly.

Chuck takes a seat on the couch next to Gene, the two of them tugging their boots on in unison. “Took my advice?”

“You had the right idea,” Gene replies.

“Where you going, Chuck?” Merriell asks.

“To a friend’s. I need some quiet for a while.”

“A friend’s,” Merriell drawls.

“That’s right.”

“You ain’t talking about Tabby Cat, are ya?”

Chuck gives him a flat glare, and at his silence Joe looks up with a frown. “Who the fuck is Tabby Cat?”

“Oh, no one,” Merriell says blandly. “Gene, where are you off to?”

“Old roommates,” Gene says. “I’m just checking in on them.”

“Huh. Didn’t realize you didn’t always live here.”

“I only been here a semester,” he replies. Merriell is watching him raptly as if the mundane details of the last few years are the most important things he’s ever heard, and that more than anything has Gene elaborating. “Used to live with some folks from my major. Ralph’s from Philly, Renee is Belgian and then Babe’s friend Julian moved in there after the fact. He’s local but he was born in ‘Bama.”

“No shit,” Merriell says. “When we gonna meet all these people, huh?”

“I didn’t realize you’d want to.”

“Don’t know why I wouldn’t.”

Gene is saved from replying to that particular statement by the news anchor shuffling his papers once more, clearing his throat with a sickly rattle. “In other news, a national story just grew a lot more local as missing persons Eugene Sledge and Merriell Shelton were located in Philadelphia just two days ago. Families of the two say that while they’re relieved their sons have been located they have
not yet returned home.”

He continues to drone on, but his voice fades out in Gene’s ears as two photos of his roommates appear onscreen. They must’ve been taken when they’d first enlisted; Merriell’s cheeks are still soft like a kid’s. He can’t be more than eighteen, dress uniform perfectly tailored yet still a strange contrast to his youth. It’s how Gene remembers him from years ago when they were still thick as thieves and ready to take on the world. If not for his own selfishness maybe Merriell would be less haggard now, less shell-shocked and still smirking slightly at the camera as if it’s all some elaborate joke.

He’s snapped out of thoughts by Merriell here and now, shouting into the other room. “Mon cheri, we’re on the news! They got real pictures of us this time, too!”

“I’m glad you see the humor in this,” Sledge grumbles as he comes out of the pantry. He frowns, studying the screen for a moment. “Wow. Those really do bring out your eyes.”

“Right?”

“Are you guys not worried?” Joe ventures. “It sounds like it’s only a matter of time before the press comes knocking.”

“They can’t do anything for a while,” Sledge replies, though he sounds a little unsure. “There’s no way into the city right now with the competition unless they already have somewhere to stay, so the only problem would be local news. And as for them, they don’t even know where to find us. As long as we keep our heads down we should be good.”

Gene frowns. Merriell’s always been one to stand and fight or run away. In all the time he’s known him hiding has never been his style, though maybe things have changed in the years they’ve been apart. Merriell looks up and catches Gene studying him, and Gene looks away quickly.

“Gene,” Chuck says. “If you’re ready to leave now I can give you a ride. Your old place is on my way.”

“Yeah, alright.” He ties his boots quickly, following Chuck out the door.

It’s freezing cold in the hallway, and that’s only a prelude to the chill that hits him as soon as he steps outside. He tugs his coat closer around his shoulders and slides into the passenger side as fast as he can. Chuck must share his pain, because the first thing he does after turning the ignition is crank the heat up to full power.

“Should we be worried about Joe?” Gene asks through the chattering of his teeth. “He seems…I don’t know. Off, somehow.”

Chuck shakes his head as he buckles his seatbelt and throws the car into gear, pulling out of the lot. “He needs to get it out of his system. After that he’ll be okay. I think,” he mutters as an afterthought.

“He wouldn’t stay mad over a book all day, would he?”

“Over a book David’s written about him in? Yeah.” At Gene’s silence he glances over. Some of Gene’s confusion must show on his face, because after a beat Chuck elaborates. “You guys came home late last night. I didn’t get a chance to tell you, but for the sake of peace around here you should probably know.”

“Know what?”
“Joe and David. They’re through.”

“What?” Gene asks, frowning.

“They’re done. David came over last night and told him they have no future or whatever. Some shit about how this is the end of the line.”

All Gene’s breath leaves him. Joe had been complaining about his fuckbuddy since Gene had met him. To have it end like this is jarring, especially when they’d seemed to be on such good terms these last few weeks. “Just like that,” he mumbles. “How’d Joe take it?”

“Well, I got home at around ten and he was blasting Evanescence and playing GTA. So not great.”

GTA is not Joe’s happy video game. It’s his burn-the-world-down game, just like Evanescence is his nothing-left-to-live-for band. The two have never before been used in conjunction. “Jeez.”

“Yep. I got him to talk about it, but after that he just kind of shut down. Wouldn’t talk or eat or anything.”

“He didn’t sleep.”

“No. I almost feel bad for hating on David for so long. It seemed like they were just starting to see eye to eye. Joe seemed happy, you know? Maybe a little manic, but happy. Now it’s just…nothing.”

“And David didn’t say why?”

“Nope,” Chuck says, popping the ‘p’ obnoxiously.

“He must have a reason,” Gene says as reasonably as he can. He’d like to give David the benefit of the doubt after everything, he really would.

“Oh, I’m sure he’s got a reason,” Chuck replies flatly. “I just hope it’s a damn good one, or else there’s gonna be words.”

The car rolls to a stop on Gene’s old street. “I hope it works itself out,” Gene says as he opens the door. “We’ve had what, two years now of David Webster making him miserable?”

“Here’s to another year yet,” Chuck grumbles. “Nothing is ever that easy with those two.”

Gene throws him a wave as he slams the door, the engine fading into the distance as he jogs up to the doorway set into the worn brick. It’s always weird coming back to this place; strange to think he has two homes to return to now, a house in Louisiana that could probably use some TLC and an apartment in Philadelphia that could probably use a demolition crew.

He walks quickly to the stoop, snow squeaking under his boots. The key is hidden behind a loose brick in the corner of the wall, a testament to Dike’s complete lack of security. He unlocks the door and takes the stairs double-time to get the blood flowing to his already-frozen toes. The hallway is dark and gloomy, the single naked bulb unlit and leaving the grimy window at the end of the hall to cast grey light onto the oily carpeting. He finally comes to a stop outside his old door, rapping on the wood twice. It swings open nearly instantly.

Julian is standing on the other side, surprised. “Gene,” he says, then blurs, “Oh, thank god,” Alabama accent sneaking in to soften his vowels. It only comes out in dire situations. This is not a good sign.
“Thank god?” Gene asks wearily, already expecting the worst.

“Yeah. I need to talk to you.”

Gene lets himself be ushered into the kitchen, watching Julian as he fusses. No one else seems to be home, yet Julian is moving with a sense of urgency Gene doesn’t find comforting. None of the lights are on in the room and it leaves the space feeling just as whitewashed and cold as the hallway outside. He looks out the window, frosted over but with the curtains thrown wide to let in as much light as possible. Outside the fire escape bears a blanket of snow and a pile of groceries. The sight is so surreal that Gene just studies it for a minute, bemused. He’s drawn back to the present by a clang of metal as Julian digs through a cupboard.

“Everything okay?” Gene asks hesitantly.

“Okay? Yeah, it’s fine. Do you want coffee?”

Gene nods, if only to give him an outlet for his restless energy. Julian pulls out a blue stovetop percolator Gene recognizes as Renee’s and starts filling it, the actual coffee pot unplugged and forgotten on the counter.

It’s that sight that has the pieces finally clicking into place. “You don’t have electricity,” Gene says.

“What? Oh,” Julian says, setting the percolator on the stove. “Yeah, it’s been out for a while now.”

“How long?”

“What is it, Thursday? So four days now.” Something must show on Gene’s face because he rushes to add, “It isn’t so bad! You guys had it way worse with the radiator. Our heating and stove are gas, so at least it’s still warm in here. It’s cold enough outside that none of our food goes bad on the fire escape. Sometimes it gets a little frost bitten, but what can you do?”

“Have you talked to Dike?”

“Renee and Ralph said they’d go talk to him on the way back. They ran to the store for groceries. They took Anna with them. Did you know Anna’s here?”

“I heard she was coming,” Gene says.

“Yeah, she’s back. Gosh, she’s so cool. She dragged them out to shop because me and Ralph never go out to do it,” he says it all in a rush, and Gene frowns as he tries to keep up.

“Okay…?”

“Yeah, cause we’re always home but we never leave cause I don’t know how to ask him if he wants to come out? Of the room, that is. To do things. Like shop, or other stuff.”

“Other stuff?”

“Yeah. Get food, or whatever.”

Oh. “Like a date.”

“Yes! Like a date. So we mostly stay here and study.”

Gene nods along thoughtfully as Julian puts the percolator on the stove. “Julian, if you want to date him you should just ask him out,” he says.
“You think so? I was trying to figure out if he’s gay or not without being rude about it, you know? Like, how do you just ask a guy that? I asked Babe for advice and he just called me a fuckin’ virgin and told me to go get my head on straight. Which is kind of ironic if you think about it, because I think getting straight would kind of defeat the whole point.”

Gene snorts. “Ralph would say yes. If he’s really been impossible to find these past weeks because he’s been holed up in here with you then he’s probably gone for you already.”

“You think so? Jeez. Thanks, Eugene.” The percolator finishes gurgling, and he crosses the kitchen. He starts pouring coffee just as the front door opens with a bang that has Gene jumping in his seat.

“How many people do you have living here again?” Gene retorts, and Ralph cackles.

“Ah, shut up. You missed us. I know you did.”

“Any luck with Dike?” Julian asks him.

Ralph tisks and shakes his head. “Nah. I don’t know where that guy ever goes. He has to know one of his buildings has no electricity, right?”

“Guess not. That or he just doesn’t care.”

Doesn’t care is more likely. “Let me know if he doesn’t turn up,” Gene says. “I might know some people who can get it working again.”

“You know the story,” Gene replies. “I told you the other day.”

“No, no. I mean what’s the deal with us not meeting them yet?”

“Well, Julian pipes up. “What’s up with that? You tell me Babe has a twin from my home state and I don’t even get to meet him? He’s basically our third brother.”

“He and Babe aren’t twins,” Gene clarifies unnecessarily. “And you two ain’t brothers.”

“Pshaw. Tell that to him. He’ll back me up.”

“Gene,” Renee calls from the other room, the consonants coming out soft with her accent. “I overheard and I think I agree.”
“With who?”

“With them,” she responds, breezing into the room with Anna at her side. Behind her back Julian crows victoriously. “I would like to meet this twin of Babe’s, and Merriell as well.”

“Merriell?”

“He is your brother. You do not talk much of home.” She smiles conspiratorially. “He has all the gossip, no?”

That’s probably true and Merriell most likely wouldn’t hesitate to share it, as much as Gene doesn’t need stories of their childhood adventures spread around. “He was talking about meeting you guys, too.”

“Of course he was,” Julian says. “We’re amazing. Seriously, we should do this. We could go get drinks tonight or something. Why the fuck not, right?”

“I just don’t know if they’re ready,” Gene says. It’s been eating at him these last few days, the worry over the entire situation. “I don’t know how long they’re planning to stay, but it sounds like they might be trying to settle. They’ve been running a long time now. Have you seen the news?”

“We have,” Anna says. “But Gene, will you ask? They are searching for a home. They should know there are people here who care about them. Perhaps then they will realize they will always have a home here, even if they cannot stay.”


She nods. “Life in transit. We all travel too much to settle down, but we find a home with people we love.” She takes Renee’s hand, squeezing it once. “If they are ready, perhaps that is what they need.”

It’s solid logic; moreover, it’s a solid appeal. Anna has a whole cluster of places she calls home while Gene just has the two, but through being displaced from her base she understands it all the same: people talking differently, acting differently, the lack of familiarity making everything seem colder somehow. It had taken him a while to settle into Philadelphia and she and Renee understand that better than Ralph, Julian or even Babe ever could.

“I’ll ask them,” he says, already pulling out his phone and scrolling through his messages for the number to their burner and typing out a text quickly. *What are you doing tonight? My friends want to meet.*

Almost immediately, his phone buzzes. Renee raises her eyebrows triumphantly.

*With the roomies? Ouais. Currahee @6? We’ll tell the others.*

Gene frowns to himself. “Any of you guys heard of a place called Currahee?”

He’s met with furrowed brows. “No,” Ralph says. “Well, maybe. I think it’s a new bar that just opened? I haven’t been but I’ve heard stories.”

“Ohh. He wants to meet there at six.”

“Ohh,” Julian chants under his breath.

His phone buzzes again. “My roommates are coming, too.”

“Ohh,” Julian says a little louder. “Party night!”
“Party night,” Gene parrots, closing his phone. His Friday just got a lot more interesting.

The afternoon passes sluggishly, the five of them lounging around the living room to idly flip through textbooks and argue over magazines. It’s nice not having power, in a way. Gene has never been one to champion unplugging from electronics, but without the added distractions he’s able to get a surprising amount of work done while still catching up with his friends. By the time he, Renee and Ralph depart for their evening class he feels surprisingly refreshed. It’s just as well, with the way his evening is bound to be full of drama.

An hour and a half of Genetics later they’re meeting Anna and Julian on the street, trudging through the snow and arriving at a storefront in the middle of an alley. It reminds Gene strangely of a speakeasy, and when he says as much Julian laughs.

“You think we need a password?”

“God, I hope not,” Ralph gripes. “We are so not wealthy enough to bribe our way in.”

The four of them pass into the warmth of the bar gratefully, but Gene lingers outside for a minute under the guise of smoking. Really he’s just toying with the unlit cigarette in his fingers, studying the minute dents in the paper and the numbness creeping slowly into his fingertips. After a long moment he comes out of his thoughts, lighting it and replacing his lighter into his pocket just as a car door slams shut. He looks up to see his three roommates walking away from a cab at the end of the alley. Babe brightens visibly when their eyes meet, quickening his steps until he’s at his side in seconds. “Hey,” he says. “Good day?”

“Good. Very quiet.” A little lonely, as lame as it is to admit. He’s gotten used to having Babe around, and being apart from him for most of the afternoon sat strangely with him in a way he didn’t even notice until now that they’re together once again. He pulls him into his side and gets a peck on the cheek in response. “How was it back home?”

“Alright. Quiet for the most part, after Sledgefu left.”

“Sledgefu?”

Babe rolls his eyes. “That’s what Joe’s taken to calling them. I think it’s actually starting to stick, weirdly enough.”

“Huh. How’s he doing?”

“Joe? Weird. He was quiet on the way here.”

Chuck brushes past them on his way inside. “Do you want us to go get a table?” he asks.


“Huh? Oh, let me help. Julian said he wanted to talk,” Babe says, sliding out of Gene’s hold.

Gene is about to follow, but Joe is still lingering in the alley like a shadow. When he turns Joe is making grabby hands at what remains of his cigarette butt and Gene hands it over silently, waiting while Joe takes a long drag before speaking.

“They didn’t say it was this bar,” he says finally, tone petulant.

“Probably didn’t think it mattered,” Gene replies. “Do you know it?”
“Yeah,” he mumbles, studying the cigarette butt in his hand before stubbing it out against the wall. “David took me here a couple days ago.”

Gene just blinks at him, unsure how to respond. Of all the things he expected to hear that wasn’t one of them.

“Don’t worry about it,” Joe rushes to say before Gene can say anything. With the dark circles under his eyes and the exhausted way he carries himself he looks almost crazed. “This is just a normal night, okay? It doesn’t matter. Whatever happened doesn’t matter,” he adds insistently, almost to himself.

Gene sighs. If Joe wants to ignore the problem that’s his right. “Let’s get you a drink,” he says, and Joe looks almost grateful as he follows him inside.

It isn’t busy, but it isn’t quiet either. Gene spots their friends in a round booth in the corner, everyone packed around the table save for Chuck who’s lingering at the bar. Gene squeezes in next to him, Joe still lagging a step behind him.

“We can get rounds for the table if you want,” Gene tells him.

“No, no, it’s good,” Chuck replies distractedly, looking back and forth down the space.

Gene frowns at him. “You looking for someone?”

“No, I’m just—”

Down the bar the bartender catches sight of Chuck. He rolls his eyes mid-martini shake and then raises his voice as he shouts into the back room. “Tab!”

“What?” someone yells back.

“You boyfriend’s here!”

Chuck splutters. “Ron! He isn’t—”

A man steps out of the back room, cursing the bartender under his breath all the while. When he catches sight of Chuck he turns violently pink. “Chuck! Long time no see, eh? I didn’t know you were coming in tonight! You should’ve told me earlier. We could’ve come together.”

Chuck smiles warmly at the man across from him, eyes lighting up. “Oh, it was a quick kind of decision! I was just coming in to meet some friends.”

“Friends?”

“Oh,” Chuck starts, as if remembering they’re there. He drags Gene a little closer. “This is my roommate Gene. You haven’t met. And that back there is Joe.”

Ron freezes. Joe freezes. Hell, even Tab freezes.

“This can’t be good,” Joe mutters.

Ron stares him down for a moment longer. He opens his mouth to speak finally, but is interrupted by the appearance of another man from the curtain behind the bar. He looks tired and is very clearly drunk; when he catches sight of Joe he starts laughing humorlessly. “You better have a very good reason for being here.”
Joe frowns. “I don’t know—”

“What was the one thing I told you not to do?”

“Look, it isn’t my fault. It came out of nowhere.”

“All you had to do was not break his heart, and two days later he comes in here crying?”

Joe looks about two minutes away from crying himself. Or possibly two minutes away from putting his fist through a wall. The expressions look basically the same on him. “He broke up with me, alright? He ended it. What the fuck does he have to cry about?”

For the first time the man across from him looks genuinely confused. “He did? Why would he—”

“I don’t know! I don’t know what I did!” He exhales raggedly. “I need to talk to him. Is he around?”

The man stares him down for another moment, eyes searching. Whatever he finds seems to satisfy him, because he reaches under the bar for two glasses, filling them with whiskey and sliding one to Joe. “Not tonight, but I am. Come on,” he says, gesturing to a table. “It sounds like you and I need to have a serious talk about all of this.”

Joe follows him and Gene sighs inwardly as he realizes he’s alone at the bar, surrounded by strangers. He’s just gathering up the will to flag down the bartender through the crowd manners be dammed when a familiar face appears across the bar. He takes one look at Gene and starts filling pitchers with beer.

“Ron takes forever,” Sledge says. “He does a good job, but he takes ages to do it.”

Somehow Ron must hear him from the other end of the room, because he looks up with a cold glare.

“Not that anyone minds!” Sledge amends loudly. “It’s part of his charm!” He slides one pitcher to Gene before grabbing the other two.

Gene studies it as they head back to the table. It’s thick and a dark shade of pink, bubbles rising slow and rich. “What is this?”

“Beer. It’s cherry. Don’t let the color fool you. There’s a reason they stock it here, and the reason is that it’s ridiculously strong.”

“I’m guessing this is where you two have been working, then?” Gene ventures as he follows him through the room toward the packed booth in the corner.

“Here? Oh, yeah. I thought we’d told you guys already. This is the place,” he gestures broadly with a pitcher of beer. “They’re still in the process of fixing it up. We’ve been busy.”

Gene is almost proud that he gets to the table without spilling any beer. He sets them down and slides into the booth next to Babe, soaking up his warmth in the places where their bodies touch. Inside or not, it’s still winter.

Across from them Anna and Merriell are talking animatedly in pidgin French, and Sledge takes a seat on Merriell’s other side after putting his own pitchers on the table. He’s barely settled into his seat before Julian is grinning at him widely.

“You must be Eugene,” he says, elated.

“That’s me,” Sledge says hesitantly. “I’m sorry, I don’t know you.”
“That’s my mistake. I’m Julian. Heffron’s brother.”

Gene sighs, not sure if he’s amused or exasperated. “Julian, for the last time, you two ain’t brothers.”

“You don’t know that,” Julian insists. “Tell him, Sledge. As a fellow Alabaman I think we know our own.”

“You’re from Alabama?” Sledge asks.

“Indeed I am. Born there but raised alongside carrot-top over here.”

“Hey!” Babe whines.

“No offense intended!” Julian rushes to add, picking up one of the pitchers and divvying it into glasses. “Anyway, the point is if you and Heffron are brothers and me and Heffron are brothers, then by extension you and I are brothers, too.” He slides Sledge a cup. “Simple math.”

“Me and Heffron aren’t brothers,” Sledge says, seemingly at a loss.

Julian tisks. “You are, though. In fact, after this night I’d even go so far as to say anyone who drinks beer here with me is my brother.”

“Even me?” Renee asks, bemused.

“Especially you, Brother Renee.”

“Ouais, et moi aussi,” Anna chimes in loudly in an over-the-top imitation of a Cajun accent that has Merriell throwing his head back to cackle at her side. She raises her glass in a toast. “À la fraternité!”

Julian cheers in agreement as eight glasses clank together, sloshing red beer onto the center of the table. And that’s how the night begins.

The room is lively with chatter. Ralph is sitting in one of the rounded booths with Julian sprawled across his lap, cheeks pink from alcohol. Renee seems to have met Chuck’s friend; the two of them are talking animatedly about something while Chuck grins at them both as if Christmas has come early. At some point Phillips appeared and he and Sledge are sat at a low table, heads bent close as they talk quietly, elbows pressed together. Gene is surprised to see Anna leaning across the bar making small talk with the terrifying bartender. Voices are ringing through from the other room, loud and happy.

“You alright?” a voice says in his ear, low and sweet.

He turns and Babe is right there, looking at him expectantly. His lips look soft and pink, his cheeks flushed and his eyes bright. He smells like fresh cherries; Gene leans in to kiss him and finds out he tastes like them, too. It’s slow and familiar and Babe sighs into it sweetly, fingers coming up to trace his jaw as he presses closer. Neither of them let up until someone wolf whistles.

“Jeez,” Babe laughs. “What was that for?”

“Nothing. I’m just happy,” Gene replies, and whatever look is on his face has Babe’s smile turning dopey.

“Yeah?”
“Yeah.” And it’s true—he can’t stop thinking about it, about the strange serendipity of every choice that led them here. He and Babe had met under the most bizarre of circumstances, that much is true. They had their own circles, their own families and studies and friends. By all accounts they wouldn’t even be here at all if it wasn’t for that letter Babe had gotten from Afghanistan all those years ago.

And yet here they are—and even more amazing, here their friends are in a bar, laughing together and getting progressively more pink in the cheeks. Here their family is, from halfway across the world and finally safe at last. To have all these people in one room together makes something in Gene’s chest settle that he can’t find the words to explain. It feels like home, being here with them. Suddenly a string of words spoken softly in the garden section of South Philly’s Ikea make a lot more sense.

There’s a missing piece to all of it, though. One face is absent from the crowd.

“Do you want another drink?” Babe asks him, and he shakes his head.

“I’m gonna get some air. Need to figure out where Mer went off to.” His absence is impossible to ignore, now that he’s noticed it. It leaves his fingers twitching restlessly.

“Alright,” Babe says. “Good luck.”

Gene gives him one last chaste kiss before tugging his jacket on and heading outside. The air is sharp and cold and he tucks his chin into his collar, tugging a cigarette out of his battered pack as he scans the alley. He can’t see much in darkness, and he only really spots Merriell by the flaring of embers in the shadows. He’s leaning against some sort of alcove next to the bar—a loading bay, maybe. Gene joins him there, taking the offered cigarette and using it to light his own.

They smoke in silence for a long minute, Gene training his eyes on their boots side by side in the snow. He thinks about all the times they’ve stood side by side like this with their bare feet in the mud and the air around them warm and heavy as a blanket. They didn’t need to talk back then, every gesture so familiar they could read each other in dead silence.

Things are different now. The silence is different. Not bad, just not the same.

Merriell seems to be thinking along the same lines. He huffs a soft laugh with a cloud of smoke before speaking finally. “You talk different now,” he says in French. “Did you know?”

He didn’t notice the change, and he frowns as he shakes his head. “What, I got an accent or something?”

“No, your French. It’s all…” he flicks his head, eyes staring at nothing as he searches for a word. “Bougie, I guess.”

It’s Renee’s fault, no doubt. Somewhere within their first month of meeting each other they’d struggled to find a place where their two dialects met, finally building a bridge halfway between drawling Cajun slang and refined Belgian vowels. He’s self-conscious of it now that Merriell’s pointed it out, and when he speaks again it’s in English. “I don’t get as much time back home anymore. It was gonna happen eventually.”

Merriell nods thoughtfully at that and blows out another long plume of smoke, watching it drift away into the darkness. “I been to see mawmaw,” he says, breaking the silence.

“Yeah?”

He nods again, slowly. “Yeah. ‘Bout a month ago.”
Mawmaw, Gene’s grandmother with a well-loved house in the trees, who had taught Gene to heal rather than hurt, had taken them both into her home and pushed them to get an education, to work hard and look out for one another. He hasn’t seen her since July. “How is she?”

“Same as ever. She’s doing good. Misses you like hell.”

“What did she have to say about Sledge?”

“I didn’t bring him up.”

Gene frowns. “He wasn’t with you?”

“No, he wasn’t in the picture, really.” He flicks his head again, a nervous gesture left over from childhood. “We took a break, I guess.”

“What? I’d assumed you were living with him in ‘Bama.”

Merriell laughs humorlessly. “You think we would have gotten away with that? No way in fuck was I gonna follow him home and ruin his life, no way. I ditched him at base and went back to New Orleans. Made it three whole months without thinking about running. I woulda stayed even longer if he hadn’t showed up at my door.”

Odd, history repeating itself like that. It rolls over and over like cogs in a clock. He takes one last breath of smoke before stubbing it out against the wall behind them. Guilt rushes through his veins fast enough to outrun the nicotine, making his heart pound and his blood feel slimy. “I’m glad he did. Good of him to follow you like that.”

“Genie…”

“You shouldn’t’a left him like that, but I’m glad he came after you. It’s good to have a family. People who won’t leave you behind.”

“I’m sorry,” Merriell blurts, eyes wide and blue in the darkness. “Gene, I shouldn’t have run.”

“What are you saying? I was the one who ran,” Gene rushes to say. “I got my admission letter and just like that I left. I shoulda taken you with me or figured something out—”

“—it’s no excuse, I enlisted just to make a point and all I did was lose you—”

“—not your fault I abandoned you. I had to leave for school but I didn’t have to leave you like that —”

“—I was so fucking stupid and I’m sorry, I should’ve talked to you about it instead of just shipping off to the fucking desert like—”

They’re talking over each other and stumbling through fragments of sentences but it feels good to say it all, even when Gene’s throat starts to feel rough and his eyes blur. He doesn’t know which of them moves first but all at once they’re clinging to each other in the darkness, the cold air pressing in around them. Merriell smells the same and different at once: Camels and water and something alien and new. His arms are stronger and more wirey at the same time, but his warmth hasn’t changed. He’s still the same boy who followed Gene through the bayou and dragged him into fights, who taught him how to cook and fell asleep on Mawmaw’s couch five nights a week. Gene pulls him closer.

“I’m done running,” Merriell mutters into his shoulder. “Swear to God. I’m done. I’m not leaving
someone I love behind, not again.”

“Yeah?” Gene sniffs. “You gonna settle down finally? White picket fence, a few kids?”

Merriell snorts a laugh, but he seems to sober quickly. “We been thinking about it. Been saving up for an apartment. Might as well make it here.”

Gene freezes. Something warm blooms in his chest, something entirely sweeter than cherry beer. “Here in Philly?”

“Yeah. If you’re alright with it, that is. Figured we got a job, we got friends and family. All we need is a good lease.”

Gene pulls away to look at him. “Really? We gonna spend weekends together? Yoga classes on Saturday and brunch on Sunday mornings?”

“Is that what you city boys do for fun?” Merriell gripes, but a smile breaks through. “Shit. Maybe we should move somewhere else, then. You know I can’t live in a place where they require shoes in fine dining establishments.”

“They require shirts here, too.”

“Well fuck. Guess I better go back into the country.”

Gene laughs wetly. “Don’t kid. You guys should settle here. If you can find a place you should really consider signing that lease. Just,” he amends quickly, “not with Norman Dike. Please, for the love of god, not with him.”

“I may be dumb, but I ain’t stupid.”

Gene grins in the darkness. He can’t help it. It feels like a missing piece of himself has finally settled back in his chest. “C’est une bonne nuit,” he murmurs quietly as they head back inside.

“You know what, Genie?” Merriell murmurs back, just as quietly. “I think that bougie French might just suit you.”

Gene elbows him roughly, the way they used to when they were kids. “Beck moi tchew. Come on. We need more drinks.”

Merriell laughs as he follows him inside.

The massive group splits their separate ways in the early hours of the morning, Julian declaring one last time that they truly are all brothers now. Gene does a quick head count of his roommates before they all start hobbling home together—and everyone is accounted for this time, Joe still quiet but a little more settled into himself somehow, a little less restless. Chuck is at his side, a silent presence as they help each other along in the snow.

When they finally get home Gene collapses into bed without even taking his shoes off. Babe laughs at him, tugging them off his feet before dragging him up and toward the bathroom.

“Come on. We need to shower at the very least.”

“Edward Heffron, I never. Are you after my virtue?”
Babe snorts. “You have beer in your hair, fair maiden. It’s all sticky. And I got a cosmopolitan sloshed on me by a tourist. We are disgusting, and I’m not spending all of Saturday washing the sheets just because neither of us bothered to shower.” He leads Gene behind him into the bathroom, adjusting the water until it’s warm.

“I’d much rather wash the sheets for other reasons,” Gene purrs. Or thinks he purrs. Honestly, it’s probably more of a slur than anything.

“God, I always forget how ridiculous you get when you’re drunk,” Babe giggles, which, rude. He’s slurring half his words himself. “Get in. I’ll even wash your beer hair for you.”

He makes good on the promise, and even his taking the opportunity to style Gene’s hair into a shampoo mohawk doesn’t ruin the domesticity of it.

When they’re finally in bed, warm and clean and content, Gene is almost tired enough to be lulled instantly into a deep sleep. Almost. “They’re thinking about getting a place in Philly.”

“Hmm?” Babe grumbles from where his face is pressed into the nape of Gene’s neck.

“Sledge and Mer,” he elaborates.

“They should do it,” Babe yawns. “As long as they don’t sign with Dike.”

Gene snorts. “That’s exactly what I said.”

There’s a pause so long Gene thinks Babe’s drifted off. He’s about to fall asleep himself when Babe finally speaks again. “So you’re okay with it?”

“Yeah,” Gene says genuinely. “I’m—yeah. We had a rough time of it, you know? All this time I was thinking he ran away because I was gonna go to school. I kept thinking I shoulda tried harder to get him to stay. Shoulda fought for it. I guess all this time he was thinking he shoulda fought for it, too.”

“I think that’s what they call ‘communication issues,’” Babe replies, sassing even as his words slur together sleepily.

Gene rolls over to nudge their noses together. “I don’t regret it. I don’t think I can. I don’t think he does either.”

“No?”

“No. It brought me you.” Babe snorts a laugh, and Gene smiles. “It brought him Sledge. It brought all of us right here. I don’t think any of us can regret any of that, not really.”

“No, I suppose not.” Babe murmurs, pressing one last kiss to his lips before sleep drags them both under.

He’s warm. He’s safe. He’s happy. They all are. That’s the best gift he could have gotten. All hardships aside, this moment is the end to a good night. Despite every bit of baggage from the last three years Gene can’t find it in himself to regret a single thing.

He dreams of trails in Louisiana and mud between his toes, and all is well.

Chapter End Notes
5 actual fake figurative bucks to anyone who can guess whose chapter is next!

Romantic love is great but you know what else is vital? Platonic love, my dudes. That’s right. This is the cheesiest thing I’ve ever fucking written but you know what? Sometimes that is necessary. Some good cheesy healing for all y’all. It’s important.

Anyway, thanks for putting up with my huge hiatus and sticking around. I’d love to hear what you guys think!
Chapter Summary

In which there ain’t no party like a Currahee party cause a Currahee party don’t stop until speeches are made, disaster strikes and the ambulance arrives.

Chapter Notes

I was going to post this on Saturday but life got messy and I had a funeral to attend and no access to the internet. And then I was going to post it this Saturday but I really don’t have that kind of patience. So let’s just all play Say Amen (Saturday Night) a few dozen times to get in the mood here, alright?

He dreams of dark eyes. He dreams of hair falling into them, of an uninhibited laugh and of a bashful smile. He dreams of late nights in the coffee shop, of the smell of books mingling with espresso and mint, of him and George and George and him and the counter between them and the night around them and the hush of it all broken by soft laughter.

He hasn’t dreamt in a few weeks now. It feels good.

Of course all good things must end, and a minute later those same eyes are turning away. He jokes, he begs, he pleads. None of it is any use; George won’t look back, torn away by some distraction or task more important than whatever it is that they’ve been doing during these late night meetings. George turns and walks away, the café with all its peace spiraling into fog along with him until nothing remains but crushing darkness and the feeling of being endlessly, hopelessly alone.

Fortunately it doesn’t last long. Joe’s alarm is beeping jarringly a moment later, and he’s almost grateful to be awake. The sun is already over the horizon, cold light illuminating the clear sky and making the snow on the ground glitter almost blindingly. He sits up in bed and stretches his back, hearing at least four separate pops as he does his best to shake the fog of sleep. Already his dream is fading into a memory, but with his apartment empty and silent there’s no way to shake the feeling that he might just be the only person on earth.

He sighs heavily, crossing to his dingy kitchen and dumping what’s left of his cereal into a bowl before cracking open one of the textbooks on the table, eating as he reads. It’s been a long week—been a long semester—but at least he has Sunday free to look forward to. All he has to do is finish his double shift from hell and complete a few readings and then he’ll be free to rest as he pleases.

It’s that thought that gives him the strength to get ready for work twenty minutes later, dump some coffee into a traveler and making his way out the door to wait for the bus in the cold.

“Hey, how are you doing?”
Joe glances in the rear view mirror at his passenger. Other than barking out an address 10 minutes ago the man has spent the entire ride in silence. Hearing him speak now is jarring. “I guess I’m doing okay. How are—”

He’s cut off by a burst of laughter. “Yeah? Jerry, I gotta say the market has been booming this quarter. Good on you. How are the kids?”

Joe rolls his eyes, looking in the mirror again. For the first time he notices the Bluetooth hanging from the man’s ear.

“Yeah, yeah. She’s good. Doing real good.”

Joe tunes him out, keeping his eyes on the road instead. There isn’t much to distract him from the monotony of driving today. The sky is grey with the promise of snow, and he wishes distantly for it to hold off at least until tomorrow so that he can finish his shift without any ice on the ground. It seems unlikely, but he can dream.

Mentally he goes through his checklist: rent needs to be scrounged together at some point, he should look into grocery shopping if he doesn’t want to live on nothing but condiments for the next few days, and as much as he doesn’t want to he should probably talk to the bank about—

“Hey! Hey! What is this?”

He ignores his passenger. This seems to be the wrong move.

“Hey, you! What is this route you’re taking?”

“Talking to me?” Joe asks.

“Who else would I be talking to?”

Joe chooses to ignore that question. “It’s a construction detour. Shouldn’t make the trip any longer—”

“—Yeah, yeah, Jerry. I’ll be there really soon. We’re pulling up now.”

Joe pulls over and lets the man out with a grateful sigh. They’re at some high-end oyster bar blessedly close to the Greyhound station. It would do him some good to catch up with the gossip, if even for only a moment.

He throws the car back in gear and follows the familiar roads. Minutes later he’s pulling into the lot.

Two familiar figures are already leaning against their respective hoods, smoking as they chat. When Joe gets out of his own car Bill leans over to put a cigarette between his lips and light it for him. Joe nods his thanks; the less he has to take off his gloves in this weather, the better.

“Any excitement, Joe?” Bill asks as Joe blows smoke in one quick plume.

“Just an asshole with a Bluetooth. Other than that it’s been dead out here.”

Lieb snorts. “Yeah, well. You know it’s gonna pick up later. Saturdays are always bad.”

“One can only hope. I’m bored half to death.”

“Jeez, Toye. You’re really that desperate to actually do work at this stupid job?”
Joe shakes his head wryly. “They’re gonna start laying people off any day now. I don’t want to be the first to go. I still need a little time to get a second job lined up.”

“They ain’t gonna fire you, Toye,” Bill says. “If anyone, Lieb here is going first. How many scratches have you put on that car of yours, huh?”

“As many as I needed to, and not a single one more,” Lieb replies swiftly. “Don’t take that as a confession, though. Technically you have no proof it was me.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Bill scoffs. “We’ve all seen you drive. Either way, the point is this workplace is comprised of children—”

“Hey!”

“Oh, I don’t just mean you. You may be the baby of this here group, but we’re all still undergrads. What kind of moron lets a college kid drive their car?”

“An idiot,” Joe grunts.

“Exactly! And not only do they give us the keys, they give us a paycheck with it.” Bill waves his cigarette in one clean arc, looking at them both pointedly. “Management is a sham. When they start firing it’s either gonna be logically—”

Lieb snorts. “Fat chance of that.”

—or it’s going to be completely random, in which case it doesn’t matter whether you’re a good employee or not. Don’t let your weekends get too strenuous either way, that’s all I’m saying. A man’s gotta rest. A man’s gotta have fun.” He stubs his cigarette out before standing. “I hear from a birdie there’s some sort of shindig going down tonight at everyone’s favorite shady little watering hole. The whole city’s going.”

Lieb nods slowly. “At Currahee, yeah. I heard about that. A couple of my roommates work there.”

“Does that mean they’ll be there tonight? I’ve been meaning to meet those two. Heffron calls me the Italian big brother he never had and yet he doesn’t even introduce me to his fuckin’ twin. Unbelievable.”

“They ain’t twins.”

“Yeah, you get what I’m saying, though. I’m going to this thing, plain and simple. Toye, you should come along, too. It’d do you some good.”

“I don’t know,” Joe replies, already thinking about the stack of readings laying on his kitchen table. “I’ve got some things to take care of this weekend.”

Bill waves him off. “That’s what Sunday is for. You’re a damn senior. Don’t you know that by now? Come on. It’ll be fun. I’ll pick you up at nine.”

That sounds like it isn’t up for debate, as much as Joe would like to argue. Good luck trying to shake Bill from anything once he’s got the idea set in his head. “Alright. Nine. Sounds good.”

“Nice,” Bill says, patting him once on the shoulder before sliding back into his car. “I’m off to find trouble. Maybe I’ll hang out at the airport for a bit and cut off a few Uber drivers.”

“That your idea of fun?”
“Oh, sure. They get so grumpy. It's great.” He rumbles off, leaving Lieb and Joe alone to wait for the next bus to roll into the station and bring potential passengers with it.

“How did it go the other night?” Joe asks finally, breaking the silence. “With the roommates.”

“Oh. Thanks again for that, by the way,” Lieb replies. He studies the burning end of his cigarette in lieu of actually smoking the thing, a nervous tick both Joe and Bill learned to recognize long ago. When he finally speaks it’s so quietly Joe almost can’t hear him. “Not so great, Toye. I’ll tell you that much.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It’ll get better, you know? Things haven’t been great, but they’ll get better.”

He looks tired, moreso than usual. His eyes are shadowed and unfocused, his skin pale. It isn’t a good look. “What happened?” Joe ventures.


“Is that who you were with the other day?”

Lieb glares tiredly at the pavement, no heat behind it. He takes one last drag of his cigarette before stubbing it out on the ice-glazed hood of his cab. “You ever been in a relationship that’s, I don’t know. That isn’t really a relationship? Maybe it is to you, but really it’s all in your head?”

Joe thinks about his late-night meetings with George; sitting across the counter from him, both of them buried in books or whispering quietly to each other amid the college students studying well into the early hours of the morning. Thinks about how it had almost become a schedule and how sick it’d make him feel to miss a night, even if he had no choice. “Yeah. Sure.”

Lieb sighs. “You ever been dumped from one?”

“No. I don’t know. I don’t think so.”

“Cause that’s the thing. I don’t even know if I’ve been dumped since it was never anything in the first place. Two and a half years and then all of a sudden it’s just…nothing. And I don’t know how to react, whether to treat it as a breakup or just go about my life because we weren’t anything. We were fucking nothing, and I’m only now realizing that.”

“Did you talk to him about this?” Joe asks.

“No. Didn’t get a chance to. Maybe I should.” He sighs again, scrubbing a hand through his hair. It’s flat today, lacking its usual shine. “Got other shit to do, though. I’m still trying to throw enough money together to get a plane ticket home. If I miss a third Hannukah in a row I’m pretty sure my mom will cut me out of the will.”

Joe snorts. “Good for you, man. It’s all about family, in the end.”

“Yeah.” Lieb seems to think about that for a minute. “Hey, you really should come out with us tonight. It’ll be good for you.”

“You think so?”

“Yeah. It’s about family.” He smiles wryly, getting up and sliding back into the driver’s seat of his
own car.

Joe watches him drive away, cab lurching as he accelerates and barely avoids jumping the corner of the curb.

“Hey!” a man calls from the doorway of the bus terminal. “I need a ride north! Do you speak English?”

Back to work it is, then.

The rest of his shift drags on and on to the point he isn’t sure it will ever end. When he finally returns to his shitty apartment he’s sore from sitting for so long and stir crazy from focusing on nothing but the road and the pedals beneath his feet.

He manages to get ready and study at the same time, blasting his readings on audiobook while he showers and gets dressed. He's just scrounging through his empty fridge for anything that could qualify as dinner when there's a banging on the door.

“Joe!” Bill shouts through the wood. “Come on, time to go!”

“Give me a minute,” he grumbles, unlocking the door. Bill lets himself in. “Hang on, I should probably grab something to eat.”

“No need. We got cheesesteak.”

“We?”

“Yeah, I brought Fran.”

Thank god for that. Fran is still the only one out of any of them who actually owns a car, and Joe isn't sure he can suffer the indignity of riding an Uber.

Bill is jostled aside as Fran pushes past him to get through the door. “What, you think we’re such bad dates we wouldn’t even buy you dinner?” she asks, then pauses as she hears the lecture just wrapping up on his speaker. “What is this?”

“Econ 302, from Thursday.”

“You call that pregame music?”

“I'm just trying to stay on top of things.” He has half a mind to point out not everyone can make the Dean’s List every semester without even trying, but there’s no reason to be unkind. Just because Fran is some sort of genius who never has to fear losing her scholarships doesn't mean he should begrudge her for it.

She understands without him saying it all, anyway. Fran just tosses him a sandwich, nodding toward the door. “Are you ready? Do you need to finish it?”

“No, it's basically over.” He runs a hand across his shirt, smoothing down wrinkles that aren't there. “Do I look okay?”

If he’s being honest with himself he isn’t sure whether he is or isn’t, and that’s kind of the problem. “You never know who you’ll see at these things,” he says vaguely, corralling them out the door and locking it behind himself.

“So that’s a yes?”

“It ain't a no,” Bill pipes up helpfully. “Didn't you have some guy you were seeing for a while there, Joe? At the coffee shop or something?”

“Seeing? No,” he says, and it isn’t technically a lie. “You know I got no time for seeing someone, not right now.”

Bill sideyes him skeptically, but he lets it drop as the three of them pile into Fran’s ancient corolla. As soon as she starts the engine Fergie blares through the old speakers.

Fran turns it up impossibly louder as she pulls out of the lot, heading in the direction of Currahee. “Now this,” she shouts over the music, “this is how you get ready for a party.”

Bill hoots and starts yelling about his London Bridge going down as they speed through traffic, and Joe grins to himself in the darkness of the backseat. No matter what’s happening in his life he can never be upset when he’s around these two. Maybe they’re right; coming out tonight will do him some good.

Currahee is packed.

The bar is overflowing into the alley when they get there, the door constantly opening and closing as people move back and forth. Even that doesn't seem to subtract from the muggy heat within the crowded space. Fran is usually the human battering ram of the group, but even she is no help. Within seconds of entering she spots Kitty across the bar and is peeling away from their group, disappearing from view almost instantly with nothing to remember her by other than a muffled shout of “Grab me a Manhattan, will you?”

Without her there Joe and Bill make slow progress. When they finally do get through it’s to find a familiar face waiting for attention from one of the bartenders. “Lieb!” Bill shouts.

Lieb turns, a small smile cutting through the exhaustion on his face when he sees them. He drags them up front, effectively cutting off a handful of people without a care. “Good to see you guys. I thought I'd be trampled by this crowd in a minute here.”

“Yeah, some turn out, eh? Seen anyone you know?”

“Most of these people are dancers from the competition, I think. The roomies are here. The Easy Co squad is wandering around too, and I’ve seen a bunch of people from school.”

That means George is here somewhere, then. The thought has Joe glancing around furtively. He needs somewhere out of the way to settle and stay out of the way. “Did you guys get a booth, Lieb?”

“Yes, over in the back. I’m grabbing pitchers for the table if you want to come hang out. As soon as I can get some attention from one of these guys, that is.” He waves frantically at one of the men behind the bar. “Hey, Sledge! Show some love for a fellow roommate, will ya?”

The guy rolls his eyes midway through filling a pint. “Give me a minute.”
Bill leans across the counter, looking the poor guy over with a grin. “Hey,” he calls. “You’re Sledge?”

Sledge frowns at him warily. “Yeah.”

“You Heffron’s cousin?”

Joe already knows the answer—it’s almost impossible to miss. Sledge looks just like their friend, especially in the way he squints at them in a look that’s equal parts suspicion and aggression.

“Who’s asking?”

Bill cackles. “My name’s Bill. I’m a friend of his. Thought I’d never get around to meeting you.”

“He hasn’t mentioned any Bill,” Sledge says skeptically.

Joe starts when someone claps him on the shoulder. He turns and there’s Babe in the flesh, already a little glassy eyed but doing his best to level Bill with a warning frown. “What are you doing harassing my flesh and blood like this, huh Bill? I know your mother raised you better.”

“Ah, shuddup,” Bill gripes, wrestling him in what little space they have in the crowd. “I was just introducing myself when you decided to show your ugly mug.”

Babe rolls his eyes, turning to Sledge. “Eugene, Gonorrhea. Gonorrhea, Eugene.”

Sledge’s eyes widen in recognition. “Oh! Gonorrhea! Yeah, I’ve heard of you. Hey, Mer! Come here!”

A second man pokes his head out of the back room. “What?”

“It’s Gonorrhea!”

“Gonorrhea,” the man drawls, grinning slowly. “We’ve heard great things. ’S a pleasure. I’m Merriell.”

Bill squints at Babe. “Really, Heffron?”

He shrugs. “What?”

Lieb snorts. “Come on, Bill. You could hardly expect…”

He trails off suddenly, and Joe looks at him in confusion. Something has him frozen, dull eyes wide and alert, and Joe follows his gaze. He’s made eye contact with someone across the bar, a man no older than them with dark hair and light eyes who looks just as exhausted and dead inside as Lieb does. Joe really only has one guess as to who it could be, and it’s just confirmed when Lieb shoots off his stool and pushes his way through the crowd. The man sees him and rushes out the door, Lieb quick on his heels.

Bill sighs heavily. “Alright. Who’s gonna go after him?”

“Why do we need to go after him?” Joe grumbles. Sledge slides him a pint, and he takes it with a nod of thanks.

“You’re kidding, right?” Bill scoffs. “If that’s the bastard that broke his heart, you really think they’re gonna have a peaceful conversation about it? Lieb’s an idiot. More than that, he’s a sleep-deprived, heartbroken idiot. He’s always gonna try to solve his problems with his fists first, and I don’t want
either of those knuckleheads getting hurt when he does.” He takes the beer Sledge holds out to him gratefully, taking a long sip largely for dramatic effect. “Joe, go after him.”

“Why do I gotta go?”

“You’re built like a frickin’ bulldozer. Forgive me if that lends a certain sense of security.”

Joe snorts. “Fine. I could use some space from this crowd, anyway.”

He moves as quickly as he can toward the door. It’s difficult—the bar has only gotten more crowded, and there’s barely any space to move. He ducks between people, keeping an eye out for George all the while. A meeting with him is one thing he can’t deal with. No questions, no scrambling to explain himself. Not tonight.

Fortunately the biggest problem he’s met with is finding a way through the makeshift dance floor that’s been created in the middle of the bar since he and his friends entered. A light-haired man he recognizes as one of the competitors is swinging a woman around in a rapid series of moves that has onlookers ducking to avoid flying arms and legs. He ducks under a foot as it rushes toward his face, dodges a few more bodies, and then he’s out the door.

It’s freezing out, but the cold air is refreshing after the mugginess of the bar. He takes a deep breath and savors the way the coolness fills his lungs, leaning against the bricks behind him and looking up at the handful of stars visible in the winter sky. The alley is far from empty, the bar having overflowed with people long ago. There are at least a couple dozen people leaning against walls with glasses or cigarettes, conversation creating a low murmur that undercuts the sounds of traffic filtering in from the street. It’s nice. Peaceful.

That peace is abruptly broken as Joe is reminded why he came out here in the first place.

Around the corner he hears voices ricocheting from what must be some sort of loading bay around the corner. He can’t see into the darkness and from the looks of it he’s the only one close enough to be able to hear the noise, but the words are easy to make out nonetheless. From the sounds of it, he just found Lieb.

“Look, I found this in the apartment,” he’s saying, voice tired and emotionless. “Thought you might want it back.”

There’s a pregnant pause before his companion replies. “Did you read it?”

“No—not all of it. I glanced and saw a bit. I’m sorry.”

“Sorry for what? None of it matters.”

“Web…”

Web. Webster? Must be. Whoever he is, he’s getting increasingly frustrated.

“I’m serious,” Webster insists. “None of that matters. It’s more than clear that you don’t want this, or at least not the way I do. You don’t need to say anything beyond that.”

“That’s not fair! You’ve never given me a chance to—”

“To what?” There’s the sound of snow scuffling, and Joe moves into the shadows so he can at least see them. They deserve privacy, but if they’re really about to fight over this Joe wants to be ready.
“To fucking talk to you! You never said anything. I didn’t know that’s what you wanted!”

“Yeah, well.” Webster scrubs a hand over his face. “Maybe I didn’t want to lose what little we had, alright? Are you happy now? Maybe I didn’t want to fucking lose you.”

“Then why the fuck did you cut me out like that? You ran out with no explanation—” Webster tries to cut him off but Joe barrels on. “—No, David, you don’t get to fuck me like it means something and then—and then run out and never explain a goddamn thing to me, alright? Do you not understand that? You can’t frame yourself like you’re some sort of martyr when you never even bothered to ask me what I wanted.”

“You never know what you want!” Webster hisses. “That’s been the problem this whole time!”

“I want you, asshole! I know that much!”

“Yeah, well,” Webster says evenly after a pause, Lieb still fuming in front of him. “That isn’t enough, not anymore. You can’t—you can’t drag me around like this when you know full well this isn’t just about lust to me. We had some good times, Joe, but I’m not just some easy fuck who you don’t even need to bother to introduce to your friends.”

Lieb looks somehow even more sickly at that. “You aren’t. You were never.”

“That’s a lie and you know it. I mean, seriously? Haven’t you been paying attention?”

“No, David, you—you mean something to me. Come on, don’t you see that? You have to see that.”

Webster laughs, a choked little sound that catches in his throat and ends up sounding more like a sob than anything. “Make me,” he says bitterly.

Lieb looks frustrated almost to the point of tears, which is never a good sign. Usually when tears start falling fists start flying, too. Joe is about to step in and create some sort of diversion when Lieb reaches out, takes Web by the arm and tugs him with surprising gentleness back toward the alley. Joe backs up rapidly and settles into what with any luck looks like a nonchalant position, hoping his blatant eavesdropping will go unnoticed.

He didn’t have to worry after all. When Lieb’s eyes fall on him he almost looks relieved. “Toye. Good to see you,” he says, Webster still in tow. “Would you consider us friends?”


“Because there’s someone important in my life who I’ve been putting off introducing to my friends, and I think that’s a mistake. I think I was afraid of committing to something, or…I don’t know. I’m sure I had an idiotic reason at some point.”

This is so much more than Joe agreed to. Bill owes him so many drinks after this.

Lieb takes a deep breath. “Toye, this is David. You’ve never met, but David was my fuckbuddy and then my maybe-something-more and then the one who got away, and since freshman year he’s been making me fall head-over-ass in love with him as much as he’s been driving me up the fucking wall because he never knows when to just shut the fuck up. Maybe if we’d both listened more and argued less we’d be happy together now, but as it is all I got was one kiss and the breakup of a lifetime.”

Webster’s eyes have gone wide and watery as he watches Lieb speak. Lieb turns to him to give him a hopeful smile.
“David,” he breathes, looking at him like he personally hand-placed each star in the night sky, “this is Joe Toye. He drives a cab and works too hard and studies way too much, and he’s a good man and a better friend and I am more than happy to introduce you two.”

David appears at a loss for words, something small and happy blooming on his face.

Joe rolls his eyes, turning to Lieb. “That’s the best introduction you could do? You gave him that entire speech and all I got was two sentences?”

The two of them don’t even seem to register that he’s there and yep, this has officially gotten uncomfortable.

“You love me?” Webster breathes, leaning into Lieb’s space with a look of wonderment.

Lieb gives him a tiny smirk, the cockiness ruined a little bit by the way his eyes crinkle. “Now who hasn’t been paying attention?” he replies lowly, quiet enough to almost be a whisper.

It’s really unclear who moves first, but all at once they’re crashing together—hands in hair, swaying as they try to keep balance, whispering what Joe can only assume is German between kisses. It would be sweet if it wasn’t happening less than two feet away, and Joe silently wishes them all the best as he tries to scoot away without disturbing them. Fortunately he’s saved by the door banging open, a familiar ginger head poking through.

“Hey!” Babe yells. “Any of you guys seen Joe Liebgott?”

Lieb and Web separate with an obnoxious popping sound, both of them laughing breathlessly.

“Babe!” Lieb calls, tugging Web behind him by the hand this time. “Come here! I have someone to introduce you to!”

Babe is piling out of the bar with Gene quick on his heels, and all at once it’s like a dam’s broken with the crowd that follows. There’s Julian and Chuck and two men he recognizes from the bar as Eugene and Merriell. Then Tab, complaining loudly about how crowded and muggy it’s become inside, then Hoobler, loudly agreeing. Then Bill, then Perco.

Then George Luz, eyes widening when he sees Joe.

“Shit,” Joe breathes.

George is sauntering over before Joe can find an excuse to run away again. It’s probably time to face the music anyway, but that doesn’t mean he has to like it. “Do you have a drink?” George asks.

“What?”

“You don’t, do you?” George hands him a tumbler holding a more than generous pour of whiskey. “Here. Drink up. I think we should talk.”

“Now?”

“What, do you think we don’t need to?” he asks challengingly, eyebrows raised. “We’re drinking, and we’re talking. Come on.”

Joe follows him, at a loss. They end up in the same loading bay Lieb and Webster had just left, the two of them settling on the concrete ledge.

George takes one long drink before speaking, eyelashes fluttering as he swallows. He shakes his
head a little to clear the burn. “You’ve been avoiding me,” he says finally, voice rough.

It’s the truth, no point beating around it. Joe nods.

“Why?”

“It’s complicated.” Schoolwork, work-work, keeping up with crushing debt and dealing with the fact he’s an inferior human being but, yeah. Complicated works, too.

“So uncomplicate it. It started when you hit Cobb.”

Joe nods silently.

“Did you punch him for me?”

“Did you want me to?”

“I’d kind of hoped you hadn’t,” George says, a note of humor sneaking into his tone.

Joe takes a drink. It burns going down; it feels good, the warmth. “He was being a dick. I punched him in the face. I don’t know why it matters beyond that. He’s had it coming for a long time, from a lot of different people.”

George sighs, putting his glass aside so he can face him fully. “It matters,” he says slowly, “because Cobb came in and tried to hit on me, he left, you called it a night and then you punched him in the face. And then you stopped coming in. Did I do something? I just want to understand what happened.”

“You already know what happened. You just said it.”

George rolls his eyes. “Come on, Joe. Work with me here. This doesn’t have to be this hard.”

Joe snorts. “He came in and hit on you. I realized maybe you don’t need me lurking around hitting on you, too. It’s sleazy.”

“So you were hitting on me,” George says, smiling softly.

“Maybe. Not anymore. You don’t need another guy lurking around trying to get your number.”

“You should’ve asked for it. Maybe I would’ve given it to you.”

“Really?”

“Sure, but that’s not the point of this.”

“…It isn’t?”

“Shockingly, no. You’re avoiding the one question through all of this that not a single fucking person can answer.”

“What’s that?”

“Why’d you punch Cobb in the face?”

“That’s the question?”

George just stares him down, silent.
Joe sighs. “He was hanging around outside moaning about you, alright? I punched him to shut him up.”

“You didn’t punch him because of me. You already said it.”

“Would you just let this go?”

“No. I won’t just let it go.” He finishes his drink in one swallow. “Joe, you’ve been avoiding me for five days. This matters to you, so it matters to me. You didn’t do it because of me, so why’d you do it?”

Joe doesn’t answer. He studies the glass in his hand, turning it round and round and examining the tiny scratches on the shiny surface.

“He said something to you,” George ventures. “He doesn’t know you well. He can’t, but he must have said something bad or else you wouldn’t have done it.”

He’s always been good with people; damn him. Circuits and pathways may be his area of study but people are his specialty. “Stop psychoanalyzing me, George.”

“You gonna tell me?” When Joe doesn’t reply he plows right on ahead. “He saw you talking to me, so was it something about the two of us?” Joe stiffens, and George sighs. “That’s it, then. Except there isn’t a ‘two of us’. So it must have been the opposite, something about how there never will be.”

Joe looks at him in defeat. “Cut it out.”

“Holy shit. Am I right? You seriously punched a guy over that?”

“No, I punched him because he told me I’d never deserve someone like you, alright?” he snaps finally, and for the first time George looks taken aback. “I punched him because he told me I didn’t deserve any of it.”

George blinks at him. “What?”

“This school, this city, none of it. People like me don’t belong in places like this, alright? They don’t belong with people like you.” He looks away, heart pounding with residual anger. He finishes his drink and doesn’t even feel it go down. “He’s right, too. I’m grateful they even let me come here, but who are we kidding? I’m never gonna catch up. I’ll always be behind, whether it’s with loans or work or school. So yeah, maybe I punched him in the face so he’d shut his damn trap. Doesn’t mean he isn’t right.”

There’s a long silence as George takes it all in. That’s what Joe gets for opening his mouth; serves him right, really. It’s almost surprising George hadn’t left him before now. If a practical stranger could see right through him to read every flaw while blackout drunk in a coffee shop at two in the morning then of course George could do the same sometime during all the hours they’ve spent together. It’s only been a matter of time.

“Fuck that,” George says finally, breaking the silence.

“What?”

“You heard me. Fuck that. You deserve to be here just as much as he does. More, even. You deserve everything.”
“George…”

“No. If you didn’t deserve to be at this school you wouldn’t be here, and that’s it. I’m done with all of this. I’m dead serious. I mean what kind of elitist pile of bullshit is that?”

“George.”

“No, actually I’m not done because you know what? The rest of that is fucking nonsense, too. It takes two to tango, right? What about me, Joe? Huh? What do I deserve?”

There’s barely any light in this part of the alley but somehow George’s eyes are still full of stars, the entirety of the cosmos contained within them. Joe thinks about all the nights they’d stayed up talking, all the kindness and humor and light George imparts on everyone he comes in contact with without even realizing it. No matter how bad the day George is still there, shining on like Philadelphia’s own miniature sun.

“You deserve everything,” he says, without any hesitation.

“Anything I want?”

“Anything.”

“I want you,” George says immediately.

His head had been spinning pleasantly from alcohol. Now it stops suddenly as if hitting a wall. “But you can’t. I don’t…”

“I thought I deserve anything.”

“But I don’t deserve you.”

“But I want you,” George says, low and slowly. “You’re smart—no shut up, you are—you’re smart and kind and you make my nights bearable. You work harder than anyone I know and you still make time to come sit with me. I love talking to you. I love hearing about your day. I love watching you try not to fall asleep face-first into your coffee. I love watching you work. I love your voice, your hands, your eyes, your smile. I love you, Joe, and you deserve everything and I just hope I deserve you, too, because this last week without you has been hell and I want you with me forever. Can I have that?”

Joe’s heart is pounding so hard it almost hurts. “Yes,” he says quietly, eyes trained on George’s lips where they’re quirked into a tiny smile to match Joe’s own. “Yes, Georgie, god.”

And then those lips are pressing against his own.

He has a split second where his entire body freezes and then all at once it’s replaced by fire alighting every single nerve. He gasps into it before he can help himself and then George is taking advantage of it, licking into his mouth and biting at his lip and soothing it with his tongue and Jesus Christ, he feels dizzy for a whole new reason. He feels like he’s flying, like he’s sinking, like he’s falling apart. He tugs George closer then gives in and slips his hands under his thighs so he can haul him into his lap, and George is laughing against his mouth before getting his hands in Joe’s hair and tugging and good god Joe is going to die. George is a warm weight against his thighs and nothing has ever felt more right.

“Hey,” a voice says behind them.
George ignores it, biting at Joe’s tongue in a way that has all his thoughts flying away along with any fucks he had left to give. He groans softly in response.

“Hey! Can you hear me?”

George pulls away with a growl to yell over his shoulder. “What do you want?”

“I need some money for gas.”

Joe stills.

George frowns, hesitating before he answers. “We’re a little busy here. Can’t you ask someone else?”

“I guess.” Joe looks over George’s shoulder in time to see a man slouching away, walking the stumbling gait of the extremely intoxicated. He lopes toward the bar and disappears around the corner.

Joe and George both remain frozen, still intertwined as they listen to his steps fading away. A moment later everything is silent and they’re simply sitting within each other’s space, breathing each other’s air.

“This fucking neighborhood,” Joe breathes finally.

George huffs a laugh before giving him one last lingering kiss. “We should probably get out of here.”

“You wanna get out of here?”

“Yeah, I wanna get out of here.”

“You don’t want me to buy you a drink first?” Joe teases.

“Fuck that. We’ve waited long enough. My place is close. Let me close my tab and then we can head over.”

George slides out of his lap and off the concrete ledge, landing solidly on his feet in the snow as Joe follows. Together they round the corner back into the alley. “I’ll wait here, alright?” Joe says. “I gotta tell some folks I’m heading out.”

“Yeah, alright,” George says. He drags him down into one last kiss, deep and promising, before heading inside with an obnoxious wink that has Joe laughing before he can help it.

Joe leans against a wall, lights a cigarette and looks up at the sky again. Maybe he’s imagining it, but it seems like there are a few more stars out than before.

“Jeez,” Bill says next to him. “What’s got you looking so lovesick? Finally work it out with what’s-his-name?”

“I’ll introduce you guys later. We’ve got places to be.”

On Bill’s other side Julian whistles lowly. “Damn, Joe. Players gonna play, am I right?”

“Are you quoting Taylor Swift at me?”

“Am I wrong?”
He snorts but is saved from replying by a figure loping toward them. He stops in front of Julian. “Got some money for gas?” he slurs.

Julian frowns. “No, man. I only got card. Sorry.”

“Well, maybe you could come with me to the station.”

“No, I don’t think so. I need to stay here with my friends.”

“But I really need money for gas.”

Bill is tensing minutely, no doubt gearing up for this to turn confrontational. That isn’t what has Joe’s breath catching and adrenaline pounding suddenly through his veins, though.

It’s Merriell, standing across the alley.

He’s watching the man unblinkingly, like a cat. His posture is tense like a spring where he stands next to Eugene, completely oblivious to the conversations that are happening around him. His focus is almost unnerving, as is the blankness that’s swept across his face. A second later Eugene sees Merriell’s expression, following his gaze before stiffening slightly.

“I just need some gas,” the man is saying to Julian.

“I don’t have any money,” Julian says, irritated. “Go ask someone else.”

The man reaches a hand into his pocket. A gun comes out.

The alley goes suddenly, completely silent. Or maybe that’s just in Joe’s own head. Surely there must be sound coming from the bar. People are still in there, talking and laughing and dancing. How can such a warm scene be separated by something so tense by nothing but a pane of glass? How did things change so quickly? He’d barely even blinked and here they are.

Bill tenses as if ready to spring forward, but before he can move Chuck is stepping out from Julian’s other side. He puts himself directly in front of him, one arm pushing his friend back while the other comes up in a soothing gesture. “Look,” he says, voice soft. “We can work this out really fast, okay?”

The man gives him a confused smile. “Do you have any gas?”

Across the alley Merriell and Eugene exchange a long look. They seem to be silently communicating, working out some sort of plan. Joe already knows whatever it is they won’t be able to react fast enough. No matter how fast they can move they’re too far away.

“I don’t have any cash with me,” Chuck says gently. “I bet we can find some though, alright?”

“What about in there?” the man asks, gesturing toward the bar. Through the windows people are still dancing and drinking, oblivious to what’s happening in the alley outside. “Do you think they have any money?”

“Maybe, but how about we stay outside for now?” Chuck replies. “I bet between all of us we can get you some money.”

“No, I think they probably have more in there,” the man slurs.

Joe looks through the window—catches sight of Tab shimmying along to the music as he fills a glass with pink beer, Gene and Babe pink-cheeked and giggling their way through a clumsy foxtrot, Lieb
and Web whispering to each other in a booth, George laughing with Nix at the bar. There are a whole host of people inside he doesn’t even recognize: reporters, dancers, students. Maybe he’s dropped them off in his cab or passed them on the street. Maybe he’s never met them until now. People, crossing paths and going about their lives.

“You don’t want to do that,” Hoobler calls from across the alley. His voice is calm and friendly but his eyes are panicked. “Don’t go in there, alright?”

“No, it’s okay,” the man says, waving the gun vaguely through the air as he turns away. “I’ll just go in and ask if they have any money for gas. I need some money.”

Chuck steps forward. “Hey, wait a minute—”

As soon as Chuck’s hand makes contact with the man’s arm he’s spinning, whipping the gun through the air. It makes a resounding crack as it connects with the side of Chuck’s head. Julian cries out, catching him before he can hit the ground.

“Chuck? Are you—”

Joe rushes forward without even thinking about it, Bill swearing as he follows. Merriell and Eugene are skidding across the alley, but if Joe can beat them all to it no one else has to get involved—no one else needs to get hurt.

Something stops him halfway there. A bang echoes in his ears and he hits the ground hard.

“Fuck,” he hisses, because there’s pain coming from somewhere, and then Bill is slamming down on top of him. “Guarno, get off. We gotta get up.”

He distantly recognizes screams coming from inside the bar—screams in the alley too, more shots going off and more people yelling.

“Joe?” Bill asks, voice faint but somehow cutting through all of it.

“Get off. We need to get up.”

Bill’s weight leaves him suddenly, but it doesn’t help. He still can’t find the strength to stand for some reason. He looks up fast enough to see Merriell dragging the man to the ground, Eugene twisting the gun out of his hand as it shoots into the sky. The door to the bar explodes open, a crowd of people running out in panic and rushing toward either end of the alley. Ron is the calm in the storm, stalking slowly over to Merriell, Eugene and the shooter with a dangerous glint in his eyes.

Ralph pushes through to skid to Julian’s side. “Jules, are you hurt? Did he—”

“I’m fine!” Julian cries, shoving his hands away. “Don’t help me, help Chuck!”

And then Joe’s entire field of view is blocked by a familiar face.

“Easy, Joe,” Gene says, jaw set and eyes assessing. “It ain’t so bad.”

“What?”

“You been hurt. It’s not too bad.”

Hurt. Something hurts. He looks down and sees red in the snow, feels his breath catch in panic. “Shit,” he breathes.
“Hey, hey. Eyes on me,” Gene says easily. “Anna, quelqu’un a besoin d’aide là-bas.”

“Our. I’ve got him.” A woman Joe doesn’t know hurries quickly down the alley.

“Heffron—”

“Yeah. Here.” Babe hands Gene a towel. It gets pressed to Joe’s leg, and the sudden burst of pain has his vision going blurry.

“Guarno?” Joe calls, looking around for his friend.

“Here,” Bill says, voice almost manic. Joe rolls his head in the snow to see him propped against the wall of the bar, Renee wrapping a towel around his thigh. “Jesus, Joe,” Bill continues, voice pinched. “You think they’ll give us any sort of insurance for this? I don’t know how insurance works.”

“You’ll get tuition cuts,” Renee says soothingly. “So many tuition cuts. More than you’ve ever seen before.”

“Maybe I should take bullets for people more often,” Bill replies.

“Mais non. I think not.”

Joe rolls his head again. Chuck is laying in the snow, completely still. Ralph crouches to one side, Julian on the other.

“Chuck, can you hear me?” Ralph asks. If there’s a response, Joe doesn’t hear it. “Eyes on me. I need you to stay awake for a little while longer.”

The door bursts open as Tab runs out, freezing when he sees the scene before him. “Is he…”

“He’ll be okay,” Gene says. “Call an ambulance, alright?”

“I didn’t even get to—”

“Tab. Call an ambulance. One head injury, two with bullet wounds.”

“Three!” Anna calls.

“Three. Go inside and do it right now.”

Tab sets his jaw and seems to steel himself before going back inside.

Gene turns back to Joe, pressing the towel down with one hand and digging through the box with the other. “You’re gonna do just fine, Joe,” he says, then calls to Ralph. “It didn’t hit the artery.”

“You sure? I don’t like the look of that.”

“I’m sure. It looks worse than it is.”

“That sounds fake,” Joe slurs. The stars above him seem to be getting darker. Maybe it’s just his imagination.

“Come on, Joe. It ain’t so bad.”

The sky is suddenly blocked out by a completely different kind of star. Joe grins. “Georgie,” he
murmurs.

“Joe,” George says, and he looks almost confused, like a kid. He has no right to look so lost.

Joe tries to explain that to him, but the words won’t come out. Everything seems suddenly muffled, soft and dark and distant. He feels George take his hand, his skin deliciously warm, and at least that feels real. “George,” he slurs. “I think I won’t make it to your place tonight.”

George laughs, a little hysterical. “Next time,” he says, rubbing a circle into Joe’s palm.

“Yeah.” The stars are gone. Maybe he’s just imagining it. Stars don’t just disappear. “Georgie, I never said it back.”

“What?”

“That I love you. I never got to say it back, and I want to say it back in case—”

“Shut up. You aren’t dying, no fucking way.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m fucking sure. I love you and you are not dying, alright?”

Joe hums, closing his eyes. He hears sirens in the distance.

“Love you too,” he mumbles, and then everything goes dark.

Chapter End Notes

Maybe some things we were expecting? Maybe some things we weren’t? Surely we knew all this talk of staying under the radar was going to jinx everyone eventually, right? I’d love to hear your thoughts!

In other news I can proudly say every single remaining chapter of this thing is about 25% done. So we’re in the home stretch, folks!

Finally I’ve been super spotty about including my tumblr and some folks have been asking about that, so if you’d like to come chat/have any questions/are just looking for a super mediocre blog to follow it’s you-oughta-know
Chapter Summary

Today in Philadelphia: everyone is reeling and Tab has insomnia.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes


"It happened so fast. That's what everyone says, right? It happened so fast and I couldn't do anything. Well, what if I could've? What if I just didn't do it fast enough? I mean, he was laying there and I thought he was dead. Do you understand me? I thought I'd just watched him die. All I could think was that I wished it was me instead. It's been a few months now and that's still all I can think, even after everything. Thank god they're all okay."

He spends a few hours in bed staring at the ceiling, hoping to doze off. It's no use, not when all he can do is replay the events of the night before over and over in his head. When he closes his eyes he hears the shots go off, sees Gene jerk out of his seat and run to the door, sees everybody on the dancefloor start rushing toward the exit as people shout in confusion. He sees his friends on the ground, sees Bill trying to brush it off and Joe staring at the stars and Hoobler slipping into shock and Chuck deadly still in the snow, watching Ralph and Julian with a blank stare. And then Tab opens his eyes and counts the cracks on his ceiling until he can’t stay awake any longer, and the cycle repeats itself.

At six he gives up. He rolls out of bed and throws on some jeans and a t-shirt from his floor that he thinks are mostly clean. When he reaches the kitchen the shades are still open and it's dark outside, a few stars clinging stubbornly to the sky despite the sun beginning to color the horizon a pale pink. It's bound to be a beautiful sunrise—bound to be a beautiful day, and that almost enough makes him mad. Nights like that shouldn’t be followed by mornings like this.

Shifty’s already there, watching the sky raptly as if waiting for something. He isn’t, from what Tab and Skinny have been able to tell over the years. He does it every morning like clockwork, rising before the sun to sit here silently and then going about his day once it’s light out as if nothing happened. It’s one of his many ticks they’ve long since gotten accustomed to.

Shifty turns from the window as a floorboard pops under Tab’s feet, starting slightly when he sees him there in the darkness. “Did you get any sleep?” he whispers.

“An hour or two,” Tab lies. “How long have you been up?"

“It depends on what you’d call awake. What happened last night is—it’s troubling me. I’m sure you understand.”

“I do. I’ve been dozing off and on. Just when I think I’m about to fall asleep it all comes back,” he
Shifty nods solemnly, eyes track carefully over the horizon before he speaks. “There isn’t any sort of way I can know what it was like, being there,” he says slowly, words carefully paced as always. “I’d turned in early, you know? And getting that call—I was away from all of it and still it’s keeping me up. I can’t imagine how it is for all of you who experienced it.”

“It wasn’t pretty,” Tab murmurs. “I’m glad I could be there and help out, but I keep kicking myself for not doing more. I keep wondering if I could’ve prevented it or something. There had to have been something I could’ve done differently.”

“There’s no use dwelling on that, now. If you keep thinking about what you could have changed you’ll only drive yourself crazy.”

“Maybe you’re right.” He traces the lip of his mug in thought. “I just can’t get it out of my head. Yesterday that place meant safety. It meant home and warmth. Will it mean that today?”

“I think there’s only one way for you to find out,” Shifty responds. They sit in silence for a long moment sipping their coffee before he smiles a sad smile mostly to himself, scanning the sky again. “Look at that. Look at those stars. It’s going to be cold and clear today; clear as a river in winter, I do say. My granddad used to say days like these are days when everything is reborn, clean and pure. Not just the world but the people too, and their hearts and souls.” He nods to the horizon. “Soon as that sun comes up.”

“You don’t say.” Tab smiles softly in the darkness. “You know the problem with a blank page? Not everything that gets written on it is always nice.”

“The only bad epilogue to a sad story is no epilogue at all,” Shifty counters. “Even heartbreak will give you more closure than a loose thread.”

“Did your granddad teach you that one, too?”

“Psych 302,” he says cheekily.

Tab snorts quietly, moving to empty his coffee into a traveler. “I’ll take that as inspiration to make this day a hopeful one, then. I’ll catch you guys tonight, probably.”

Shifty nods solemnly. The last thing Tab sees before he steps through the door is his roommate, searching the stars for something known only to him.

His jeep is parked on the corner in all its rusted glory. The streets are blessedly empty as he drives to the bar on autopilot, and he makes good time. He parks in his usual spot next to the loading bay, pausing for a long moment after the engine dies. He rests his forehead against the top of the steering wheel and just breathes, collecting his thoughts.

The meaning of the bar’s name has always been something of an inside joke to its employees. The bar doesn’t stand alone, nestled between buildings and streets as it is. Its patrons don’t stand alone, often leaving the place leaning against each other for support. Its staff doesn’t stand alone; they’re together in everything they do, protective of their little found family and loyal to a fault. They all stand together, all of them. Every person woven into this mess stood together before this began, and they’ll continue to now.

No matter what, they always will. No matter what changes, that will always remain the same. What
he needs right now is to remember that—to be reminded of that.

When he feels marginally more centered he swings the car door open and steps down, snow crunching underneath his boots. He hesitates when he nears the storefront.

For the first time he’s seen it Currahee is completely abandoned. The lights are off, the interior looking cold and gloomy. Someone has cleaned the red stains off the snow on the cobblestones, but other than that the place is locked down. He’s reminded suddenly of how old this bar is and how much it must have seen. They may all call it home, but they’re not the first or the last. This place has seen things and it will see things again. It’s as comforting as it is harrowing.

He’s about to approach just to make sure nobody is inside when he notices a man leaning next to the stoop, almost completely concealed behind a dumpster. When he makes eye contact with Tab he pushes off the wall to greet him.

“Hey, man. You looking for someone?”

Tab frowns. “No. I was just checking if anyone’s in. I guess not.”

“I’ll say,” the man retorts. “Do you work here?”

“I just do deliveries.”

“Were you here last night, then?”

The man seems harmless enough, his stance open and his face kind. Nonetheless something about him is setting off red flags. Tab is reminded of Chuck the first time the two of them had spoken, when Tab had asked him one question too many and the other man had closed off into defensive silence out of loyalty to two people he’d barely known more than a few hours. His defensive streak runs a mile wide and just as deep; he’s always ready to go to war for his friends, and it’s as much a strength as it is a liability.

And then Tab promptly stops thinking about that entirely. God, Chuck.

“Look, do I know you?” he asks the man pointedly instead.

The man sighs before pulling out a recorder. “My name’s John Richard. I’m with the Tribune. Could you just give me a quick statement about what happened here last night?”

Tab’s already shaking his head, turning back to his Jeep and climbing in even as the man calls after him. His tires skid in the snow for one long second before gaining traction, and then he’s lurching onto the street and speeding back the way he’d come. Within seconds he’s clear of the alley entirely.

He needs to get out of here—needs to talk to someone, needs to find his friends. He doesn't even hesitate before pulling onto the freeway and heading to New Jersey.

“Ron,” Tab calls as soon as he steps out of the car.

The garage door of Colbert Imports is cracked open enough for him to duck under. When he does he’s confronted by Brad and Ron seated on folding chairs, two glasses and an open bottle of whiskey between them on top of an upturned orange bucket. They both nod in greeting, falling silent in the middle of whatever they were talking about.
Tab eyes them both suspiciously. “I didn’t take you two as the types to drink this early in the morning.”

“I’m celebrating,” Ron says flatly. “The police finally let me go.”

“What? Did they actually believe you when you told them the guy beat himself up with his own gun?”

“They can’t prove anything. Besides, he had it coming.”

Tab is inclined to agree. He can appreciate the symmetry of knocking out the shooter with the same gun that had done so much harm to innocent people; that doesn’t mean he himself has the stomach for it. “Who else got out?”

“Just me,” Ron says. “Dick and Lew are still there. Their statements barely took any time but the boys were being detained when I left, so I guess they stayed behind to make sure someone’s there when they get released.”

Tab glances sideways at Brad, but no recognition shows on his face. If he knows about Merriell and Eugene he isn’t saying. “How about everybody else?” he asks Ron.

Ron tilts his head. “Harry went home with Kitty. I think they’re both laying low for a while. Lip is, uh. He’s at my place.”

“Oh my god. Are you blushing?”

“No,” Ron says resolutely, setting his jaw. “He’s just there to use the kitchen. He doesn’t want to get behind on orders while Curahee’s closed and his place is still under repair.”

Tab nods. “I checked for him at the bar but no one was home. There was a journalist lurking around so I left. I almost wondered if your friend was there, Brad.”

A corner of Brad’s mouth quirks up. “He’s probably over there somewhere. He said something this morning about trying to get interviews with some people of interest. I guess there’s some sort of story shaping up with those two guys he was looking for. He’s been offered a second book deal if he can get any good interviews, apparently.”

“Jesus,” Tab murmurs. “We’re gonna be the talk of the town, aren’t we? And over something like this, too.”

“It’s always been a bad neighborhood,” Ron reminds him. “We work at a bar located in an alley off a side street in the middle of a very interesting area. We’d do well to remember that.”

“I don’t think you’ll have trouble with that any time soon,” Brad says. “It’s all they’ll be writing about.”

They’re interrupted by Tab’s alarm going off in his pocket.

Ron looks at him accusingly as he rushes to turn it off. “Did you sleep?” he asks.

“I dozed. Oh, don’t give me that look. I usually get up early. That was mostly to make sure I don’t miss visiting hours.”

“Visiting hours?”

“At the hospital.”
Realization dawns somewhere in the drunken haziness of Ron’s eyes. “How are they?”

“No idea. We can only assume no news is good news. Chuck’s friends have my number but they haven’t contacted me, so I guess that…” nobody’s died yet, is what he’s thinking. It’s too harsh, too candid. “…Things are going alright,” he finishes lamely.

Ron nods sagely. “They’ll be alright.”

“How do you know that?”

He gets an inscrutable look at that, Ron watching him from under his eyelashes for a long moment. “They have to be,” he says finally, as if it’s obvious.

Tab sighs. “I hope so. Look, I’ll tell them you said hi, alright?”

“Yeah, alright.”

Brad salutes him lazily with a whiskey glass and Tab nods back before ducking under the door again, digging his keys out of a pocket distractedly. He doesn’t notice the figure walking toward him until they’ve practically crashed into each other. When he finally does he starts, dodging him quickly.

“Woah! Watch where you’re going, eh? Kids these days, always distracted with their mid-youth crises or whatever.”

“Ray,” he says, then blinks. “Are you drinking a smoothie?”

Ray props his huge sunglasses on top of his head just so he can squint at him properly. “Relax. It’s a milkshake. Like I’d be caught dead drinking pureed rabbit food. What, has hell frozen over?”

“Only a little.”

That has Ray sobering quickly, frowning to himself. “I heard about what happened. I’m sorry you had to be involved in all that.”

It aches to hear, and from him especially. Ray’s quiet empathy only comes out in the most dire of times, and just those words have Tab looking away quickly so he doesn’t have to look him in the eye. “Yeah, well. Thanks. I guess sometimes these things just happen.”

“How are you doing?”

“I could be worse,” he says, and it isn’t technically a lie. “It’s the waiting that’s killing me. I just want to know how the others are doing.”

“Others?”

“Yeah, the guys in the hospital. Has Ron filled you in?”

“Ron? No. I just woke up. Is Ron here?”

Tab nods. “He came this morning, I guess. He and Brad have been drinking it all away or something.”

“That sounds healthy,” he says, taking a sip of milkshake to as if to prove a point. What that point is, Tab isn’t quite sure. That’s generally how most of his interactions with Ray tend to go. “You’re not drinking it away with them?”
“I would. Believe me, I would. I think I should head to the hospital and check in on everybody, though.”

Ray gives him a tiny smile. “Good man. If you want my advice? Take the back entrance.”

Tab frowns. “Why?”

“I woke up late today, but I know Reporter was out long before either of us,” he replies, lowering his voice. “Evan, I mean. Our reporter friend, you know?”

Tab nods, still frowning. “What’s that have to do with me?”

“That story he’s following. Sledge and Shelton. The missing marines?” Tab stiffens, and he raises his eyebrows. “Okay, I get that me and Brad are just your friendly local alcohol dealers, but we were military assets once. We know a thing or two about gathering intelligence, you know? You guys did a good job of keeping it under wraps, but we figured it out a week ago.”

There’s no way they know; no way. None of them said a word or let on a thing. “I don’t—”

“Yeah, yeah, currahee. I know and I get it. Don’t worry about that. Just take this as a gentle reminder, alright? All those reporters in town for the Lindy Hop competition are going to pounce on this as soon as it takes off, and that’s a guarantee. In the other corner we’ve got Evan’s people, who at this point have just about tracked Sledge and Shelton into Philadelphia. Those two stories are going to crash into each other as soon as people make the connection, and what do you think will happen then?”

“They’ll need sources. Interviews,” Tab says softly. “Everybody they’d want to talk to is at the hospital, so they’ll start there.”

Ray nods, face open and concerned. “And chances are they won’t leave you alone until you talk.”

“They won’t be able to come inside.”

“No, but they’ll probably be watching the door. Like I said,” he says, clapping a hand on Tab’s shoulder. “Back entrance.”

He starts to walk away, but Tab calls after him before he can. “How’d you find out?”

“How could we not?”

“You didn’t tell anyone. Not the reporter, not anyone.” It isn’t a question; somehow he knows already, and Ray only confirms that.

“We figured Reporter should work for a story every now and then. It’s good for him. Besides, those two probably could use an ally. They aren’t the only people ever to be gay in the military, you know.” He raises his milkshake in a mock-toast. “I’m gonna keep an eye on these two and make sure they don’t drink themselves into a stupor before noon. Good luck out there.”

“Thanks. I can only hope I won’t need it.”

“You won’t,” Ray calls back. “I’m giving it anyway, though. Chin up, alright?”

Tab nods, throwing him a wave as he gets back in his jeep and starts the engine.

Chin up. It’s hard to stay in high spirits, even now as the sun shines down on him in earnest and the city begins to wake up. The cheerful weather is in awful dissonance with the worry he can’t seem to
shake, images of the night before on an endless reel in his brain. He has no idea what to expect for any of them. At least Bill and Joe were talking, after. Hoobler had been completely motionless and Chuck—he doesn’t want to think about it, him laying in the snow a few paces from where they’d first met.

It’s been barely nine days since Chuck plodded half-drunk down that alley and they’d walked the trek home together. Nine days and Tab was worried he’d been moving too fast, had gotten invested in this too fast. Nine days is too fast to lose someone, and he can’t do it. He’s not going to lose him, not so soon and not like this.

The morning radio is just starting to broadcast the news as he digs around in his cupholder for some money for the bridge toll—four in the hospital from a shooting at a bar, one in critical and no other information—and all at once he’s sick of worrying. He’s sick of sitting around. All at once he can’t drive fast enough.

The hospital is almost quiet this morning. No bustle or crowding, just a sleepy sort of stillness as doctors make their rounds and machines beep quietly in their various corners and rooms. It isn’t what he was expecting after the events of the night before, and yet the peace of it all helps center him a little. He approaches the desk, stopping hesitantly in front of it and lingering until the nurse looks up.

“Can I help you?”

“Yeah, I’m a friend of Charles Grant,” he says. “I was wondering if I could visit him.”

“Are you part of his little squad, then?” At his look of confusion she smiles gently. “There are about ten visitors running lurking around that wing right now. They’re all following the guidelines and all the patients seem happy with it so we’ve been turning a blind eye. Just don’t tell anybody I let another person through and we’ll be good.”

“Are you sure? I don’t want to get you in trouble.”

“Don’t be too generous. If you break any rules it’s your head, not mine. Besides, the head physician’s always had a soft spot for Gene Roe. In his eyes, that boy and his friends can do no wrong.” She passes a clipboard across the desk. “Go ahead and sign in.”

“Thanks,” he says, filling out the forms carefully. It only takes a few minutes, and then he’s sliding them back across the counter.

She reads over them quickly before smiling softly again. “Fourth floor at the end of the hall.”

He nods his thanks, walking across the room and into an elevator on autopilot. The whole city’s been quiet today. Maybe it’s just the way of the world this early in the morning on a half-frozen Sunday; maybe it’s just because nobody is awake to hear the news. Either way here he is, alone in a quiet elevator in a quiet building, too conscious of the fact that he may well be the only person alive. Claustrophobia is just about to set in when the doors open with a cheery ding, and he breathes a sigh of relief even as he’s hit with a barrage of noise.

“-expecting me to drive a cab like this, huh?” Bill is complaining loudly somewhere down the hall, voice echoing off the bare walls. “I got a hole through my damn leg and they want me to sit down and drive one of them mechanized cesspools through Philly for four hours a day?”

“Well what’d you tell them?” Babe asks.
Tab wanders down the hall until he’s outside their room, the sunlight filtering in and casting them all in warm shades of yellow. There are two beds, Bill in one and Joe in the other; Babe has taken the chair next to Bill’s bed while George has ignored the one next to Joe’s, choosing instead to perch on the mattress next to Joe’s good leg. It’s probably against hospital protocol, not that either of them seem to care.

“I told them,” Bill replies, “that they better read the Tribune and look for my name. Imagine that. Like some sort of celebrity or something.”

“And what’d they say?” Babe prompts impatiently.

“They said sorry. I said it’s alright, but words only go so far. These hospital bills sure add up.”

“Especially when they don’t even give us health insurance at that shitty job,” Joe grumbles.

“Damn crooks,” Luz mutters in solidarity.

Bill chortles heartily. “Yeah, well. Those damn crooks seemed to commiserate with us lowly cabbies, either way. I told them we was shot up in the leg and isn’t feeling too great about it, and they said they’d give us both paid time off while we heal. I felt a little better after that.” He chortles heartily.

“Oh, go for gold, Bill,” Luz gripes. “Don’t stop there. You gotta go for the school next. Payed time off is one thing, but getting waved through finals? That’s priceless.”

“George, I like the way you think,” Bill says. “You know what? I think I’ll email them. See if they got any sympathy for a guy living off hospital pudding cups. What about you, Joe? You want a spot on the Dean’s List?”

“Not me,” Joe rasps, reaching to entwine his fingers with George’s. “After all that shit I got one good thing came out of that night, and I got it right here.”

“Sap,” George teases, but then he leans down to kiss him anyway even as Bill and Babe yell at them to get a room.

Tab smiles to himself and continues walking down the hall. The last thing he hears is Joe add belatedly, “Actually, Bill, if you want to get me on the Dean’s List I wouldn’t be too upset.”

The hospital seems to get quieter and quieter as he walks, the sounds of the other room fading into oblivion behind him. He passes Johnny and Bull dozing propped against each other. A little further down Ralph gives him a nod from where he’s seated talking quietly to a nurse, Julian sleeping across the chairs next to him with his head in his lap. It’s good to see familiar faces, even if it’s in a place like this; good to see people brought together rather than scattered apart. Something settles in his chest finally, and it feels almost like safety.

When he finally opens the door at the end of the hallway he’s met with a silence that feels close and warm like a blanket, broken only by the beeping of a heart monitor. He shuts the door carefully behind himself before turning to take in his surroundings.

The sunlight shining through the window significantly cuts the coldness of the room, the whitewashed walls and sterile tiles—and the paleness of Chuck’s face, stark against the bleached sheets and the bandage on his temple. The gold light adds a little color, and Tab is almost grateful.

Joe is holding vigil at his bedside, one arm bent awkwardly to keep David’s head pillowed on his shoulder. He looks away from the muted television in the corner when Tab enters, eyes blank and
underlined with dark circles. “Was wondering when you’d show up,” he says quietly in greeting.

Tab sits down in the empty chair on the other side of the bed, right in the warm ray of light from the window. “How is he?”

“Better. He’s woken up for a few times. Never for long.” He pets a hand through David’s hair, seemingly without even noticing he’s doing it. “Mostly he just blinks at us and then falls back asleep. He asked me if this means we all get four-points for the semester. Wanted to know if you were okay, once. Then he was out again.” Joe looks over Chuck’s face again with that same blank stare. “Doctors are still trying to figure out if there’s any lasting damage, but they think he’ll be alright.”

Tab nods to himself. It’s better news than he dared to hope for, after seeing Chuck like that last night. “How are the others?” He asks softly.

“Bill and Toye are next door. You probably saw them on the way in.”

Tab nods. “Yeah, they seemed to be recovering well.”

“Word is Toye fucked up some tendon or nerve or something along those lines,” Joe replies. “He’ll have a limp for a while, but they say he’ll make a full recovery eventually.”

That’s good news, too. Lucky; they’ve all been so lucky. “Hoobler?”

Joe is silent for a long moment. “Still in critical,” he says finally. “He got out of surgery earlier this morning, at least.”

Tab lets out a slow breath. Here Joe and David both sit, clearly running on fumes as they wait for any improvement in their respective roommates, two of the kindest and most empathetic people to ever step foot in Currahee. Of course that luck would run out, and of course it would run out for Hoobler and Chuck of all people. Bargaining will accomplish nothing. Shifty was right about that, but all the same Tab can’t help but wonder at the sheer idiocy of luck. He was left standing; so was Joe, and right now he can’t say for certain that either of them are grateful when their friends are the ones injured instead. At least they’re all here, surrounded by people they care about. “How’s David?”

“Worried. This is the first sleep he’s gotten in…fuck, I don’t know how long. Neither of us have been sleeping much this week. He passed out about half an hour ago. I didn’t wake him. Figured he could use the rest.”

Even in sleep David looks about as exhausted as Joe does. Tab doesn’t know Joe well, outside of meeting him at Currahee and hearing stories from Chuck; he knows David though, and if Joe’s been sleeping as much as David has this week then he hasn’t been sleeping at all. “Did you get any sleep?”

“No. I don’t think I should leave Chuck alone. Someone should be here when he wakes up.”

“Let me do it,” Tab says. “You’re dead on your feet. You need some rest, even if it’s just a few hours. David could probably use it, too.”

It’s probably a bad sign that Joe doesn’t even bother arguing. He just sits silently for a moment before nodding solemnly once, jostling David’s head lightly to wake him. “Liebling, wake up,” he whispers. David mumbles something in German, eyes still resolutely closed, and a corner of Joe’s mouth quirks up for the first time since Tab entered the room. “You can’t call dibs on a pet name. We can share. We’re big boys.”
David snorts, sitting up finally. He opens his mouth with what’s probably a ready-made quip in response, but as soon as he opens his eyes any trace of humor leaves his face. He looks around the room; looks at Chuck, the linoleum floor and the heart monitor beeping away in the corner, and exhaustion slams down across his face again like a set of blinds. “Hoobs?” he asks wearily.

“No word,” Joe says quietly.

David nods. “I should go find Gene, or find a doctor…”

“David,” Joe sighs. He runs a hand through David’s hair before standing, holding out a hand. “They’ll let us know, alright? The only thing we should be asking Gene about is whether there’s somewhere around here where we can bed down for an hour or so.”

David seems like he wants to argue, but one look at the exhaustion written plain as day on Joe’s face seems to change his mind. He nods, taking Joe’s hand and standing. “One hour,” he says.

“One hour,” Joe repeats, a note of relief sneaking into his voice as he follows David out the door.

And then Tab’s alone.

He watches the news for a while. They’re replaying footage of the Lindy Hop Competition, and the announcer spends a good half-hour nitpicking Sid Phillips’ footwork as he throws his partner through the air at alarming speeds. Tab turns it off when the morning news comes on; the broadcast opens on a photo of the storefront of Currahee, and that’s one thing he doesn’t want to hear about right now. He flips to the nature channel instead and sits back as he watches sharks swim across the screen.

After an hour it’s clear David and Joe have passed out somewhere and won’t be getting up for some time. After two Gene Roe pokes his head in to ask if Tab needs anything. After three Skinny texts him for updates and he relays what little information he has. After four a nurse enters to check on Chuck’s vitals, throwing Tab a wink as she leaves.

After five, Chuck huffs in his sleep. After five and a quarter he tosses his head, eyebrows furrowing before smoothing out once more. And after a little over five and a half Tab looks up to find two pale eyes looking back at him.

Chuck licks his lips slowly before speaking. “Are you an angel?”

“No,” Tab says, bemused. “Are you alright? Joe said you were remembering everything. Did you develop amnesia in the last few hours?”

“Who’s Joe?” Chuck deadpans, then huffs a laugh at Tab’s look of horror. “Relax. I’m fucking with you.”

“Are you sure? What’s two plus two? Who’s the president of the United States?”

“God, don’t remind me,” Chuck mutters. “How long have I been out?”

“Around sixteen hours, give or take.”

“Damn. Maybe I should put in a thank you note. That’s the longest I’ve slept since…ever, maybe.”

“Don’t you dare.”

He lets out another little huff, the corner of his mouth kicking up in a smile. It makes something in
Tab’s chest trip and flop over itself. “Sixteen hours. Thanks for relieving Joe and David. They needed the rest.”

“Yeah, well.” I didn’t do it for them, he thinks, but it’s a little to raw to say aloud. “I wanted to make sure you were doing okay,” he settles on instead.

Chuck blinks at him slowly. “Yeah?”

“Yeah,” he says solemnly.

“So much that you’d sit here for five hours waiting to do it?”

“Five and three quarters,” he corrects quietly.

Chuck smiles at him; studies him silently, the light filtering in warm and gold behind him. It casts a halo behind the mess of his hair and turns his eyes more silver than blue, and it’s a wonder that out of the two of them he’s calling Tab the angelic one because. Wow. He licks his lips again, eyelashes fluttering as he blinks and looks down. “Why?”

“Why? What do you mean? Because I care about you. Because I was so worried it was keeping me awake all night. Because you’re important to me. It’s what friends do.”

“Friends?”

“Friends.” It reminds him suddenly of that conversation he’d had with Ron and Harry a few days prior. It feels like months ago now. All at once his heart starts racing and dear god, he’s doing this. “Friends, and whatever else this is. You mean something to me, you know? This isn’t the time and place for us to have this conversation, but you do. It doesn’t matter if you feel the same or not, I just need you to know that, alright? Anything could happen any day no matter how safe we feel, and I need you to know.”

Just like that the shutters are coming back down over Chuck’s face; nearly predictable now, though not quite. Every time Tab even brushes against anything remotely related to whatever they are to each other he gets the same reaction. It isn’t in his head. He knows it isn’t, not when Chuck is taking as much a part in this as he is. It seems anything goes so long as neither of them address it.

He sighs. “Or we don’t have to have it at all. The point is I’m here, as your friend. The rest of that stuff doesn’t matter.”

“No—Tab,” Chuck starts, and Tab distantly notes the heart monitor in the corner start beeping a shade faster, “it matters, alright? What you feel matters. You mean something to me. You mean a lot to me. Maybe it took getting pistol whipped in an alley to realize there’s no time like the present to say it. There’s something here, you know?”

Tab nods emphatically. “Yes, exactly. We both—”

“I just don’t think I can give you what you want.”

That draws him short. “What?”

“Not that I don’t like you,” Chuck rushes to say. “God, I do, you’re great. You’re so great. I just don’t know if I feel exactly the way you feel. No, that’s not what I mean. I mean I like you, and I want you to be happy, but what if I can’t be what you want me to be?”

“Slow down,” Tab says, frowning. His heart’s in his throat and it almost hurts. He feels suddenly ill.
“What do you mean?”

“I mean,” Chuck starts, then huffs at his lap before looking up finally to meet his eyes. “God, I can’t—I need to get used to saying it, you know? After everything I need to—I think I’m asexual.”

For a moment Tab just stares back at him, neither of them blinking. And then all his breath’s leaving his lungs as he collapses forward, elbows on his knees and face in his hands. He takes a long breath before looking up finally. “That’s all?”

Chuck blinks at him. “Yeah.”

“Thank god.” Chuck frowns at him, and he rushes to continue. “No—it’s just all this time you’d always steer clear of discussing any of this, you know? I thought maybe you just were waiting for the right moment to tell me you only wanted to be casual or something like that.”

Chuck looks vaguely nauseated. “It’s definitely not like that.”

Tab breathes a sigh of relief. He’s been waiting to hear that for a week. “Good.”

“Do you seriously mean this doesn’t change anything?”

“About how I feel about you? Hell no.”

The heart monitor is speeding up again. Tab wishes he could block it out. It feels unfair that he can hear it when Chuck can’t hear his own racing heartbeat in return. Chuck seems intent on ignoring the beeping either way though, even if a flush of pink makes its way to his cheeks. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure.” He laughs breathlessly. “It doesn’t change a goddamn thing.”

“Will you still be saying that in a few months?” Chuck asks, eyes wide.

“In a few months?” And now his heart is pounding for sure, no use denying it, and his hands feel so shaky he has to grip the arms of the chair just to disguise it. “Chuck, if you can seriously put up with dating me for a few months I’ll be saying a lot of things, and I can promise you not a single one will include any sort of whining about whatever it is we are or aren’t doing in the bedroom.”

“What’ll you be saying, then? Chuck asks with a tiny, hopeful smile. “If not that, I mean.”

“Mostly? How grateful I am to have met you.” Chuck’s smile widens and something in his chest flops over again. He reaches out, willing his fingers to stop shaking as he takes Chuck’s hand in his own. “How I wish we’d done it sooner. How much I like having you around and how I want to have you around for a while.”

“A while?”

He grins. “A while.”

“You really want to do this?”

“I really want to try.”

Chuck watches him carefully for a moment, wonder and happiness and worry and something calculative all rolled up in one. “I’m grateful to have met you, too,” he says finally, “and I think you should kiss me.”

Tab does.
It’s soft and sweet and electric all at once—shy and brave and familiar and perfect and everything a first kiss should be. It throws him off his feet and it’s wonderful and it’s over far too fast, but then Chuck’s pressing a second one to his lips as if he doesn’t want to just leave it at that, and that’s perfect too.

When he pulls away it’s to rest their foreheads together, sharing the same air. “Alright?” Chuck whispers finally.

Tab opens his mouth to reply just as the door swings open.

Gene steps in, swears and then backs out again even as they spring apart. “The nurses thought you were going into cardiac arrest,” he calls around the corner, covering his eyes as if he’d walked in on something much less chaste.

Chuck’s cheeks turn faintly pink again and he leans back in bed, their hands still intertwined. He winces slightly as his head hits the pillow. “Hi, Gene.”

“Chuck. You should be resting.”

“Sleep is for the weak,” he grumbles, though already his grip on Tab’s hand is loosening. Of course he’s exhausted after all this; he’s still healing, and Tab should’ve known better.

He can’t really bring himself to regret it, though. From the way Chuck reaches up to absently trace his lips he guesses he can’t, either.

Gene pokes his head back into the room finally. “Much as I hate to say it, you ain’t exactly among the strong. You gotta give yourself time to heal.”

“Are you just here to mama bear me?” Chuck grumbles, eyelids already dragging closed.

“Mama bear, see if you’ve had a heart attack, same thing,” Gene replies, smile tugging at his mouth. “Oh, and deliver some news, too. Hoobler’s still in critical, but they say he’s stable now.”

Something in Tab’s chest loosens, and Chuck breathes an audible sigh. “Thank god.”

“Yeah. He ain’t in the clear yet, but at least it doesn’t look like he’s gonna get worse. Get some rest, alright? Just because we don’t need to worry about him so much anymore doesn’t mean you gotta make up the difference.”

Chuck doesn’t seem up for arguing, already half asleep as it is. “Tab, if I don’t see you—”

“We’ll talk,” he says quickly. “We’ll hash it all out once you’re better, alright?”

“Mhmm. We can get coffee.”

“It’s a date,” he says, and gets a sleepy smile in return. “Soon as you’re up to it.”

“Guess I should get better quick, then.”

Tab laughs softly. “I’ll be waiting.”

Chuck hums sleepily, blinks those silver eyes at him once more, and then he’s out.

He sits in silence for a moment, stillness returning to the room all at once. Gene’s still watching in the doorway, and when Tab looks up he jerks his head pointedly to the hall. Tab carefully extracts his hand from Chuck’s before following him, closing the door softly as they step outside.
“Thanks for coming in,” Gene says quietly. “I’m sure it means a lot. He likes you.”

“Did he say that?”

“He didn’t need to. Way he was sneaking around and texting nonstop it wasn’t hard to figure out.”

It doesn’t make his heart sink the way he thought it would: certainly not good news, but not necessarily bad either. “He didn’t tell you guys.”

“Not until he introduced you. I know how that must sound, but you gotta realize he don’t introduce us to anyone.”

“No one?”

“No one. He dates, but not often and never long enough to bring anybody home.” He shrugs.

“That’s a conversation to have with him, I guess.”

Tab nods solemnly; it isn’t information he wants to hear from anyone other than Chuck himself. “Are you here to give me the big brother talk, then?”

“Big brother talk? I guess it’s my job, since I’m the only one awake. Lord knows I ain’t the best one to do it.” He studies Tab for a long moment, expression inscrutable. “I ain’t gonna threaten you with bodily harm or any of that. I know a few things about Chuck, though.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I know he’s the most loyal man you’re ever gonna meet. I know he’s gonna stick with you and he’s gonna fight for you and he’s gonna trust you, and he ain’t gonna ask for a thing in return.”

It rings true, all of it. Tab thinks back to panicked bargoers recounting Chuck pushing Julian behind himself in the alley the night before. “He’s a good friend.”

“He is. And if you do a single thing to betray that trust he’ll drop you instantly. See, I don’t gotta give a big brother talk cause he can look after himself. Chuck knows what he deserves, and he knows when he ain’t getting it.” He looks Tab dead in the eye. “Don’t fuck up. Don’t fuck with him, or you’ll lose him in a heartbeat and then you’ll have to deal with the rest of us.”

Tab holds his gaze for a moment; the sheer blank honesty staring back is jarring. “I thought you said you weren’t going to threaten me?”

Gene blinks, and all at once he comes back to himself. “Huh. Guess I lied.”


“That’s all any of us can do, ain’t it?” He watches as Tab does his level best to stifle a yawn, frowning to himself. “When’s the last time you slept?”

“I got an hour or two last night.” At Gene’s raised eyebrow he sighs. “Okay, I dozed. Same difference.”

“It ain’t. You need rest as much as anyone else. Let me keep an eye on him. He won’t be awake again for a long time yet, anyway.”

“What about you? You need to sleep, too.”
“I’ll sleep when I get around to it. Don’t worry about me. You should be resting while you can.” He
smirks slightly. “The doctors said if he continues like this he should be out tomorrow. You gotta be
ready for that date.”

Tab nods. He’s looking forward to planning it. It’s enough to give him whiplash, the fear and regret
that was plaguing him all morning giving way to excitement for the future over the course of just a
few hours. Something happened, something terrible, and it’s far from over. Hoobler is still
technically in critical and Chuck is barely in the clear. Despite all that he can feel something like
hope sprout in his chest.

He says goodbye to Gene, following the hallway back to the elevator. Everybody must have filtered
out or found somewhere to get some rest because the rooms on either side are quiet. When he passes
Joe and Bill’s room the two of them are asleep, George throwing Tab a little wave from his chair as
he skims through a textbook propped up in his lap. He rides the elevator back down to the ground
floor, crosses the lobby and sneaks out the back entrance to where his jeep is parked behind the
building.

He’s glad he did, driving by the entrance a minute later. A few people are milling around the front
entrance who he can only guess are journalists, waiting seemingly for nothing as they watch the
door. He shakes his head, stopping by the curb for a moment to text Ray.

Thanks for the tip earlier. Payed off. Leaving the hospital, things seem to be going mostly ok. Need
me to take Ron off your hands?

The phone jumps in his hand a moment later as he gets a reply. Np thought it might. And Ron is
safely home. His FRIEND came to pick him up and make him something to eat.

Tab snorts quietly to himself. Lip?

Lip. Go home and get some rest maniac.

Some internal part of him is still restless and unsettled, needing to keep moving and stay busy.
Things almost seem alright, though; things are looking up and he can’t keep running forever,
especially when everyone is settling down around him. As much as he wants to be there for his
friends there is nothing more he can do, not right now.

He sighs internally before leaving the parking lot and heading in the direction of home.

When he opens the door the apartment is bright and warm from the afternoon sun, the light shining
through the windows into the kitchen and illuminating the dust motes in the air. Something’s
cooking, tomatoes and pepper and meat. It’s domestic and cozy and safe, and all at once exhaustion
hits him like a brick.

“Good news?” Shifty calls. He’s stirring a pot on the stove, Skinny sitting across from him on the
kitchen island with his computer open.

“Chuck’s doing good,” he replies, untying his boots and leaving them at the door. “Joe and Bill are
resting, but they’re up and about. Hoobler’s in critical still but he’s stable.”

“That’s good to hear,” Skinny says. “Everybody is worried about all of them, but Hoobler in
particular. I’m glad he’s doing better. He’ll probably be happy to know he’s been trending on twitter
when he wakes up.”
“He’s trending?”

“Yep. Everyone’s very concerned.”

“Everyone as in who?”

“Everyone as in everyone.”

Tab frowns. “I’ve had the news off all day. What’s the chatter?”

He snorts. “It’s gonna piss you off. All this time Currahee’s been suffering for patrons, and now people are calling it a cultural institution.”

“What?”

“You heard me. Part of it is how old the place is, I guess. It’s been there since forever so now that people know it’s been in trouble for a while they’re all rallying, talking about it being a symbol of strength and perseverance and all that.”

“Jesus. Seriously? I bet you anything none of those people have ever even stepped foot inside.”

Skinny shrugs. “That’s what they’re saying, in any event. Add in the fact that it’s owned by two twenty-six-year-old gay veterans and all the victims are students, and it’s shaping into a bit of a media sensation.”

Shifty nods, tapping his spoon against the edge of the pot. “Everybody wants news on the victims. Or news at all, really. The guys who took the shooter down still haven’t been identified yet. There hasn’t been a police statement or anything.”

Tab thinks back on Ray’s words this morning. With the way things are shaping up the media circus that’s been surrounding Merriell and Eugene for the last few weeks will only gain traction once that statement comes out. It’s about time his roommates heard about it; better from him than the tabloids. “I might have some news on that front,” he says hesitantly. “You know the missing marines? Sledge and Shelton?”

Shifty frowns. “Goodness. With all this happening nobody’s been talking about that for the first time in ages. It’s like everybody’s forgotten.”

“Yeah, well. They’re about to remember real quick.”

“What?” says Skinny. “Were they there that night?”

“They maybe might be the new coworkers we hired a while back,” he says in a rush.

Skinny stares. “What.”

“Sorry I didn’t tell you guys. We didn’t want word to spread, so we’d all just been pretending not to know about it. It’s better for everyone that way, you know?”

Skinny stares at him for a long minute. Finally he nods slowly, face carefully blank. “That’s fine. I’m not upset. It makes sense with all that’s been going on. Hopefully they’ll be able to stay under the radar with all this happening.”

“Yeah, that’s not likely. They were the ones who took down the shooter.”

“…Seriously?”
“Yeah.”

Skinny and Shifty both blink at him. Then they blink at each other. “Fuck,” Skinny says quietly after another long moment.

Tab nods. “This isn’t gonna go away anytime soon. I wish it would now that Hoobler’s doing better, but I don’t think any of us are going to get an easy conclusion.”

“Least of all them,” Shifty mumbles. “I thought this would fix everything. I thought as long as Hoobler gets better they’ll all be alright.”

“What do they say about counting chickens?” Skinny says. “All anyone can do is wait and ride it out.”

“And stay inside,” Tab adds. “They’ll be looking for statements. I don’t want to recommend we all hide in here all day, but it might be for the best.”

“With the way our sleep schedules look right now that isn’t a bad idea,” Skinny replies. “This is dinner, or at least it is for me. I don’t care that it’s barely three o’clock. I’m going to bed after eating.”

“What did you guys make?” Tab asks, sniffing the air again. Whatever it is it smells comforting and hearty, but that could describe any number of things in their combined cooking repertoire.

“Brunswick stew. Well,” Shifty amends quickly, “kind of. It’s only real if it has rabbit.”

“That isn’t true,” Skinny says quickly. “The rabbit doesn’t matter but you gotta put paprika in there or else it’s just not—”

“Paprika does not belong in stew,” Shifty says in a tone that’s reasonable and respectful yet somehow brooks no argument.

Skinny argues anyway.

And that’s now they spend the rest of their day, sitting on the couch eating stew and debating the intricacies of traditional regional cooking as they do their best to ignore whatever is happening outside. And Tab is grateful for it, all of it; for his two roommates and the home the three of them have carved out here, for the safety of their friends and the fact they all seem to be making it through, for the calm of the world before the storm hits. He’s thankful to be here, and aware of that for the first time in a long time.

When he finally gives in and lets his eyes slide shut it’s with his phone’s ringer turned all the way up where it sits on the coffee table in front of him, his head resting against the wall and his roommates leaning against each other sleeping next to him. It’s a mess, all of it: the waiting and the chaos in the world around them and the memories of the night before. Despite that something has settled in his chest. He’s warm, safe and among friends. Chuck is doing better; so is Hoobler, and Bill and Joe. Things have changed drastically since this time yesterday and maybe they’ll never be the same, but the sun is shining. He’s making plans for the future and looking forward to them. He isn’t alone; none of his friends are alone, scattered across the city though they may be. Come what may, the world continues to turn and they’ll continue to turn with it.

He spares no thought to the world outside and whatever may be coming toward them. He thinks only of his friends and the people he loves. And then he throws his legs over Skinny’s lap, lets out a breath and falls asleep at last.
It’s been a super weird week. Without going into too much detail, one of my friends was hit with tragedy and it’s put a lot of things into perspective, like how important it is to be present in the moment and appreciate the people around you. It’s always good to accept your own feelings and be honest with your friends and family because you never know when those people you love could just be gone. So I’ve been working through a lot of thoughts and the writing of this chapter was definitely influenced by all that. Don’t forget to let your friends know what they mean to you today, and maybe give your family a call if you’re separated and you haven’t talked in a while. And hey, this has been one long ride. Thanks for sticking around!
Shelton

Chapter Summary

Today in Philadelphia: Merriell rejected a family then gained a family then lost a family then met a family then left a family then returned to a family, and he acquired a home or two along the way.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

_Corporal Merriell Shelton could not be reached for contribution to this work_

He doesn't dream very often. Not like Eugene does, or at least not the same way. He doesn't dream of bodies or bombs or any of the ways it could go wrong. Sentries falling asleep and someone sneaking in and slaughtering everyone in the night, or grenades slipping at the worst possible moment, or some cocksuck officer getting a lesson on danger close and losing half the platoon as a result, or—

Any of the other things that could happen, but didn't.

He doesn't dream often.

When he does it's in that space between sleeping and waking, just flashes of memories he could never forget, things that are almost enough to make him miss it. And that's the real puzzle of it, that no matter how hungry or tired or fucked up in those years he was he can still want to go back—can still look at it fondly and remember, memories floating by like a flipbook, pages swishing like the wind in the desert, images piling over and over and over.

Eddie and the Skipper passing a cup of coffee back and forth in the early hours of the morning, helmets nearly touching as they talked.

Gunny flipping a knife between his fingers while he kept watch, muttering under his breath all the while.

Bags under Burgie’s eyes, skin grimy and burned as he dealt another hand of cards and laughed, sand leaking in through the bottom of their tent as they waited for the whole fucking thing to just be blown apart by a storm, the entirety of the tour stretching out in front of them.

Leyden humming under his breath as he cleaned the M2 for the third time in one day, stopping midway through some Katy Perry song to cuss the thing out, and then cuss out its mother, and then cuss out their officers, and then cuss out Afghanistan.

Eugene, his Eugene, tugging his Kevlar off to run a dusty hand through his hair, cropped short back then and shining like embers in the desert sun. Teasing him, testing him, messing with him until he'd finally snapped, wrestled him back in the darkness between tents and nicked his ribs with the tip of his kabar, the soft cadence of his voice turned sharp and pissed as all hell as he chewed him out. He
He and Eugene split a pop tart in the shadow of a Humvee. He and Eugene, too similar yet too different, angry teenagers ever since the day they’d left the south. He and Eugene against the Marine Corps, against the world.

He and Eugene, curled up on a mattress on the floor in a shitty apartment in Philadelphia, hair longer and skin a little less sallow, souls impossibly old and bodies impossibly young.

The sun is up but covered by heavy purple clouds, the light filtering in dim and grey. It makes the room seem cold, but Eugene’s breath is warm and steady against his collarbone where he’s somehow tucked himself beneath Merriell’s chin during the night. Merriell lets his eyes drift back shut for a moment, breathes him in and pretends the darkness means it’s still nighttime. He thinks of waking him up, if only to shake lingering ghosts. It isn’t worth it, though. Merriell would rather spend the morning alone trying to wade through memories if it means Eugene gets a few more hours of sleep free from his own.

He slides out of bed carefully, and Eugene must be tired because he doesn’t stir at all. It's early still and Merriell half-doubts anyone else is awake at all; he drags on some sweats and squeezes silently through the gap of the door, padding across the carpet to the kitchen.

Someone is already there, leaning back in a kitchen chair so he can lean one elbow on the windowsill, arm outstretched through the gap so the smoke from a cigarette drifts harmlessly away. The outside air cuts through the apartment but for once Merriell finds it nice—refreshing, like a splash of water across his face. Steam spirals up from a mug on the table, smoke twirls behind the glass of the window, and nothing else moves. He wonders if he’s still asleep. He wonders if he’s still in the desert. He wonders if he’s dead.

Gene breaks the eerie stillness though, starting a little as Merriell approaches before taking a sip of coffee to hide it. “Did I wake you?” he whispers.

“Something did. Not you, though.” He squints into the darkness of the cupboard to find his mug. It’s tricky without a light on, but the red stands out purple in the gloom and gives it away. “When did you get in?”

“A hour ago. You?”

“Must have been around midnight. The cops did their best to hold us for the full 24 hours but Winters was breathing down their necks.”

“Good for him. They knew they had nothing, anyway.”

Merriell nods. “They didn’t even really have anything to ask us after we gave our statements. They kept trying to say it wasn’t self-defense, but we all know that’s bullshit.”

“How could they say that ain’t self-defense? You didn’t even hurt him.”

“Ron didn’t fess up to hitting the guy, so they tried to pin it on us. They didn’t even have any evidence, so they were just clutching at straws. Chalk it up as discrimination, I guess. Anyway, what are you doing back? Thought you’d still be at the hospital.”

“Heffron sent me home.”

Merriell snorts quietly to himself. “Why do you call him that?”

“Cause I’m mad at him.” He doesn’t really sound mad, just petulant. Merriell decides not to point that out.
“He’s looking out for you. He probably just wants you to get some rest.”

“Don’t know how I could do that. He knows I’m just gonna sit up waiting until I can go back. I ain’t gonna get any rest so long as everybody’s still there.”

Merriell sits down at the table and watches the smoke outside for a long moment. The way it swirls reminds him of water; always has, no matter where he is. “How are they?” he asks finally in an undertone.

“When I left?” Gene gives him a half-shrug. “Toye and Bill got out last night, mostly because they wouldn’t stop bugging the doctors about it. They’re set for regular checkups, but they should be in the clear. Chuck’s just on observation at this point, and it’s looking good. Hoobler,” he licks his lips nervously. “Hoobs ain’t awake. Not yet. They’re still running tests.”

“He’ll be alright,” Merriell says immediately.

“He might be,” Gene replies just as quickly, “or he might not.”

“No, he’ll be okay. We seen guys over there who got it a lot worse. Guys with—” heads gone legs gone bodies gone people just plain gone “—all manner of things way worse off, you name it, nothing but rags holding them together, and they all pulled through. And you folks here are all a bunch of tough sons of bitches. Of course he’ll be alright.”

Gene looks at him, tilts his head in acknowledgement; not agreeing but not disagreeing either, and if that's the best Merriell will get then he'll take it. His eyes catch on something midway down Merriell’s chest, mouth twisting into a semblance of a smile. “Woah, hey. When did you get that?”

At first Merriell is sure he means his scars. He’s about to give the standard barbed response, well-used to the point its delivery has become toneless, because of all people his best friend should know. But Gene’s eyes are trained instead on the chain around his neck where two tags dangle right alongside a plain gold ring.

He smiles wryly, catching it in his hand so the chain pools in his palm coolly. Traces it with his thumb, watches the way it gleams in the pale light before tugging the whole thing over his head and holding it out across the table. “What, this?”

Gene takes it gingerly, rubbing a thumb first over one of the tags before studying the ring next to it. “Did you guys…?”

“Get hitched in a warzone?” he asks plainly with a grin, because of course Genie is too shy to ask outright. Gene frowns at him, and he grins some more. “Nah. Got it after we got it back. We been waiting until things are a little more settled down so we can run over to the courthouse to get it all filed away.”

“Just like that?”

He shrugs. “It’s just a piece of paper. We figured if things get bad it could come in handy in court. Hospital rights, too. Lotta people out there ain’t too fond of us.”

Gene is silent for a moment, turning that over. And it’s harsh but it’s true; it’s what Merriell’s been afraid of since the beginning, someone sending the person he loves so completely to the hospital just because of what they mean to each other. It’s his fault Eugene is stuck in this mess in the first place, no matter how much he tries to argue the point. If he gets hurt it’s Merriell’s fault and if he were to die in some hospital where Merriell couldn’t even visit him then hell, that’d be his fault, too. Punished just for existing first by man, and then by god and then finally by the law, just to spit in the
wound.

Well, nobody can prevent the first two. At least they found a way around the third.


“Et je vous déclare unis par les liens du mariage,” he says half-sarcastically, picturing for a moment the grains of rice and flower petals flying through the air to land on the steps of the church back home. A boy can dream.

Gene holds up the ring. “This ain’t no piece of paper.”

“It felt right,” he says defensively, because it did. Still does.

Gene raises his eyebrows teasingly, passing it back to him. “Felt right?”

It’s solid in his palm, a familiar weight. There’s a matching one dangling from a chain around Eugene’s neck, no doubt resting warm against his chest where he’s sleeping just a room away, the band a little bigger but otherwise identical. The symmetry of that makes him smile every time he thinks about it; it makes him smile now. “It’s a promise. Piece of paper at the courthouse, that’s for the law. Ceremony at the church, that’s for god and family. A ring? Now, that’s just for the two people wearing it on their hand.”

“Unis par les liens du mariage,” Gene echoes, voice soft. “It ain’t on your hand.”

“With the way things are going on right now it would do no good to have somebody notice that. Talk about national scandal. Like I said, it’s for two people. We’re the only two that need to know.”

“Now there’s three.”

Merriell tilts his head. “Now there’s three.”

Gene smiles at that. He looks like he’s about to respond when the lock on the apartment door opens with a tiny click, and all at once he’s stubbing out his cigarette and sitting up in his chair. The door swings open with a quiet squeak, Babe wincing at the sound as he steps through.

“You’re back early,” Gene says in a low murmur.

“A little,” Babe replies, and his mouth presses into a thin line. “You’re supposed to be sleeping.”

“Couldn’t.”

“Couldn’t or wouldn’t?”

Gene mimics his stubborn expression. “ Couldn’t.”

“Gene, you need to take care of yourself. You aren’t any use to anybody when you’re ready to drop.”

“I can’t sleep. I ain’t gonna get a break until we know they’re gonna be okay.” He twists the cigarette butt restlessly between his finger and thumb. “Worrying just keeps me up.”

Babe sighs heavily and looks ready to argue, but when he speaks again his voice is soft. “You’re in luck with that, at least. Chuck’s due to be released.”
That draws Merriell up short. He’s almost breathless with the sudden wave of relief—could laugh with it, but instead he sits there gaping like a fish. “Released? Today?”

Babe nods. “Noon.”

“Jeez.”

“Yep. Joe’s with him now. I’m just here to pick up some stuff.”

Gene stares at him, uncomprehending. When he finally blinks back to reality he unfolds his legs from his chair as if ready to spring up at any moment. “He must be doing well if they decided that fast.”

“Mostly he’s just been pissing off the nurses, I think,” Babe replies, scratching the back of his neck. “He keeps waxing poetic about wanting to sleep in his own bed. They love him, but it’s getting to the doctors to the point everybody just wants him gone.”

“Jesus,” Gene breathes, like he isn’t sure whether to laugh or sigh. “You should’ve texted ahead. We could have got things ready.”

“Yeah, well. I was counting on you not answering, seeing as you were supposed to be asleep.”

“Does this mean you ain’t gonna force me to nap anymore?”

“I never said that,” Babe replies, side eyeing him as he crosses to Chuck’s room. “You’ve got a few hours until he’s home.”

“Sure. Hey, the docs said he’s gonna be sensitive to light for a while. Grab him some sunglasses. He’ll thank you later.”

“Okay, I’ll find him some. Can you at least promise you’ll try?”

“You ain’t my mother, Heffron,” Gene replies, though he looks vaguely guilty. “Actually, we should find him something to eat if he’s coming back. All we have is stuff for dinner.”

Babe frowns at him. “You guys can do that and still get some sleep.”

“What, grocery shopping while sleeping?”

“Well you said ‘we’, didn’t you? What about you, Snaf? You can do it.”

Merriell snorts. “Sure. I’ll be faster, anyway.”

“You sure?”

In all honesty, he really just doesn’t want Gene walking around in the snow when he looks ready to fall over. Merriell is well-versed in functioning on no sleep; Gene he’s not so sure about. “Let me do it. It’s like Babe said. You should sleep while you can.”

Gene sends him a frustrated glare, but he belays his relief in the slump of his shoulders. “If you’re sure,” he mutters, plodding off to his room as Babe disappears into Chuck’s.

Merriell spends one last moment in the kitchen, watching the morning light play across the tiles as it steadily crawls across the floor. Things are still at this time of day, almost peaceful. It’s welcome, but at the same time quiet in a way he isn’t ready to think about quite yet. It feels almost isolating, his breath the only sound in the whole universe for just that moment.
He shakes it off and crosses to the pantry door, swinging it open on silent hinges. All at once he isn’t alone in the world anymore.

Eugene has somehow burrowed even further into the blankets, fair skin glowing against the white where his fingers are fisted in the comforter. That and the fiery red of his hair is all that is visible of him in the down, and Merriell lays down as softly as he can next to the ridge of his body in the fabric. He hates to wake him like this—Eugene rarely sleeps this soundly, and his breath is whistling softly on each exhale in a way Merriell can only find charming—but it would be even worse if he left him to wake up in the apartment alone. They have an unspoken rule, after last time.

He gently tugs the sheets away until his face is revealed. “Eugene,” he whispers, Eugene’s nose wrinkling at the cold air. He sleepily tries to burrow back into his cocoon, and Merriell can’t help but laugh a little at that. “Wake up, cher. I’ve gotta go to the store.”

“Whassit?”

“Still morning.”

“Hmm.” Eugene’s eyes drag open, foggy and warm. “I slept.”

“I think you might still be sleeping,” Merriell deadpans, and gets a weak swat for his efforts.

“I think we should still be sleeping, too.”

“That ain’t what I said and you know it.”

“Know what?” Eugene asks innocently, rolling and doing his best to drag Merriell back into the blanket pile.

“Eugene,” Merriell starts, then laughs as he’s buried in warm fabric. “Come on. You can sleep if you want, but I gotta go.”

“It’s no fun if you aren’t here.”

“Sleeping is no fun?”

“Without you then no, any chance of it being fun is slim to none. Where are you running off to, anyway?”

Merriell sighs against his neck. Eugene’s dog tags are resting on the mattress just underneath his chin, and he thumbs the band hanging from the chain. “Just the store. Chuck’s coming home and we’re out of food. I’ll probably stop at Easy or something.”

“Chuck’s coming home?” Eugene asks, suddenly alert. “Goodness, he healed up fast.”

“Yeah. Won’t be here for a while, though. You can go back to sleep if you want.”

“Not anymore, I can’t. You’ve got me awake now.”

“Yeah? Sorry about that.”

“Don’t be. It’s good news to hear. This is a sign that things are looking up if you ask me.”

“Go around saying shit like that and you’ll jinx it.”

“I’ll take my chances.” Eugene kisses him on the mouth quickly, tugs his lip between his teeth so
suddenly that Merriell gasps into it, and then pulls away just as fast. “Come on. Let’s go.”

“You’re a goddamn menace,” Merriell mutters. Eugene just laughs and throws him a shirt. “What’s got into you, huh? Been having sweet dreams or something?”

Eugene hums noncommittally, digging through the stack of clothes on the floor. “I’m just feeling optimistic. Maybe it’s the sleep.” He tosses Merriell a shirt. “Everything is working out. Everything might be okay. It’s gotta count for something.”

“Something, that’s for sure,” Merriell grumbles. Eugene’s happiness is contagious though, damn him. “The others are doing good, too. Well, one’s still out. Joe’s friend.”

Eugene squints into the air. “Hoobler?”

“That’s the one. No news on him.”

“We’ll cross our fingers, then.” Eugene drags a shirt on, his hair significantly more mussed as it appears through his collar. “He’s gotta be alright.”

He knows better than to make assumptions about what he can’t control; they both do. As much as he doesn’t want to get their hopes up, Merriell can’t find it in himself to argue with Eugene’s optimism when it so rarely shows its face. “Here’s to hoping,” he says, because it’s as close to a compromise as he can come up with.

“Come on,” Eugene says softly. “Get dressed. I’ll keep you company.”

“It ain’t gonna be exciting, unless you’re just looking to stretch your legs,” he says, throwing clothes on hurriedly.

“I think we could both do with stretching our legs after being stuck in that precinct all of yesterday.”

“Grand Dieu, don’t remind me.”

Eugene snorts softly, opening the pantry door and sneaking into the living room with Merriell close behind. Babe must have left at some point because the apartment is silent. When they pass his and Gene’s room he can barely see the shadow of Gene curled up on the bed, dead to the world. Another small blessing to count for the day, then.

They don’t speak until they’re out of the apartment entirely, stomping their feet to get the blood flowing in the chill. “I’m telling you,” Merriell says as they jog down the stairs. “If Currahee is closed more than a week we should just start fixing this place up. Getting ridiculous, this cold.”

“I can’t imagine how everyone else in the building is doing.”

“Me neither. Way they were carrying on when we got here I’d say these four would still be wearing their parkas to bed. Does nobody know how to fix stuff?”

“Don’t complain so much. It keeps us in business, doesn’t it?” As soon as they step outside Eugene pulls his face further into his jacket, curling in on himself for warmth.

“Maybe, but it sure does make it harder to live around here when the landlord doesn’t give a shit about anyone.”

“Well why don’t we start looking for somewhere else?”

Merriell almost stops walking; it’s only the fact that Eugene seems determined not to linger in the
slush that he keeps moving, if only to keep up. “Really?”

“I don’t see why not. We’ve got the afternoon free. We know we want to stay here and we’ve got more than enough saved up. It’s not like we can live in the pantry forever.”

It’s odd, permanence—the idea that something could be theirs as long as they want it. He has trouble wrapping his head around it, if he’s honest. “We don’t even have furniture,” he says distantly.

“We can get one with the furniture already in it. Or just make it up as we go along. We could own nothing but a mattress on the floor for all I care.”

“You telling me you’d put up with that, after sitting pretty in that big house of your dad’s all your life?”

“I’m putting up with it now,” he counters. “I’m happy with it now. It might be nice not to live in a space that only fits a mattress, but I don’t mind.”

“You’re getting downright sloppy. Look at you,” Merriell teases, though it comes out a little too bitter. “You’re becoming some sort of bum. Spent too much time around me.”

Eugene hums. “You taught me to cook,” is all he says.

Merriell smiles softly at that.

By the time they arrive at Easy the streets are clogged with cars, drivers slowing down as their tires swish through the thick layer of slush on the road. It makes an odd sound Merriell tries his best to ignore, the ice and water and muck piling up in the gutters. The color reminds him of something. Eyes of fish left too long in the market, maybe. Petroleum jelly and the clouded windows of the busses back home. He looks away, studying the pink of Eugene’s cold fingers where they poke out of the sleeve of his jacket. They reach out a little further as he pushes the door open, and then the bell above them rings as they step inside the cafe.

“Didn’t expect to see you two around,” George says by way of greeting, still blinking sleep out of his eyes.

Merriell looks away from Eugene’s hands, catching sight of his own slush-covered boots and stomping them a few times on the mat to dislodge the worst of it. It sticks to the fabric, wet and thick. “Why not?”

George shrugs. “Thought you’d be laying low is all. Seems like everybody else is. Your usual?”

“Sure. A few scones, too.” Merriell takes a seat at the counter—he knows the man sitting on the stool next to him, remembers him from Currahee. If those eyes weren’t so familiar the crutches leaning up against his seat would be a dead giveaway. “You’re Joe, right? I remember you from the other night.”

Joe nods solemnly. “And you’re Snafu. How’s someone come by a name like that?”

“Sure you want to know?”

“No,” Joe laughs quietly, but sobered a moment later. “Thanks for—you know.”

“It was nothing,” he says blandly, because it wasn't.
“It was. Take it from me.” He gestures to his leg. “Could have been a lot worse.”

Could have been a lot better, too. He chooses not to voice that particular thought, looking away quickly. When he glances at Eugene he’s already looking back, brown eyes warm and soft before he’s turning to George.

“Luz, what did you mean? What’s everyone laying low for?”

“Oh,” George says from behind the espresso machine. “There’s a journalist looking for you.”

“What?”

“He came in earlier. He had questions for us. I guess he’s got some sort of book deal or something?”

“Yeah,” Joe adds. “He left his card. Told us to tell you to give him a call.”

Merriell frowns. “What the fuck about?”

“Everything.” Joe slides Merriell a card, which he takes gingerly.


“Everything,” George is saying. “Last night, but everything before that, too. He asked about you two, about your military records, about what you guys have been up to…all of it. He told us if we had anything to say about it there would be something in it for us, not that we gave him shit to work with.”

Merriell looks up at that. “Something in it?”

“A cut,” George says, laughing hollowly. “Five hundred bucks, give or take. Can you believe? Fucking audacity of some people, I swear to god…”

He looks back at the card. Maybe he’d seen that font on an album cover. Prince or something; he doesn’t know. “Five hundred bucks. Lot you can do with money like that.”

“Yeah, not that we’d take it,” George retorts. “Like hell he’s gonna buy us all like that. Nobody wants to talk to him.”

“Why not?” he asks, looking up.

“You kidding?” George scoffs, disbelieving as he shifts his weight from one foot to the other. “We’re not gonna sell you guys out.”

The card is made of nice paper; Merriell turns it over and over in his hands, calluses catching on the ridges of the print. He can feel Eugene’s eyes on him, inscrutable and unwavering in that almost scientific level of observation that only Eugene can pull off. “I think you should,” he says, and turns the card over. *Evan Wright*. He flips it. *Rolling Stone*. Flips it. *Evan Wright*. He flips it again.

“…What?”

Must have been awfully expensive, printing cards like that. He smiles. “Why the fuck not, right? Make some fucking money off it while you can. He ain’t getting a story from me, and that’s half his subjects gone right there. If he ain’t got me and Eugene then there ain’t a fucking story. *Mon cheri*, are you planning on giving any tell-alls anytime soon?”
“Not planning on it, no,” Eugene scoffs.

Merriell shrugs. “Then that’s his story down the drain, right? Ain’t no harm in you guys talking to him, taking his cash and getting the fuck out.”

George frowns at him over the top of the espresso machine. When Merriell only smirks back he turns instead to Eugene. “You two can’t seriously be alright with that.”

Eugene meets Merriell’s eyes again, and Merriell can practically see the cogs turning. He can see him weighing the pros and cons, calculating the sums and comparing their options. “Honestly, what’s the harm?” he says to George finally, carefully slow. “They’re gonna write about us no matter what we do. We can disappear off the face of the earth and that still won’t stop them. Hell, that’s how this all started. This guy isn’t gonna get a story from us, but that doesn’t mean you two can’t make a little money off him in the process.”

“You’re saying we should lie,” Joe says, and brown eyes turn to him innocently.

“Did I say that?”

“We knew you two were trouble the moment you came to town,” George gripes, but he’s laughing. He slides them two cups and a paper bag.

Merriell snorts, but he doesn’t bother denying it. He pockets the card and digs out a few bills, but George waves him off before he can even hand them over.

“No way are you paying for that after the other day.”

“Oh, come on. We did what anyone would—”

“I don’t care. Point is you guys did it, alright? I got a mostly whole boyfriend sitting here thanks to you.”

Only mostly, but Merriell doesn’t say it. “Thanks,” is what he does say, then gives the card back to them as an afterthought. “Take this, at least. I ain’t talking to him. You’ll need it more than we will.”

George frowns, but he takes it. “We’ll think about it, anyway.”


“What?”

“Five hundred isn’t bad, but it’s worth arguing over. Ask for a percentage. You guys hold all the chips.”

“No, that’s you. If that’s what you want, though…”

“It isn’t about what we want. This isn’t about us anymore. You guys are involved in this, too.” Eugene fidgets for a moment where he’s standing midway to the door. It jumps out at Merriell, uncharacteristic as it is. “It’s your story, too. If you choose to share it don’t sell yourselves short.”

George nods, shaking off the unhappy set of his mouth. “Careful out there, alright? I’m worried about the media storm.”

“Don’t worry about them,” Merriell says as he walks toward the door. “We’ll go easy, we swear!”

“It’s not them I’m worried about,” George mutters, and that’s the last thing Merriell hears before he
steps out onto the street, Eugene at his side.

They start toward home, careful on the wet concrete. “That was smart,” Merriell says. “About the payout.”

Eugene shrugs. “They might as well get all they can out of it, if the journalist is really getting no big break.”

“What happens if he gets something after all? He can still publish whatever he wants. He doesn’t need us as bad as we might think.”

Eugene turns toward him as they walk, frowning. “Why’d you tell them that he did, then? I thought you didn’t think he could publish without us.”

“Did you believe it?”

“No. Not really.”

“Neither did I,” he says, and takes a sip of coffee. It hits his tongue just shy of hot enough to burn, strong and bitter and ridiculously sweet. He licks his lips. “He can publish without us. I’d be surprised if he doesn’t, if he gets those two on board.”

“You don’t care.”

“Do you?”

“No.” Eugene is silent for a long moment. “I mean, I guess it won’t matter. They have the right to talk about that night. They were there. They’ll tell him as much as they want, but I don’t think they’ll tell him anything about us. They wouldn’t.”

“You trust them.”

Eugene nods. “I do. Is that bad?”

“After everything, I think that’s probably good.”

He gets a soft smile, small and sweet. “Good,” Eugene murmurs, and Merriell smiles back.

And then they round the corner and everything goes briefly and blindingly white.

He flinches hard and barely avoids ducking. It’s an IED, it’s got to be. He’s been stupid all these months, so stupid for not watching for danger. He’d spaced for one second and now they’re all going to pay and it’s his fault. All the training and experience and the entire platoon could be in danger, Eugene could be—

But Eugene is next to him, wide-eyed with fear, and there’s ash in his red hair but he’s unharmed, there’s no blood—

There’s no ash, either. Snow. It’s snow, and his hair is long and still a little tangled from sleep and very much not a regulation length. And it’s cold not hot, and they’re standing in slush not sand, and they’re unharmed.

Sound rushes back all at once.

Another flash goes off. A camera—he sees it this time, sees two or three of them, and there are people everywhere. They’re yelling over one another to the point he can barely make out the
questions, voices overlapping.

“—any comments about what happened two days ago—”

“—how would you respond to comments that you two have betrayed this country’s armed—”

“—Romus Burgin, would you agree with what he said about—”

“—America’s LGBT Sweetheart, would you like to respond to that?”

He’s dropped his cup at some point. The coffee is mixing with the slush on the street. The sight of it sends a pang of irritation through him, and that more than anything snaps him back into the present.

“Eugene—”

“Yeah,” Eugene mutters, eyes still wide, and then he’s grabbing his arm and tugging him through the crowd. When the people refuse to move they get shoved none-too-gently out of the way, and then the two of them are jogging across the street as cars honk and swerve to avoid them.

The people on the other side seem torn between waiting for the light or following them directly into the path of angry Monday morning Philadelphians, and in that split second of hesitation Eugene drags Merriell into an alley, out of sight. They take it all the way to the end at a dead run and then turn the corner, and another.

“Can’t lead them back,” Merriell says between breaths, and Eugene nods. “Fire escape. Take the alley.”

The next street they cross is almost devoid of cars. It’s quieter over here, and that sets something at ease in his chest. Still he doesn’t slow. He chances a look behind them, but all he sees is empty road.

Eugene skids to a stop in the slush but Merriell keeps going, using his momentum to catch the ladder and pull it down. Merriell climbs quickly, reaches down to take the bag out of Eugene’s hands before starting up the steps. He doesn’t have to look to know Eugene is following. He just keeps going until he reaches the window to the apartment, still cracked open from Gene smoking there earlier. He pulls it open all the way and tumbles inside, Eugene on his heels.

They sit underneath the sill behind the table, catching their breath. He can hear the cars outside on the street through the open window, the cold air grounding. When he peeks above the sill the alley is empty.

Eugene lets out one last, long breath. “You okay?”

“Yeah. You?”

He nods. “You froze up. I was worried—”

“Leave it, Sledgehammer,” Merriell says sharply.

Eugene gives him a long-suffering look, the heat of it ruined by the pink that’s been brought to his cheeks and the tip of his nose from running through the cold. “We all get them.”

Maybe, but it isn’t Eugene’s job to be the one with his head in reality. That duty usually falls to Merriell, and the role reversal is throwing him off-kilter. “It’s fine. Don’t worry about it.”

Eugene is still watching him, but he doesn’t comment. “Do you think they followed us?”

“I doubt they even made it across the street. They’ll find us, though. If not now then soon.” Gene’s
lighter is still on the kitchen table, right on top of his pack of cigarettes. It’s the same brand they used to pilfer when they were dumb teenagers, and Merriell snags one and lights it. The nicotine hits like a balm, and Eugene reaches over to steal a drag before putting it back in Merriell’s mouth.

“I guess apartment hunting today is off.”

“It sure looks that way.”

Merriell jumps hard as the door to the apartment bangs open, Babe pushing in with Joe and Chuck in tow. When Eugene puts a hand on his knee he doesn’t shake him off, offering him the cigarette instead.

Babe frowns and peers through the apartment before his eyes catch on the two of them still hunkered behind the table. “Are you two alright?”

Eugene nods. “Hi, Chuck. We brought you scones.”

“Thanks, guys. Means a lot. Hospital food is shit.”

“Yeah?”

He nods, already midway through cramming a scone in his mouth. He’s still got all his winter clothes on and a pair of aviators over his eyes. Together, it’s a look. “Poor Hoobs has to deal with it all on his own now.”

“How’s he doing?” Merriell asks hesitantly.

Joe snorts. “Hooble woke up this morning,” he says. “His first words on waking were to ask if Dike had somehow magically fixed his heating while he was unconscious. Then he tried to convince the nurses he’s allergic to everything in the cafeteria except for the pudding.”

“Did that work?” Eugene asks warily.

“Not in the least. Me and David went and stole him six cups just to get him to stop pouting. He’s taking the news that he got two bullets to the torso pretty well, but the pudding is apparently an issue.”

“Yeah, he’s mad that he’s the only one in there now,” Chuck adds. “Of course as soon as we all check out he wakes up. I told him not to feel too bad about it. I slept through all the hospital camaraderie, too.”

He says it like it’s a joke, but his wry smile doesn’t quite reach his eyes. Merriell chooses not to comment on that. “How are you feeling?” he asks instead.

“I’m doing alright. Mostly it just feels like a bad hangover at this point. Light is giving me a killer headache, which is great considering how our morning has gone.”

“What do you mean?”

“We got swarmed by journalists as soon as we left the hospital. Camera flashes and everything. We had to go back inside and sneak out the back.”

“For real?” Merriell asks. “Did they follow you guys?”

“No, they couldn’t find us after that. I don’t think they know where we live.”
“Probably not.” They know his routine, though—know all their routines. It’s only a matter of time.
“We had a run in with some.”

“No kidding. For real?”

“On the way back from Easy. Someone’s been keeping tabs on you, boy.”

“They probably just got lucky,” Joe grumbles.

“Or they followed that Rolling Stone guy,” Eugene adds. “He seems like he knows what he’s doing.
They probably just wanted to know what he was doing at Easy. The hospital, though. That they
figured out on their own.”

Babe frowns. “Rolling Stone guy?”

“Yeah.”

“I got an email from them. Something about an interview.”

“Did you open it?”

“I deleted it. It sounded like a scam.” They all stare at him and he shrugs. “What? Do you really
expect me to believe Rolling Stone wants to write a story about me, of all people?”

“After everything, kind of,” Joe says after a beat. “You’re wrapped up in this, Babe. I’m pretty sure
Rolling Stone is going to want to be talking to all of us.”

And that’s the bottom line: the press is going to come. They’re going to find them eventually, no
matter how fast Merriell can run. No matter what the two of them do, they’ll always have to keep
moving. They’ll never be able to rest.

Eugene leans his head on Merriell’s shoulder as the others pace around and continue to talk amongst
themselves; as Gene wanders half-asleep out of his room to hear the retelling of the story and gives
the two of them a long, worried look; as he and Babe settle in the living room, as Joe closes all the
blinds, as Chuck finally takes his glasses off and joins Joe in digging through a cabinet under the
television.

Finally they’re alone in the kitchen, and that’s when Eugene speaks at last.

“They’re going to want to talk to us,” he says.

“I know.”

“They’re not going to stop. We can’t hide here forever.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“You know,” Eugene says, and then swallows. He sits there for a moment, the tip of his nose cold
where it’s pressed against Merriell’s neck. “You know what the next step is for us.”

“I promised I was done.” Eugene pulls away to look at him, a question in his eyes even if he doesn’t
speak. “I said I was done running.”

“This isn't running.”

“Isn’t it?” he asks, because it is. It’s fleeing everything chasing them, running from every single thing
that will always be snapping at their heels. “Aren’t you tired of running, cher? Because I’m tired. I’m so tired.”

Eugene shakes his head. “We aren’t running. We aren’t leaving a single thing behind. Just—I’m not ready to stop. I don’t want to leave, but we can’t stay. Damn it, Merriell. I’m not ready to be whatever it is that they want us to be. Heroes or icons or traitors—I’m not ready.”

“You want to disappear again.”

“I want a break. I need a break. Isn’t that why we came here? To try and settle, finally?”

It rings true, so much it hurts. Eugene stares at him and he stares right back, looks until he catches the flecks of black in his eyes and then tugs him close again. “We did settle,” he murmurs into his hair. “We just didn’t have it that long.”

“We’ll have it again. We’ll be happy and then someday we’ll come back here. I just—not right now. We can’t be here right now.”

Merriell nods once, threads his hand through copper hair. “Okay,” he says, kisses his temple and then reaches into Eugene’s pocket to dig out the burner. “Okay,” he says again.

“Are you—”

“Yeah. It’s about time.”

Eugene nods, lips brushing his cheekbone as he does before Merriell pulls away and sends him one last smile. Then he gets up and opens the door to their room, leaning against the wall next to the window as he dials the number he memorized months ago.

It rings once, then twice, then picks up with a dull click. “Hello?” a familiar voice drawls, and Merriell’s breath leaves him in a rush.

“Hillbilly,” he says, because it’s all he can think to.

Eddie’s silent on the other line for a long moment, and Merriell almost thinks he’s hung up when finally he speaks again. “We were wondering when you’d call.”

“Things got bad,” he says carefully.

“We noticed,” he replies, and there’s a note of humor in his voice before he sobers again. “You ready to come home? Just say the word and we’ll get you out of there.”

“Yeah,” Merriell says quietly. “Yeah, I think we are. Where do we need to go?”

“Nowhere. We’ll get you out. Hang tight for—an hour, I think. Can you do that?”

“Yeah,” he says, nodding. “Yeah. One hour.”

“Good,” Eddie replies, and Merriell can tell he’s smiling. “You don’t gotta worry, alright? It’ll all be okay.”

“Alright. I—” he swallows heavily. Something’s clogging his throat. “You ain’t mad?”

“Mad?” Eddie asks evenly, familiar note of comfort in his voice. “The hell we got to be mad about?”

“I thought maybe you wouldn’t want to see us.”
Eddie is silent, but only for a second. “You’re family. Both of you. We don’t turn our backs on family.”

Merriell swallows thickly against the lump in his throat. “Thanks,” he says finally, because it’s all he can think. It isn’t enough, won’t ever be enough, but for now it’s what he has. He recites the apartment’s address quickly. “One hour.”

“One hour. Be ready,” Eddie replies, and then he hangs up.

Merriell stares at the phone before clicking it closed, crossing his arms and propping his chin on the warm plastic. His eyes burn for a moment and he tamps down the feeling with everything he has, imagines the tide along the coast back home and just presses it all down. There’s no use crying over anything, especially when he isn’t even sad. It feels more like relief—shock they’re being accepted back, no questions asked. Just like that.

When he finally feels better he pushes the door open, and the outside world comes back to him in a rush.

Joe and Chuck are giggling amongst themselves as they play cards at the table, the curtains drawn so the light is faint and dim. Even from here he can hear the traffic buzzing outside. Something is nearly bubbling over on the stove before Gene rushes past him from the living room to tend to it, Babe calling something about flash cards after him. Merriell can see Eugene from here, perched on a chair in the living room and trying not to look nervous. When Merriell catches his eye he nods once, and Eugene sighs visibly before turning all his nervous energy to Babe.

Gene passes the door to the pantry again, and Merriell tugs on his sleeve as he passes. It’s a ridiculous movement too similar to shadows of their childhood, but it works anyhow. “Gene,” he murmurs. “We…”

That’s all he gets out before Gene looks at him and understanding seems to dawn. “Let’s talk,” Gene says quietly, herding him back into the pantry. Merriell catches Chuck looking at them through the gap for a split second, eyes solemn and carefully observant. Then the door is closed and they’re alone.

It’s quiet for a long moment without the sound of the outside world. Merriell thought he was ready to tackle this, thought he’d be ready when the time came. Now he’s not so sure.

He’s saved from having to start by Gene shifting awkwardly before leaning against the wall. “You’re leaving,” he says finally.

Merriell nods. There’s nothing else to do. “Just until things settle down.”

“You know what they say about running. Once you start…”

“…You can’t stop. Yeah, I know.” It feels too harsh as soon as he says it. “I ain’t running from you, though. None of this is your fault. Do you hear me?”

“I’d never blame you for—”

“No, what happened was shit but I was never running from you. Not ever. I couldn't come up here piggy back riding on your scholarship and just be useless, so I ran the other way.”

“You’d never be useless,” Gene murmurs.

“I—” His eyes sting horribly all at once and he looks away, frustrated. “I get that. I don't know if I
believe it, but I get it. I just need you to know you ain’t the reason I left. You weren’t then and you ain’t now.”

“Mer, stop. I know.”

“You know?”

“I know. It took me a minute, but I know.”

Merriell lets out a sigh, and when Gene gestures him to come closer he wraps his arms around him gratefully. “I’m glad,” he mumbles into Gene’s shoulder, and Gene hums.

“You have somewhere to stay?”

“Yes. Yeah, our Captain and his Lieutenant. They got a big farmhouse in the country. Been meaning to see them for a while anyhow.”

“Don’t tell me where. I don’t want to know. I’m a terrible liar.”

“Don’t gotta tell me that,” Merriell snorts, doing his best to subtly wipe his eyes before he pulls away.

“When are you going?”

“One hour. It needed to be fast. They’re already looking for us out there.”

Gene nods thoughtfully, not meeting his eyes for a long moment. “And what do you do if they never go away? If someone’s always snapping at your heels?”

It sounds like something out of a bad sci-fi, if he’s being honest. Straight up Orwellian, Leyden would probably call it. “I doubt we’re that famous, but if that happens we’ll lay low when we come back. Lead them on a goose chase for a while.”

“When you come back?”

He nods. “When we come back. And someday maybe we’ll even be brave enough not to give a fuck about any of it at all.”

“I hope that day is soon,” Gene murmurs. “Take care of yourself in the meantime.”

“You too,” he mutters back. This is as close to a goodbye as they’re going to get this time around, but they’re the only words he can get out. He’s always hated closing doors. This isn’t a closed door though, not quite. He can still come back through it again, if he wants.

It’s that thought that he turns over and over in his head until it’s smooth and soft like beach glass as he follows Gene to the living room. Babe is nodding quietly at something Eugene’s said, but he looks up when the two of them approach.

“Just like that,” he says.

“No rest for the wicked,” Eugene replies lowly, and Merriell bumps their knees together gently when he sits down next to him.

“You have everything sorted?” Babe asks.

“It’s all in order. Don’t worry about us.”
Babe nods again. He looks like he’s about to say something, but he’s cut off as Chuck looks up from his card game suddenly.

“You’re leaving,” Chuck says, a statement more than anything. It has Joe turning away from his cards to eye them all quizzically. “That’s what this is, isn’t it?”

“Are you moving out?” Joe asks.

“Don’t get too excited, Joey,” Merriell replies, forcing a lazy smile onto his face. The movement is familiar enough that it almost feels natural. “We’ll be back, just you wait.”

“I’m not excited. This may come as a shock, Shelton, but I might actually miss seeing your ugly face around here every morning.”

“You always did say the sweetest things.”

Joe snorts, and the fact he doesn’t provide a comeback is worrying on its own.

“Take care of yourselves,” Chuck says earnestly. “I’m serious. I owe you after—all that, but that isn’t why I’m saying it. You deserve something good.”

“We found something good,” Eugene says, echoing Merriell’s words from earlier. “We’ll be back to visit, alright? We just need this all to blow over. This isn’t forever.”

“Until next time, then,” Joe says, and Merriell nods.

“Until next time.”

It doesn’t take them long to pack.

Mostly they just throw all their shit back in their packs. They call Lew and Dick, explaining as best they can. Eugene shuts himself into the pantry for ten long minutes while he talks to Sid. They peer out the window for any loitering journalists on the street, tie their boots and pull on their coats, and when all is said and done all that’s left of the last ten days is the stripped mattress in the middle of the floor, their slightly thicker wallet, and miscellaneous repaired items scattered around Philly. Other than that, it’s like they were never here. It’s all he can think of one hour later as he walks through the apartment one last time, down the stairs and out of the lobby.

The door of the building scrapes closed behind them, and that’s another chapter of their lives closed. Just like that.

Eugene shifts beside him, adjusting the straps of his pack. “Now what?” he asks.

Merriell shrugs, at a loss. He’s wracking his mind for some way to put a hopeful spin on this for Eugene’s sake if not his own when tires screech around the corner, a car barreling onto their street and skidding abruptly to a stop in front of their building, the bumper rattling as the engine idles. A burst of music floods the street as the passenger door opens, a blaringly loud chorus Merriell distantly recognizes as Queen. And then Bill is stepping out, combat boots somehow even louder as they scrape against the icy pavement.

“Get in, fools,” he says, smirking. “You look like a couple of fish with the way your jaws are hanging open like that.”
“I didn’t know you were in town,” Eugene says, voice faint with surprise.

“Yeah, well. Gunny said if I made it to Philly he could give me a ride the rest of the way to Skipper’s place. I’ve been meaning to visit, you know? Give me your packs. I’ll put ‘em in the trunk.”

Merriell hands his over, so distracted he barely even notices how Bill grimaces when he takes the weight. “Gunny’s in town?”

The driver’s side door screeches open and Merriell’s stepping toward it before he even notices he’s moving. When Gunny climbs out he’s chortling, already holding his arm open. “What’s the matter, kid? All this time in Philly and you didn’t notice I was your damn neighbor?”

“Pops,” Merriell mumbles, and really he’d be a lot more embarrassed for how readily he falls into the hug if it weren’t for the way Gunny tugs him close just as roughly. “I thought you were back in Arkansas.”

“I got a little place up here, just temporarily. I thought I should be close to Skipper just in case, given how this month has gone. Turns out I was right about that.”

“Didn’t think you’d want to get tied up in this.”

“What, you thought just cause we came home suddenly it ain’t my job to look after this company? The way you all get into trouble every five minutes, that’s one job I’ll never be able to retire from.”

“We messed up,” he mutters. “We just wanted to disappear. We didn’t want it to turn into all this. We don’t want—”

“That’s enough. I’ve seen the news. You listen to me, boy,” Gunny says, quietly enough that the others can’t hear them where they’re still loading up the truck. “Did you need to get out?”

Merriell thinks of Eugene’s monotone recollection of his life back home as they sat side by side on the Greyhound, about the flatness in his shoulders and the exhaustion in his eyes. He thinks about his own house back home, the peeling paint and the radiator that rattles in the winter. His father’s heavy footsteps and his mother’s cold eyes, the name that wasn’t his and the clothes that weren’t his and fear of a god who never seemed as loving as they made him out to be. “We couldn’t stay,” he says, and it’s the truth.

Gunny shrugs and squeezes his shoulder one last time. “Then you did what you had to. The rest ain’t your fault.”

It’s too easy, so much that Merriell can’t keep the incredulity from his tone. “You taught us to be better,” he argues. “You taught us not to run.”

“I taught you to be there for each other,” Gunny counters just as quickly. “I taught you to have each other’s backs. I taught you strength in numbers, just like Skipper and Hillbilly did. Damn, son. I thought I taught you better than to be scared to ask for help, especially from your own damn platoon.”

There’s nothing to say to that other than the only thing he’s been thinking this whole time. “Thank you,” he says quietly, sincerely, and means it with every bone.

“Yeah, yeah,” Gunny mutters. “It’s what we do. Now get in. It’s time we set out, or we won’t get there until late.”

Merriell nods and follows Eugene into the backseat through the gap behind Leyden’s chair. It’s a
tight fit, their knees bumping the seats in front of them, but Merriell manages to twist sideways a bit and rest his head against Eugene’s shoulder and really, that’s not so bad. He smells like the cheap soap Babe kept pilfering from the Res Halls to keep their shower stocked, and a little bit like clean sheets and caramel but mostly like Eugene. Merriell thinks maybe being crammed in this space forever would be bearable if Eugene were here next to him.

Eugene must feel his attention on him because he cranes his head to look at him as the car pulls onto the road, Gunny and Bill arguing over directions in the front seat. “You should get some rest,” Eugene mutters, half into his curls.

“I’m not tired.”

“Liar,” Eugene says, laughing quietly.

“Tuat t’en grosse bueche,” he mumbles back, eyes already slipping closed.

He doubts Eugene understands, but he laughs again anyway. It’s a bright sound, somehow still soft in the space. Merriell stares up at him for a minute, the angle of the underside of his chin and the length of his eyelashes. He reaches up to trace his collar, then dips his finger under the chain until he can tug it free. He runs his fingers along it until he finds the clasp, pops it easily open and removes the ring before clipping it closed again.

Eugene watches him, eyes curious and careful. He watches as Merriell traces his fingers, their calluses catching against each other before he slides the band onto his ring finger. It catches the light, and Merriell traces a thumb across the top before letting it rest in Eugene’s lap.

Eugene traces it once too, flexing his fingers a little as if getting used to the weight. His other arm is still around Merriell’s shoulders and Merriell can feel his fingers tugging his dog tags free. He sighs when Eugene slips the ring onto his finger and tugs his hand up to kiss across the metal once, already warm against his skin. The weight feels comforting and warm. It’s different; it’s alien, and he won’t stop noticing it for a while. It’s nice.

“Je t’aime,” Eugene murmurs into his hair, his pronunciation choppy and clumsy and perfect.

It makes Merriell smile against his shoulder, two words making his throat thick and his heart pound. “Et toi,” he gets out around his grin.

It makes Eugene huff a laugh into his hair, and he gets another kiss for his efforts. “Sleep, Mer,” Eugene murmurs. “I’ve got watch. Get some rest.”

He really shouldn’t. He should be paying better attention. He has no idea how he’s even tired after the week they had. Back during their tour they’d sleep half as much even if nothing was happening at all and still consider themselves lucky for it. The adrenaline should be keeping him going if nothing else.

Maybe it’s being surrounded by these people again, back in a vehicle bumping down the road with Bill singing along to the radio in the front seat and Eugene at his side. Maybe it’s that, or maybe it’s the knowledge that for once he’s leaving a place with the intention of returning there eventually. Maybe it’s the assurance that someone else is protecting him, someone else is driving and someone else knows they have a destination and they’ll reach it safely. He has no idea. Either way, warm and content and rocking along quietly with the bumps in the road he falls asleep against Eugene’s shoulder before he even knows what’s happening.

He sleeps soundly, and he doesn’t dream.
In my head Gunny is that surly old man on your block who seems absolutely terrifying, but on Halloween he hands out full sized candy bars and he drives a super ridiculous tiny car. A vintage bug, or a 70’s corolla or something. Just something completely out of left field.
Anyway, I am so sorry this took so long to write. It’s mostly because I kept getting stuck on style and things and I couldn’t stop picking at it. That, and sadly things in real life haven’t been the most ideal and I had to attend another funeral just last week, which was hard. On the bright side hopefully things can only get better from here! <3
Thank you so much for sticking with me, it means the world! We have a huge time jump coming up between now and next chapter, and hopefully I’ll be able to post it soon. As always, I’d love to hear your thoughts!
Interlude III

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“—think that the main conversation isn’t about gay rights or—you know, or trans rights, or veteran’s rights at all. I think this is a conversation about guns and a conversation about gun legislation, and I think everything else is quite honestly a distraction from the big picture. This is yet another example of one issue in this country that’s running rampant, and that could be fixed with just one piece of legislation, and that’s sad to me. That’s what we need to fix.”

“Hold on—hold on a minute, Sal, because I just don’t know that that’s true.”

“What, the anti-gun legislation or the—”

“No, I mean—you know, I mean that it’s easy to say this is a simple problem with a simple fix when really this conflict is bringing to the light a lot of issues that we wouldn’t even be seeing normally. I mean—hold on—I mean that here you have two veterans who aren’t being taken care of. I mean that you have a young trans man who isn’t being accepted by his community, you have him and his husband fleeing their homes because they don’t feel welcome—”

“Now that isn’t the issue here, though.”

“Well, but we have to think about it, you know? They came north for a reason, and that reason was that they were facing a hostile environment they had to get out of. And you know, they wouldn’t have been in harm’s way in the first place if that hadn’t happened. We’d all like to say this has an easy solution but then there’s that voice in the back of the room going well, there are more layers to this. And that’s what we need to be keeping in mind here. This is a complicated issue made up of even more complicated issues. I mean, look at the victims, too.”

“Four students, yeah.”

“Yeah, young people. I mean, Charles Grant’s got a life ahead of him. Donald Hoobler’s got a life ahead of him.”

“They all do.”

“They all do. And here we have—we’ve got Joe Toye having to work triple shifts to even go to school and we have him and William Guarnere getting second jobs to cover medical expenses because they don’t get insurance through work. These are young, poor working people trying to get through college. And then we’ve got Winters and Nixon as well, and they’d been seriously struggling before this. And you’ve got the shooter, and he was a student and he was struggling financially.”

“So what are you saying?”

“I’m saying I think this was a terrible thing that could’ve been prevented, but the reason this situation has risen to national attention so fast is because here we are learning all these things about people in our city, and the night at Currahee Bar was just one tiny part of the problem. We can’t just start there, we need to start everywhere. Anti-gun legislation would have prevented this, but we can’t just pass that and then pretend it’s all okay when the victims are still suffering from a host of other issues. We need to focus on the present and the future, too. I mean, it’s been almost six months and nothing has changed. We need to start asking these questions and we need to start asking them now.”
“Well, thanks for talking with us today. For those of you just tuning in, that was Detective Lena Riggi with the Philadelphia Police Department. We have some music coming for you now, and make sure to tune in in an hour. Joining us to discuss this matter further will be Edward Heffron, a witness to the shooting and the cousin of—”

He flicks the radio off, then kills the engine and squints through the dusty windshield. “Huh,” he says

“You sure this is it?” Florence asks. If she cares about the dust and the dirt she isn’t showing it, and the heat doesn’t seem to phase her in the slightest.

And some heat it is, especially for June. It’s sweltering in Pennsylvania, enough even to give a native Texan pause. It’s certainly making him feel sluggish and tired, thoughts running languid and slow. “I couldn’t tell you,” he says. “I’ve never been here.”

“I’m not even sure where ‘here’ is,” she remarks, pushing her shades up. She climbs out of the truck and he follows suit, looking around warily.

They’re parked somewhere north of the middle of nowhere, east of Pittsburg but west of Philly. They’d needed the GPS and a bit of luck to even locate the place at all, and he still isn’t sure they’ve succeeded. Something about the house before them seems right, though. Maybe it’s the painstakingly restored porch, the wood sanded free of splinters; maybe it’s the clearly homemade porch swing and the battered guitar resting on top of it, or the carefully maintained vegetable garden out front.

It’s probably the man who bursts out of the front door in a rush, takes the stairs in one leap and tackles him into the dirt. Yeah, that’s probably what it is.

“Burgie!” he roars into the vicinity of his shoulder, arms snaking around to try to pin him down. Dust flies into the air as Burgie scuffles against him, trying to get his feet under himself so he can flip him away. “You missed us so much you dragged your ass all the way out here, Sarge?”

“Yeah, I couldn’t live without you shoving me into the fuckin’ sand twelve hours a day,” Burgie gets out. The man on top of him lets out a laugh before executing a move that would’ve taken his arm out of commission had it been full force. Really, Burgie can only be proud.

Even so, Burgie is willing to risk caking himself thoroughly in dirt if it means proving life as a civilian hasn’t made him soft. He’s able to get free for only a moment before they’re full-on wrestling again, and it reminds him so much of those long hours of sitting around at camp waiting for something to happen with nothing better to do than roughhouse that he starts laughing, out of nowhere. It’s everything he missed, with nothing he didn’t: the earth but not the sand, the heat but not the uniform, the friends but not the war. The man beneath him is laughing too, enough that their wrestling is turning less tactical and more into puppy fighting. They’re dirty and probably look a mess, but he can’t bring himself to care. He feels like a kid again. He feels happy.

Of course, there are a few things missing. A voice clears loudly above them. That’s one.

They both jump up guiltily, brushing themselves down as if that will do anything to rid the dirt covering them. It barely makes a dent, and the man next to him has just enough time to look at him with the face of a panicked child before they both turn back to face forward.

“Boys,” Andy says slowly. He’s doing a bad job of hiding his amusement.

“Cap,” Burgie says.

Andy stares him down for a long moment, but evidently even he can’t remain serious about this for
long. Within moments a grin is breaking across his face. “Come here,” he says, pulling Burgie forward into a rough hug. “Good to see you.”

“Likewise.” He holds a hand out to Florence, who comes around the truck. “Sweetheart, this is Captain Andrew Haldane, and I think you remember Bill. Guys, this is my fiancée.”

“Florence,” Andy finishes for him. “We’ve heard all about you. It’s nice to finally put a face to the name. And please, Andy is fine. Burgie, you know I’m not a captain anymore.”

“Worst loss the Marine Corps has ever taken, if you ask me.”

“Yeah, believe me, we’re both better suited for this kind of living.”

“Yeah?” Burgie asks, looking around again. The property is lush and well maintained, trees and hedgerows lining the house neatly and giving way to fields and a barn beyond. He can hear a stream babbling somewhere, he thinks. Even in the heat it’s idyllic.

“I wish the two of us could’ve stayed with you boys longer, but we’ve made the best of it.”

“I’m just glad you’re both okay,” he says. He remembers the exact sound of each shot that had caught their captain and lieutenant. The fact both of them made it home with honorable discharges and nothing but the scars to show for it is a miracle in itself. “Where’s—”

The front door of the house swings open, and Eddie steps out. When he sees Bill he sighs. “Leyden, for the last time. I’m not gonna do your laundry anymore if you keep making such a mess of it every day.”

“But Eddie—”

“But nothing.”

“But I had to! Burgie’s here!”

Eddie looks to him and Florence finally, eyes widening. He comes their way quickly, dragging Burgie into a hug. Somehow he doesn’t get any dust on himself, but he balks a little when he sees how much of it is coating Burgie’s person when he pulls away. “Good god, what happened to you?”

“What do you think? Good to see you.”

“You, too. And Bill, I keep telling you you don’t actually need to keep tackling people all the time. This ain’t the goddamn Registan. Someone’s gonna get hurt.” Despite his tone he can’t keep the smile off his face. God, he’s just as bad as Andy is. When his eyes land on Florence he’s all but beaming. “You must be Florence.”

“That I am,” she says, shaking his hand.

“Lovely to meet you. I’m Eddie Jones. Here, we have a room made up for you two. Let me get your bags and I’ll help you get settled.”

Burgie lurches to follow them. “Oh, I can help, too.”

“No way are you tracking all that dust into the house,” Eddie says. Behind him, Florence smirks. “You two haven’t changed a bit. Go round back and hose off first, alright?”

Bill casts pleading eyes Andy’s way, but Andy just gives him another look of mock-disappointment, mouth twitching. “Don’t look at me. You heard him.”
And that’s how Burgie’s first trip to Pennsylvania devolves from a dirt wrestling match to a hose fight.

They settle on the back porch, after. The sun is setting over the tree line in the west, the fields turned gold and their shirts drying in the last rays of sunlight where they hang on the rail. They have a bottle of whiskey sitting between them and they pass it back and forth every few minutes, drinking from it directly. It’s turning warm, not that it matters. It hits them warm, too. It’s warming Burgie from the inside as the sun hits his wet skin, and he feels loose and happy and good.

He can hear Florence talking to Andy and Eddie in the house behind them. They’re getting along famously. He’d worried about it before, but here they are carrying on as if they’ve known each other for years. It settles something inside of him he didn’t even know he was worried about.

Their voices grow louder for a moment as the door opens then squeaks back shut again, and when he looks up Shelton is looking down at him.

“Sir,” he drawls.

“Corporal,” Burgie says back, then grins when Snaf sits down between them. He leans against Burgie’s shoulder for only a second before recoiling with a grimace.

“You’re all wet,” he complains.

“Yeah, that’d be Bill’s fault.”

“You got the old Bill Leyden welcome, then?” he asks, and steals the bottle from Bill’s hands.

“Hey,” Bill gripes.

“Ah, hush, boo. You stole half of mine the other day.”

“I’ve seen the kickstarters people have put up for you. The two of you ain’t exactly lacking in whiskey money these days.”

“Well technically we’re still homeless, ain’t we?”

Bill rolls his eyes, but he lets it go. Snaf takes a long drink before passing it to Burgie. He flicks his head a little after swallowing, and when he speaks again his voice is rough.

“How was the drive up?”

“Good,” Burgie says. “Long, but good. It helped to have Florence there. We took shifts.”

“Oh, I met her on the way in. She’s lovely. I hope you’ve put a ring on that.”

“Working on it,” Burgie replies, thinking of the diamond he has hidden away in a roll of socks back home. “What about you two, huh?” He grabs at Snaf’s left hand and Snaf pulls it away with a shy smile. “How’s married life treating you?”

“Oh, stop.” He toys with his wedding band for a moment before taking the bottle back from Burgie with a nod of thanks. “To be honest it don’t feel much different than before.”
“Doesn’t surprise me,” Bill says. “Lord knows you’ve had a wife ever since Sledgehammer first showed his pretty little ginger head in camp. All that’s changed is the tax returns.”

The sun is barely peaking through the trees now, its rays drying his skin rapidly. It’s turning Snaf’s eyes green and making Bill’s hair glow. It makes the remaining liquid in the bottle bright and golden. “Sorry we couldn’t make it up in January.”

“Don’t be. It was just a courthouse thing. We’ll have a real party once things are more settled. It ain’t really like we even need to, though. It’s been nonstop up here. Practically the whole platoon’s been through. You just missed Jay.”

“Yeah?” Burgie says. “How’s he?”

“Good. He’s good. Asked about you. I’m sure you’ll be hearing from him soon.” He digs through his pockets and pulls out a pack of cigarettes, toying with it but making no move to actually light it. “He’s been through every other weekend or so. And then Sid Phillips is up here now and then. You remember him?”


"Yeah, that's him. He won one National Lindy Hop competition and all of a sudden he thinks he's hot shit. The rest of the guys come and go as they please. Bill’s here most of the time, now."

“Still not as often as you,” Bill pipes up. “These two are permanent residents, practically. It works out, though. It’s been a lot of road trips from here to Philly to Brooklyn, but it works out.”

“Philly?” Burgie asks. “I thought you guys had left for good.”

Snaf hums. “We visit. Got some people we’ve been staying in touch with. Plus Eugene’s got online classes now. He goes into the city for tests.”

“Yeah? That’s good to hear. Is that where he is right now?”

“No, he should be around here somewhere.” Snaf leans back toward the house, calling through the screen. “Sledgehammer!”

The door creaks open again. “Thought you said you were quitting?” Eugene says. He steps forward to lean against the railing, gesturing to the cigarette Snaf is still playing with.

“Oh, come on, cher. I’m down to one a day,” he whines, though he’s still making no effort to light it. “Where’ve you been?”

“The damn goat got out again. I’m heading back over to catch him. Just wanted to know if one of you two wanted to give me a hand, is all.”

“Oh, let us take care of it.”

“You’ve been drinking.”

“That’s what makes us the better goat-catchers, Sledge,” Bill says. He stands, Snaf following suit. “You’re too reasonable with them. We’re wily just like they are.”

Eugene has a tiny, lopsided smile on his face like he knows exactly how untrue that statement is, but he doesn’t protest. “If you’re volunteering then have at it. Good luck.”

“Oh thanks, but we won’t need it,” Snaf smirks. He trails a hand across Eugene’s arm as he follows
Bill down the steps and toward the barn.

Burgie watches them go, then wordlessly holds out the bottle. Eugene contemplates it silently for a moment before accepting it and taking a long sip. It feels like old times, the rhythm of it, and Burgie smiles to himself. “It’s good to see you, Eugene.”

“You, too,” Eugene says. “I’m glad you’re here. I never got a chance to thank you for setting the story straight on tv and all that.”

“It was nothing.”

“Oh, stop. Don’t give me that. Back then when everything was up in the air it made all the difference.”

“No one thought you were a kidnapper,” Burgie argues. “That may have been the headline, but by the end of that first week nobody believed it.”

“Maybe,” Eugene allows. “All I know is it helped to have our platoon on our side. I’m serious. I won’t forget it.”

Burgie turns to look at him. He doesn’t recognize the smile on Eugene’s face, small and happy and genuine. It isn’t like him; or maybe it’s exactly like he used to be, that hidden side of every man in his platoon that he’d never quite be privy to as a sergeant.

This is different though. He isn’t a sergeant here.

He’s here as a friend visiting people he missed—people he knew better than he knew his own family while he was overseas. Here he’s come home to find them all changed, with families of their own and lives with which he isn’t familiar. It’s odd, to say the least. He can’t bring himself to be anything other than happy about it, though. In Afghanistan Eugene didn’t smile and Snafu didn’t let people close and when Bill fought he fought for his life. Sitting here on the back steps things are miles different than what they were—almost as many miles as are between them and that wretched pile of tents they called home for so long. The boy sitting next to him is familiar, yet not. All the men here are the people he knew plus five more shades from the rainbow. Richer; full of a new kind of life.

Things aren’t settled yet—that much is clear. Things aren’t perfect but sitting here surrounded by people he feels like he’s known for forever the world feels a little more stable. The sun is a little warmer and brighter, the sky a little more clear. Things aren’t perfect, but they’re good and they’re getting better and maybe one day they’ll be great.

(“They’re nice,” Florence will say later that night, leaning against the quilted pillows with a book propped up in her lap. “Not that I wasn’t expecting that. From the stories you’ve told, though, I thought that wouldn’t be my first impression. But they’re nice, all of them. Just sweet people.”

“They’re probably on their best behavior for you,” Burgie will reply with a grin. “They’re all very cunning. Don’t be fooled.”

She’ll close her book at that and turn to him. “I’m glad we came. I know you were worrying about all of them, but it’s beautiful up here. They seem like they’re all doing well.”

“They do. They really do.”

And that’ll seem like the end of the conversation. It will be, for a long moment. Florence will flick
the lamp off and plunge the room into darkness before finally speaking again. “Are they happy?”

And Burgie will think about the events of the day, about Bill returning covered in dirt once again after wrestling the goat back into the barn; about he and Snaf arguing about whose turn it is to set the table, about Andy bumping Eddie’s hip as he dries the wet dishes Eddie hands to him before stacking them neatly for Eugene to put away. And he’ll smile in the darkness. “I think they are, yeah.”

Chapter End Notes

Wheee time jump! The next chapter has been in the works for literal months and is taking forever to write, so hopefully this will hold everyone over until then. I think I started it around March just to make sure everything was right tonally, and it still isn’t done. So thank you for bearing with me while I sort that out!

As always, thank you for reading and sticking with me for all this time. I always love to know what you guys think and comments will definitely make our conclusion come that much faster!
NEWS THIS WEEK: 12/16/17

**National: Full Recoveries Expected For Victims at Currahee:** Four were injured in a robbery gone wrong one week ago at Currahee bar in Philadelphia, PA. Among the victims was 22-year-old Charles Grant, one of four harboring national sweethearts and local heroes Eugene Sledge and… (read more)

**Art Column: A Fresh Face In Last Century’s Game:** “If you’re surprised, image how I feel.” So said Sidney Phillips upon winning second place in couples’ improv at the National Lindy Hop Competition in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania last weekend. Hailing from Mobile, Phillips took everyone by… (read more)

**Food: 12 New Recipes For Christmas:** When it comes to great eats we have you covered this holiday season. Get your delicious snacks before those new years resolutions set in. Here are our 12 favorite recipes as the weather outside gets colder, from homemade stews to scones to cookies and… (read more)

**Opinion: The War At Home:** They defended freedom in the war abroad. They came home to a nation that hated them. They risked their lives defending their friends, and two days later they disappeared running from the media spotlight. Our heroes have a right to their private lives, and here’s… (read more)

**Local: Don’t Sign Here:** We love our city, warts and all. That being said, only the foolhardy sign a lease without doing their research. From the dead radiators to the burst pipelines to the month-long electricity outages, here are ten reasons you should never rent in a building owned by this man… (read more)

From: Sledgefu Burner 7:19 12/11/17

Comment est Chuck?

From: Gene 7:20 12/11/17

Il ne peut pas jouer call of duty alors il n’est pas joie mais il va bien.

From: Gene 7:20 12/11/17

Comment allez-vous? Avez-vous en securite?

From: Sledgefu Burner 7:20 12/11/17

Oui, nous sommes avec nos amis. Le voyage etait de la merde mais nous sommes ici maintenant.

From: Sledgefu Burner 7:22 12/11/17

Merci pour tout. Tu es un bon frere.
chuckles @grantcharles96 · 18 Dec 2017
Someone buy #COD off me before I light it on fire please #concussionproblems #toobright
#tooflashy

baaaeb @baheff · 18 Dec 2017
@grantcharles96 dont release that curse on the rest of the world

From: Sledgefu Burner 18:21 1/21/18
Jules, our data plan really doesn’t support all these cat memes you keep sending

From: J. Julian 18:25 1/21/18
Maybe you should get a real phone and stop complaining then

US Weekly @usweekly · 6 Feb 2018
#Breaking: Sledge and Shelton married 2.02.18. Congrats boys! View certificate
https://usm.ag/2qaYk3R

Kierra<33 @kgirl02 · 6 Feb 2018
@usweekly Because digging through their personal life is exactly what they need #BackOurBoys

Phil Blasdel @amazingphil0284 · 6 Feb 2018
@usweekly is #disgusting. Whoever leaked that can rot. #BackOurBoys

joejoe @sanfranvroom · 2 Feb 2018

to the pap outside: we see you. they moved out 3 weeks ago. fire ur hairdresser plz. Thx.

John Richard @richardoffic68 · 2 Feb 2018
@sanfranvroom Heard you’re skilled! I’ll let you fix my ‘do in exchange for a statement!

joejoe @sanfranvroom · 2 Feb 2018
@richardoffic68 hahahshsfdkhgfkbvmvbm youre funny

Kelsie @kchoi01 · 14 Feb 2018
@richardoffic68 #BackOurBoys it’s been 3 months. Leave them alone already

From: The Sledge Household;
Subject: Summer

Hello to both of you-

Well, summer is finally on the way, and after such a long winter too. Already it’s getting quite warm out and we’ve been keeping the windows open to let in the air. Around town everyone is already getting out their summer clothes. Eugene, the ice cream truck has been driving about already and we were reminded of how you and Sid used to chase it down the street when you were young.

We have been talking to Sid, as I am sure you know. He came to us immediately upon his return home to deliver the news that you did not accompany him and would not contact us—how we wish you had left us some way to talk to you. Eugene, it has been four months now since you’ve been home. It’s taken time, but we’ve come to terms with the new life you’ve chosen and the decisions you’ve made. We only wish you had thought not to cut out your family along the way.

It is quiet around here without you or Deacon around. We considered getting another dog. Perhaps you could come south for a time to help us find a new one—you, and Shelton as well. We’d love to finally meet the man you chose to marry.

With all our love,

Ma and Pop

From: Heffron 12:43 4/18/18
Ma wants you guys to come by next weekend + bring friends. Thoughts?

From: SledgeFu Burner 12:51 4/18/18
She aint met our friends is she really ready for that

From: Heffron 12:54 4/18/18
Shelton you haven’t met my mother

From: SledgeFu Burner 12:55 4/18/18
No that’s not true. Me and her had a great time last night

From: Heffron 12:57 4/18/18
Invitation revoked. Im blocking your #

From: SledgeFu Burner 12:58 4/18/18
That’s no way to treat family

...
From: SledgeFu Burner 1:32 4/18/18

We’ll be there.

To: eheffron96@gmail.com; luz.george@gmail.com; & 9 others

From: wright@rollingstone.com

Subject: All set to go

One last special thanks to each of you who contributed. As you’ve probably heard everything is all set and due to be published on Monday. You’re all invited to the release party that night and you’ll each be getting your own copy in the mail sometime next week.

Cheers and thanks for all the help,

Evan Wright
Rolling Stone

Karl Norman @nkarl92 · 6 May 2018

(1/2) The theory that the #PhillyGang are government plants is smart when you think about it. They’re all so vaguely connected, there’s at least one person for every letter in LGBTQA+

Karl Norman @nkarl92 · 6 May 2018

(2/2) but the most damning evidence by far is that they’re ALL SO SYMMETICAL. They’re way too attractive. Government agents for sure, and I ain’t even mad.

Warren Jones @jonesusweekly · 6 May 2018

@nkarl92 maybe you should spend less time thirsting and more time actually thinking about their story not adding up.

Karl Norman @nkarl92 · 6 May 2018

@jonesusweekly don’t @ me, I’ve read your work. You’re just as thirsty as I am.

baaaeb @baeheff · 6 May 2018

GUESS WHO PASSED BIOCHEM 2.5 bitches id like to thank the academy my genius boyfriend @roe.eug96 and prof Strayer. Drinks on me!

luz @georgieluz · 6 May 2018

babe im SO holding you to that because GUESS WHO FAILED CONTEMPORARY LIT

baaaeb @baeheff · 6 May 2018
@georgieluz oh no im so sorry

luz @georgieluz · 6 May 2018

@baeheff actually it was perco but nice try

Perco @perkiconte · 6 May 2018

@baeheff @georgieluz you know what catch 22 can suck my dick

alex! @penkalano · 6 May 2018

@perkiconte AMEN we’re doing shots

From: Julian 8:32 5/7/18

Did you read it

From: Babe 8:48 5/7/18

Jules do you know how hungover we all are right now

From: Julian 8:49 5/7/18

Alright, but did you read it

From: Babe 8:53 5/7/18

Gdi

From: George 8:56 5/7/18

Malark read it

From: Julian 8:58 5/7/18

What did he say?

From: George 8:59 5/7/18

Why, is it bad?

From: Julian 9:01 5/7/18

It isn’t good. Just ask him

From: George 9:02 5/7/18

He threw up.

From: George 9:02 5/7/18

But that might be unrelated.
It was 80% from the book and 20% from the tequila

From: Julian 9:12 5/7/18

Great

To: sledge.eug97@gmail.com; sheltonmK35@gmail.com;
From: phillips.sid97@gmail.com
Subject: [no subject]

Did you finish it?

To: phillips.sid97@gmail.com; cc: sheltonmK35@gmail.com
From: sledge.eug97@gmail.com
Subject: re: [no subject]

Neither of us have the right to judge as we gave them no help during the process of writing it.

Wow, though. Just...wow.

To: sledge.eug97@gmail.com; sheltonmK35@gmail.com;
From: leckier001@gmail.com;
Subject: Evan Wright.

Boys—

I don’t know if either of you remember me. I served with Phillips before he came home. I crossed paths with the two of you a handful of times in country, though never for long.

Sid recommended I check out Wright's book about the events of the last few months, so I gave it a read. Wright did incredible work in Iraq and I have every ounce of respect for him as a writer, but judging from the excerpts of his interviews I gathered he had trouble connecting with his subjects this time around. The topic seems to be somewhat outside his reach—believe me when I say I know there are more gay marines out there than their commanders would like to know about, but nonetheless people only seem to be able to understand what being gay in the corps entails when they’ve experienced it directly. I know you two are trying to keep a low profile, but I've also seen firsthand the stir you've caused and the inspiration you've given people all over the country. Let me know if you'd be interested in telling your story one last time the way you want to tell it—the way you want it to be heard.
He wakes to his phone doing its best to commit suicide via jumping off the nightstand. He catches it before it can, sliding the ‘call accept’ button and raising it to his ear without even looking at the screen.

“Hello?” he rasps.

“Good morning, sleeping beauty,” Hoosier replies dryly, voice tinny over the small speaker.

“What’s your point?”

“The ass crack of dawn?” He rolls over to look at the ceiling. “Not so much.”

“It’s eight, first of all. Thought you’d be up by now. I was just calling to see if you’d seen the news.”

“What, you mean you didn’t call just to hear my voice?”

Hoosier snorts. “You’ve been gone two days. Forgive me if I’m not that desperate quite yet. Here, I’m sending you an article.”

His phone buzzes against his ear, and he pulls it away from his face to open the text. Homecoming Heroes Back In Philadelphia, the headline reads. He scrolls down to examine the attached photo.

Judging from the lighting, it was taken recently. Two boys are standing on a fire escape on the side of a shitty building he knows must be Dike’s. He recognizes one as Grant, leaning on the far end of the rail with his face half-obscured by a pair of knockoff ray bans and his hands cradling a mug ringed with the stripes of the pride flag. Sledge is next to him, leaning against the bricks, the two of them deep in conversation. Roe is leaning out of the window with his elbows against the frame, laughing wryly at something. Last is Shelton, sitting at Roe’s side on the other side of the window with his bare feet dangling over the edge. A pair of obnoxious rainbow aviators rest on top of his curls and he’s smirking directly at the camera challengingly as if he’s just spotted their observer. In his hands is a hideous red mug that reads Proud Veteran Of Your Mom, the font obnoxiously large to the point it’s legible even in the poor resolution of the photo.

“At least they look healthy and happy,” Leckie ventures.

“Probably because they’d been gone so long,” Hoosier replies with a snort. “That marks the first time they were in the city since December, as far as anyone can tell. Before the article was even released they were scattered to the wind again. They probably started packing as soon as it was taken.”

“Can you blame them?” Leckie asks. “After all the fanfare of their last visit it makes sense that they’d want to be gone for a while.”

“Yeah, but you see my point.”

“What’s your point?”
“That getting a hold of these guys is going to be next to impossible if they don’t want to be found.”

That’s a good point. “What are you suggesting, then?”

He sighs, static bursting through the line. “I’m not suggesting anything, really,” he grumbles. “But if it was up to me? Put those two on the backburner and start talking to the rest. Sledge and Shelton aren’t in town and it’ll take them a while to agree to all this either way. You might as well get a head start on everyone else.”

“I thought we were going to try to avoid doing that,” Leckie grumbles. “You said it yourself. If I want any of them to trust me I’m going to have to do this one step at a time, starting with getting Sledge and Shelton’s permission.”

Hoosier sighs again. “Look, I don’t know. It was a good plan, but just because you need to do things a little bit backward doesn’t mean it isn’t going to work out. If your intentions are good they’ll notice it, and they’ll trust you to do the right thing.”

Leckie doesn’t like it; not the sneaking around, not any of it. If that’s what’s going to finally get the ball rolling, though… “I guess you’re right. I’ll talk to Wright in any case and see if he has anything useful to add. That was his approach too, you know. We all saw how well that worked out.”

“You aren’t Wright.”

“That might not be a good thing.”

“It sure as shit ain’t bad.”

Leckie snorts a laugh. “Take care of yourself, Hoos. Don’t get too wild out there without me.”

“No promises. We’re going to the dog park today. It’s going to get crazy.”

“You spoil those dogs.”

“Someone’s gotta. Good luck today.”

“Mhmm.”

When Hoosier hangs up Leckie immediately opens his email, typing out a quick message to Wright. He’s still in town—must be, with his work here only barely done. Wright hadn’t gotten the warmest welcome from his subjects, but nonetheless he’d managed to get some interviews and content out of it.

Hopefully Leckie will be able to come away with a little more than that.

He’s about to get ready for the day when a new message in his inbox gives him pause. Meet tonight? is the innocuous subject line. He opens it, skimming the short message quickly.

Mr. Leckie,

We were contacted by our colleagues about your inquiries re: the incident on December 9, 2017 and the circumstances leading up to it. Please meet us at Currahee bar at 1800 for a debrief and initial screening. None of the individuals involved can sign on to the project without a personal preliminary meeting at this time.

Regards,
Harry Welsh and associates.

Currahee, Philadelphia PA

…Initial screening? He blinks. The only people he’d reached out to so far were Sledge and Wright. If he’s reading this correctly then the entire crew could be on board, provided the meeting tonight goes well. It isn’t the strangest thing he’s ever received in his inbox as a journalist, but the message certainly has an odd energy to it.

He’s just about to type a response when his phone pings with a message from Wright. Staying a ways out of town, he reads. Can you make it to Jersey?

Leckie sighs. Already he can tell it’s going to be a long day.

The drive to Gloucester City is pleasant, if a bit too hot for his taste. He has the AC roaring the entire way and still he feels like he’s about to sweat his way out of his seat.

Fortunately the address Wright provided him with is cool enough, sitting in the shadow of the bridge and quiet in the outskirts of the city. Philadelphia is a shining pool of humidity across the river, tumbling in its expanse and wavering in the foggy mugginess.

“Nice view, eh?” someone says behind him.

He turns around. There’s a man standing against the side of the building, propped up casually yet somehow making it look aggressive all the same. Maybe it’s the overly confident slant of his shoulders or the obnoxiously big gold sunglasses he’s sporting. Maybe it’s the way he’s loudly drinking a slurpee, careless and cocky. Something about him seems familiar, though Leckie can’t tell what.

“It is nice, yeah,” he says. “You live around here?”

“Nearabouts,” the man replies, pushing off the wall. He’s definitely posturing aggressively now, though Leckie will be damned before he takes a step back. He has no reason to. He’s not doing any harm here. “Can I help you with something, or are you just loitering for the sake of it?”

“Actually I’m looking for someone,” Leckie replies. “Evan Wright. He sent me this address. You know him?”

“Damn reporter,” the man mutters. He turns to the building, ducking under the garage door. “Hey, Wright!”

“What?” a voice calls back.

“Some dude here for you.”

A few seconds later Wright is stepping out from under the door. “Sorry about that,” he says with an easy smile. He turns to the man still leaning against the wall to add, “Ray, not everyone is an enemy, you know.”

Ray snorts, heading into the building. “Speak for yourself, homes. This is Jersey, not Disneyland.”

Wright shakes his head as Ray disappears from view. “He’s been surly recently. Sorry.”

“Everything alright?” Leckie asks, frowning.
“Oh, yeah. I think he’s just getting tired of the media running around.” At Leckie’s look of confusion he shrugs. “He was a subject in one of my other projects a while back. It took a while for the attention to fade, and now I think he’s irritated that I’ve brought it here again.”

“How did that go? The project, I mean.”

“Good. It went great. Better than the last one, anyway.”

“About that,” Leckie says. “I had some questions about your approach and all that.”

“Of course. Come on. Let’s talk.”

They settle at a diner a few blocks away, waiting until they have their food before getting to the matter at hand.

“I had to beat the rush,” Wright says finally over a plate of pancakes. “It was a race, and that really changed the way things had to be done. Whoever was the first in the door got first access, and that took a lot of grace out of the way I had to handle it.”

Leckie ponders that as he takes a long sip of coffee. Of course there were circumstances that dictated Wright’s actions. He’s always been a good journalist, and there must have been reasons for this slip-up. “How’d you find them?” he asks.

“Employment, mostly. Everyone was focusing on the hospital and the bar, but nobody considered that most of the people there would still have to work the next day. I traced a few of them back to their jobs and offered money for statements, and that’s how I got a lot of them on board.”

“It didn’t quite work though, right? You weren’t satisfied with the results.”

Wright waves a hand broadly. “That’s what happens with payouts. People gave statements without focusing on the content or quality and as a result we ended up with a lot of interviews but very little information. And of course I was missing some key players, so none of the others were as trusting as they could’ve been.”

“You didn’t have Sledge or Shelton,” Leckie says. “Who else?”

“Winters and Nixon would’ve been helpful, maybe. That early into it we were trying to get the facts, and they would’ve been good for that. They’re as much ghosts as Sledge and Shelton are, though. If they don’t want to be found they’re not going to be.”

“So that’s why you didn’t have Sledge and Shelton? They just disappeared?”

Wright puts his fork down, toying with it thoughtfully for a moment. “They didn’t just disappear. Not quite,” he says. “I had Sledge’s number. He didn’t block me or anything, but he’d let it ring and ring. Shelton is impossible to contact, but he’s never quite shied away from the camera. If anything he seems to goad the media on. I mean, you saw the most recent photo that came out.”

“Yeah, I saw it.”

“Well, there you go. They aren’t impossible to find and they aren’t unwilling to be contacted, but if they do this it’ll be by their own terms. Until they’re allowed that they’ll just stay half in the spotlight and half out.”
Leckie nods. It isn’t anything he wasn’t expecting to hear. “What about the others?”

“The others are a tight family. They look out for each other, and that means if even one person
doesn’t think you have good intentions the rest will all but shun you. You need to be very, very
careful. If they give you an inch you can take it, but not a single bit more. They’re all going to be
doing this by their terms, whatever those may be.”

“Fortunately I might know something about that. I have a meeting at Currahee later tonight.”

“Yeah? That’s good. That’s probably your initial screening.”

“Sounds fun.”

“About as fun as meeting your prom date’s father. I don’t want to stress you out, but whatever you
do you can’t botch that meeting, alright? You botch it and the whole thing is off.”

“No pressure.”

Wright snorts, attacking his pancakes once more. “No pressure.”

The rest of the morning and much of the afternoon passes in a blur of panic and preparation and self-
doubt. When he’s smoothed his shirt down over three dozen times and gone over his main goals in
his head so much it seems like they’re looping back on each other he bites the bullet and pulls his
shitty car out of the hotel’s lot, heading out to Currahee as the sun casts shadows long and warm over
the pavement.

When he gets to the alley it’s deserted, and he parks his car in a loading bay before hopping out.

The cobblestones are clean and free of debris, the planters on either side of Currahee’s storefront in
full bloom. The windows look newly cleaned right down to each small colored pane, the stained
glass casting even more shades to the rainbow pride flag hanging to one side of the door. There is a
closed sign hanging on the other side, but when Leckie tries the doorknob it swings open anyway.

There’s no one home when he steps inside. He calls out just to be sure, but nobody answers. The
place is deserted.

Despite that it’s homey and inviting, warm as if just waiting for people to entertain. The whole space
is clean if a little well-loved, the floors newly polished but already a little scuffed by the door and in
front of the dartboard hanging off the wall. The bar itself is pristine, glasses neatly hanging overhead
waiting to be used and bottles full and tidy behind the counter. There are photos there, tacked to a
doorway that leads to some sort of back room. He steps closer to examine them.

The first is of three men in uniform, tanned and grinning at the camera. The second is a blurry candid
of the bar at full capacity, loud and busy. The third is of a man mid-laugh at something his
companion said, the two of them standing over a pot of soup as a cluster of people sit across the
counter, unrecognizable and out of focus. He examines a few more before his eyes catch on a wide
shot of the bar completely devoid of tables and chairs. There’s a stack of buckets and tools in one
corner, and it must have been right after the floor was restored because the wood looks as smooth
and slippery as glass. As if proving the point a man is sliding across it in fluffy pink socks, a
respirator mask in one hand and the other held out precariously for balance. He’s all but a blur of
motion, but after the media circus of the last few months Leckie would bet his last dollar anyone
could recognize him as Merriell Shelton.
“That was about a month ago,” a voice says.

Leckie is proud to say he only jumps about an inch off the ground. Nonetheless the man behind him smirks, his companion giving him a long-suffering look as he follows him into the bar.

“Those two swore up and down that they’d fix the floor in this place,” the man continues. “They wouldn’t shut up about it. Half the donations in December went to finishing the restoration. They had to close down for a week to do it, so of course those two were practically living in here while it was empty. Dick and Lew were mothering over them the entire time. It was embarrassing for everybody.” He looks Leckie up and down. “You the reporter?”

Leckie gathers himself quickly. “Robert Leckie, yeah. That’s me. I was supposed to meet Harry Welsh here.”

“He’s late,” the man says, following his companion into a booth. “Sit.”

Leckie sits down across from the two of them warily.

He’s done his research; had to, going into a project like this. All his reading had led him to one conclusion, and that conclusion is this: the man in front of him is very much a wildcard. Babe Heffron is Sledge’s cousin with a loud mouth and a protective streak a mile wide; For all his thoughtful quietude Eugene Roe didn’t manage to escape the media circus either, woven into Shelton’s story from the very beginning; Charles Grant has been out of the spotlight since the robbery-gone-wrong, but from his interview in Wright’s article and the few statements he’d given to the press it is more than clear that while Grant is coolheaded and graceful under pressure he’s still struggling to cope with the trauma of his injury. He’d rapidly become the media’s golden boy despite avoiding the public relations positions Roe and Heffron had somehow fallen into for their little group. While they are the advocates he is the martyr, the face everyone knows.

That leaves Joe Liebgott.

Joe, who has been nothing more than a shadow behind the others in the press.

Joe, who was there for the entire time and yet somehow managed to avoid the same level of national recognition.

Joe who, whenever interviewed, falls back on a well-practiced persona of uneducated spite, lower-class indignation and shock value of crude language despite the fact that he got a scholarship to go to a well-respected university, is fluent in two languages and has kept a more than respectable GPA for the past three years while working to pay his tuition. Joe who in the eyes of the nation remains a giant question mark, a series of unanswered questions that no one seems dedicated or brave enough to ask.

It makes sense that of everyone involved they would have chosen him to come to this meeting: he’s smart, quick on his feet and knows the ins and outs of everything that happened in December, and yet with his presence in the media largely lacking Leckie has no idea what to expect.

He has even less of an idea of what to expect from the man in the booth beside him.

“I know who you are,” Leckie says to Joe.

“Oh?”

“Yeah, you’re Joe Liebgott.”
“Nice, you’ve done your research.” He turns and mutters something to the man next to him in German; the man raises an eyebrow but doesn’t reply.

“Yeah,” Leckie says warily. “So that’s you, but then who is this?”

Joe looks like he’s gearing up with a sharp retort, but the man beside him beats him to it. “I’m David,” he says, holding out a hand which Leckie shakes. “David Webster.”

David Webster. Another one of the people interviewed by Wright. He was there that night, though he’d carefully skirted around all the questions with well-structured not-answers. Smart guy. “David,” Leckie repeats. “Nice to meet you. I was led to believe I’d only be meeting one person.”

“He’s just waiting for me to finish up,” Joe says. “We have an engagement after this.”

“Engagement?”

“We’re going to the aquarium,” David clarifies. “To see the sharks.”

“You’re answering some questions about a national scandal at the bar where a few of your friends got shot,” Leckie asks, “and then you’re going to the aquarium?”

“Yeah,” Joe answers, giving him the stink eye. “We’ve got a date. It’s the six-month anniversary of that time we broke up for five minutes and then decided we should get back together for real, this time with a lot more making out. You got a problem?”

There it is; the Joe Liebgott media persona. He’s good.

“No, I don’t,” Leckie replies. “Wait, you said six-month anniversary. Do you mean…”

“Same night,” David answers. “The media will only tell the drama. Some good things came out of it too, though.”

“Yeah?” Leckie asks. “Nobody ever talks about that side to it.”

“Nobody knows. Nobody cares. You know what’s crazy? It was just another night of the week for us. It was just another trip to the bar with our friends. After that night do you know what we did?”

Leckie shakes his head.

“We went to class.” David lets out a little laugh, and Joe sends him a lopsided smile. “We spent some time in the hospital with our friends, and then as soon as they were all clear we all went home and got ready for finals. Life goes on.”

“That isn’t the way anybody tells it, though,” Joe tells David. “According to the Tribune everybody who was there is on some sort of mission as we speak.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that,” Leckie reasons. “If you want to take a stand what’s stopping you?”

“Jack and shit, that’s what,” Joe snaps. “Who said we wanted to take a stand, huh?”

David regards him with careful blue eyes before turning back to Leckie. “I think what he means is there isn’t any requirement for any of us to do anything. Hopefully you know that by now. Just because we were there doesn’t mean we want to talk about it.”

“Your friends seem pretty eager to talk about it. Heffron and Roe, that is.”
“You’d probably rather be sitting with them, is that it?” Joe says. “Diplomatic fuckers that they are. You wanna know why you got me instead?”

He doesn’t, not really. “Why?”

“Because I’m the middle ground in all of this, that’s why. Chuck don’t wanna talk. He ain’t ever gonna, either. People like you are already out there glamorizing what happened to him and his ‘stoic silence’ about the whole thing or whatever the fuck else bullshit they’re spouting. And Babe and Gene are trying to diffuse it all, because that’s what they do. If they sugar coat this enough maybe one day they’ll get their family back and have their happy ever after, because the world will stop caring about them for five fucking minutes if they tell the same story enough times. You know why you got us?”

“Joe…” David mutters.

“You got us because I got to watch my best friend go down like a ton of bricks. You got us because David got to see his best friend breathing through a tube for a week. You got us because Babe and Gene are too busy trying to clean up this mess after six fucking months, and they’re too optimistic to see that it isn’t ever gonna go away. That it’s never gonna be the same, and that even if it does it won’t be through interviews and statements, it will be because people forgot about us. And then we’ll just be stuck in the same loop of worrying about school and working too much and getting slowly buried up to our eyeballs in debt. Where’s that story, huh? I’ve seen fifty different accounts of my best fucking friend getting knocked out cold by a crazy maniac, but I haven’t seen a single story about the time he passed out in class because he’d decided to mix Red Bull with espresso.”

Leckie blinks. “…He what?”

“I’ve heard dozens of versions of Bill and Joe acting like superheroes in some fuckin’ alley, but I haven’t heard a word about the number of times we’ve had to help each other scrub vomit out of a fucking cab. I’ve seen about a hundred different stories about what a fucking icon Shelton is, but I haven’t once seen anyone mention what a little shit he is when it comes to sharing the remote or the fact that he can’t fucking shut up about how numb his toes were in the winter because our fucking useless landlord wouldn’t fix the heater. So you know what? Fuck you for trying to glamorize this, and fuck you for trying to turn a profit off of it. We ain’t heroes and we don’t owe you shit.”

His rant is followed by a long silence, Webster watching him carefully as his chest heaves. Leckie swallows. It was a sentiment he’d completely expected, yet at the same time so much of that had taken him by surprise. Probably not in the way Joe was expecting, either. He clears his throat carefully, and Joe’s eyes snap to him reproachfully before he even speaks. “Grant put what in his Red Bull?” he asks quietly.

Joe squints. “What?”

“I heard you say espresso, and I was just curious. That sounds disgusting.”

There’s another beat of silence as Joe looks at him incredulously. “It was,” he says finally.

“Why’d he do it?”

“He was really tired. He’s addicted to video games, and he kept pulling all-nighters on them and then being exhausted in class the next day.”

“Yeah,” Webster adds quietly with a smirk. “He pulled the Red Bull thing in German class. Showed up with a big cup of espresso from Easy and then dumped the can right in. It smelled awful. I think
he was babbling World War II history in German for about ten minutes straight, and then he just kind of keeled over.”

Joe finally breaks a smile at that, tiny and amused. “Fuck, it was bad. He goes on about artillery specs and the strategy in the goddamn Bois Jacques like his life depends on it and then he’s just out like a light. Sobel was mad.”

“You called Gene, remember?” Webster asks him, voice still quiet like Leckie isn’t even there, like they’re just talking to each other about it. “He cut out during Biochem to come over and check to make sure Chuck hadn’t gone and killed himself. What a mess.”

“That was the worst thing for Chuck after he came home from the hospital. He was mad about the paparazzi and about Eugene and Snaf having to leave and all of that, but what really pissed him off was the headaches the TV gave him. He couldn’t play Call of Duty for weeks. He kept trying to pick fights with me, he was so bored. I think we must’ve made Gene age about a year in that week alone.”

Leckie smiles to himself. “Tell me more.”

Joe blinks, his smile fading. “What?”

“It’s the kind of stuff I care about.”

“Why?” Webster asks blankly.

“It’s the story that hasn’t been told yet. Did you read Wright’s book?”

“Did I ever,” Joe mutters darkly.

“That’s what was missing from it. You know that? He framed it like you were all heroes, like you were all above mortality. He painted Shelton and Sledge like some star-crossed lovers in this big Greek tragedy, and the whole time he missed the truth of it all.”

Joe squints at him critically. “How exactly is telling that side of the story going to help us?”

“Hey, maybe it will and maybe it won’t.”

“You ain’t exactly making a good case here, reporter.”

“All I’m saying is it’ll help someone, alright? Having the truth out there will certainly help someone and it’ll probably help you guys, too.”

They sit silently for a minute. Webster’s eyes finally flick up to Leckie’s, big and perceptive. “Did you study the classics?”

“Oh, here we go,” Joe mutters.

Webster elbows him, turning back to Leckie. “You know Cincinnatus?”

It sounds familiar; still, it’s been some years since college. “He was a dictator of Rome, right?”

Webster nods. “The legend is he was a farmer, and when the people called on him to lead the army he rose up to it. He did what he was asked and won the war, but when it was over they wanted him to be the dictator forever. He didn’t want to. He went back to his field because that’s the life he wanted to live.”
“Where do you pick up this stuff?” Joe gripes. “You don’t even study the classics.”

“I read.”

“So do I!”

“Yeah, as long as the book has pictures in it.”

“David, we’ve been through this. Just because comic books aren’t considered—”

Leckie jumps in quickly. It’s probably in his best interest, or they’ll be here bickering all day. “What are you saying?” he asks Webster. “You guys are like Cincinnatus?”

Joe huffs as Webster turns away from him gratefully. “In a way, yeah. That’s what I’m saying. We did what we had to do, but that doesn’t necessarily make us heroes. We took the necessary measures at the time.”

“And now you just want to return to your field,” Leckie finishes for him. “You want to continue on your original path, the path that you wanted to be on in the first place.”

“It’s all any of us can ask for,” Webster replies. “Things won’t ever be the same and they’ll certainly never be perfect, but that doesn’t mean we can’t keep on trying. All any of us can do is keep on trying.”

Joe’s fallen silent beside him, closed-off and contemplative.

“Look,” Leckie says finally. “I’m not trying to make this worse. I don’t want to. None of you need any more attention than you have right now, but you said it yourself. Either you get chased forever, or you fade out of recognition and live with the same problems you had before. Don’t you want a third option?”

“You have no guarantee it’ll work,” Joe says.

“But isn’t it worth a shot?”

They’re interrupted by the door swinging open and a man stepping through.

“Joe?” he calls, then smiles when his eyes fall onto their little group. “Oh. Hey guys.”

“Hi, Harry,” Joe says. “How’d it go?”

“As well as it could’ve gone. We’re making progress.”

“Hey, one step at a time, right? Do you need anything else?”

“No, no,” Harry says. “Go have some fun. I’ve got this from here.”

“Awesome.” Joe stands from the booth, offering Webster his hand. “Good luck.”

“Thanks, boys,” Harry says. “Thanks for helping out, too. I know you have a big day today. It means a lot.”

“Hey, it’s no problem,” Joe replies, tugging Webster toward the door. “We know how busy things are right now. It’s the least we could do with everything you have going on.”

Harry waves them out with a smile. Once they’re gone he crosses the room to stand behind the bar,
rummaging through the shelf of pint glasses.

“You want a beer?” he calls to Leckie.

It’s barely evening. Even so, Leckie will probably need it. He nods as he settles across the counter on one of the soft leather stools. “What did he mean about everybody being busy?”

Harry smiles wryly as he fills a glass from a tap. The liquid is red and dark enough to be wine, but the thick foam gives it away. “I’m getting married in two days,” he says, sliding Leckie the glass before filling his own.

“Congratulations.”

“Thanks. It’s a lot of planning right now, but Winters and Nixon are losing their minds over errands as we speak. It’s become a very involved process for everyone.”

“Nice of them to help out.”

“That’s what family is for, right?” He taps his glass against Leckie’s before taking a sip and Leckie follows suit, the cold sweetness a relief after all the driving in the heat. “Anyway,” Harry continues. “I’m guessing those two gave you a rundown on the situation.”

“More or less.”

“Good. Then I won’t have much else I’ll need to tell you. I’d rather hear what you have to say, anyway.”

“What do you want to hear?”

Harry smirks. “Doesn’t matter. What matters is what you want to say. Let’s just cut the bullshit and get down to it, alright?”

No beating around the bush, then. “What do you want to know?”

“Look, you were over there,” Harry says, leaning closer. For the first time since they’ve started their conversation his face has gone hard. “I’m no marine, but I know a thing or two about war. I’ve got a family. And you’ve met Wright, and you know Recon’s got a family. Do you have a family?”

Leckie thinks about Chuckler’s wide smile and the way his voice is always so loud it makes the phone line crackle with static; about Runner and his pride over his shoebox in New York, all of them coming up for a visit and cramming themselves into the tiny space to celebrate; about a big house in Indiana, the windows open in the summer and the curtains blowing through the room, the peeling paint on the porch and the stairs that will probably crumble to dust at some point, the sheets on the clothesline furling in the wind as the dogs chase each other across the lawn. “I do,” he says.

“But you don’t have to. You’ve found peace.”

Sheets blowing in the wind the way the waves tumble against the coast sometimes, Hoosier sitting on
those old wooden steps with a cigarette in his mouth and a smile on his face as he surveys his kingdom, this quiet piece of earth that is just his and no one else’s. The smell of grass in the summer and coffee in the winter, furnace blasting against the snow. Leckie escapes there as often as he can. Time stops moving in those fields and that house. Sound feels muted and touch feels real. “I’ve found peace. Have you found peace?”

Harry waves at the bar around them. “Things are starting to calm down. I’m not a victim or a martyr. I’ve found quiet. The media doesn’t care much about me, but they care about them.”

“I don’t think they’ll stop caring for a long time.”

Harry nods solemnly, and he’s made his point. “They never found peace. They never got the chance, but they have it now. I’m not at liberty to say where they are, but they have their family close and a chunk of land to rest on. A couple of fields, a big house,” he pauses to look Leckie in the eye. “It isn’t Indiana, but it’s something.”

Harry had done his research too, then.

“I want you to think about this very carefully,” Harry says after a beat. “Wherever they are now, they’re happy. No one is paying attention to them. No one even knows they’re there, and they’re finally getting some rest—some peace—and you’re asking them to give that all up and return as heroes to the spotlight. They didn’t ask for any of this, but they’re finally starting to put all of this behind them. Why do you want to drag them back into the fray?”

“You’ve got it all twisted, Harry,” Leckie starts. Harry’s jaw tightens and he looks like he’s already made up his mind over how quickly Leckie will be escorted out of here, but that’s not what this is. That’s not how this is going to go, not if Leckie can help it, because finally he’s seeing all the pieces.

“There won’t be any graceful leave from the spotlight, that much is true. No one is forgetting about this. But there won’t be any return as heroes, either. You all must be able to see that.”

“How do you figure?” Harry asks warily.

“People like them. Some people. Others decidedly don’t, and that’s the way it’s been since the beginning. That’s why this has taken off: the controversy. It’s also the reason none of this is going away.”

“So your plan is, what? Change the minds of everyone in the country and make them into heroes instead of fugitives?”

Leckie’s shaking his head before Harry is even done talking. “No, no. Not heroes. Humans, with stories to be told. You were over there. You said it yourself. We had families—people we loved. We did things and we saw things and there was no point to any of it. There was no moral. And now we’re all home, and all we have is the pieces we left here when we shipped out, and we have to pick those up and put them back together. I did it, you did it, and they never got a chance to.” He leans forward. “What I want is to give them a chance to build something new. Tell their story themselves as the people they are. They’re human.” He gestures to the photos pinned to the door frame. “You and I both know that.”

“Human,” Harry mutters under his breath. He studies the photos for a long moment, eyes catching on the shot of the three men in uniform. One of them is Harry himself, Leckie realizes belatedly. He should’ve noticed sooner. “Are they ever. What’s the end goal in this, then? People figure out they’re mere mortals and this all goes away?”

Leckie hums. “You want the truth? I have no idea, but it’s sure going to help. We tell this story the
way it’s supposed to be told and maybe people figure out deifying human beings isn’t a good route, especially when everybody has made mistakes in their lives. Maybe people learn that you don’t need to be superhuman to be a hero, too. Webster said it himself. Everybody who was there that night did what they did because of love for their friends.”

There’s another beat of silence. “This is a real boneheaded plan, you know that?”

“Maybe. Or maybe not.”

“I’m not the only one you need to convince. Nix will have a field day with this.”

“I’d love to talk to him about it.” It feels like he’s won. Maybe it’s too early to say, but this feels like it might just work out.

From the way Harry can’t quite hide his smile as he takes another sip of beer Leckie thinks maybe he thinks so, too.

The last thing he does before he goes to sleep that night is text Hoosier.

Met with Currahee crew today. Seemed to go well. I think we’re on the right track.

It only takes a minute for him to get a reply. Congrats, the text reads. Then his phone vibrates again as a photo of the dogs sleeping on the porch comes through.

Well, it’s almost the last thing he does before he goes to sleep. The very last thing he does is check his email.

From: sledge.eug.97@gmail.com; cc: sheltonmK35@gmail.com

Subject: [no subject]

We’ll be back in Philadelphia in two days. We look forward to talking to you then.

MS & ES

Chapter End Notes

Aaaaand we’re done! It’s like coming full circle. What a feeling! Thank you so much for staying with me through all of this! I absolutely love and appreciate each and every single one of you!

A special note of thanks to all of you who have been with me since the beginning, talking to me on tumblr, etc. Hopefully you all know who you are! It really means the world and I definitely wouldn’t have gotten this far without your kind words and encouragement, so thank you so much for that.

And if you’re reading this for the first time or haven’t had a chance to check in yet I’d love to hear your thoughts! This is the first major project I’ve taken up, and getting
feedback truly makes the world go round. Additionally my askbox/inbox is always open on tumblr @you-ughta-know.

Lastly, now that this is done I’m looking forward to a break. Or not. I already have a small-ish webgott side story lined up from some scenes I cut and other points in their relationship I wanted to include but wasn’t able to work in. If there’s any interest in that we can expect to see it on here very soon!

Alright, that’s all for now. See you next time!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!