The Life You Always Dreamed Of

by caffienedcold

Summary

You’d think having grown up in New Jersey, Frank would’ve outgrown his horror movie fixation. But no, he’s thirty, teaching Italian in fucking Rhode Island and he actually believes the student gossip that the art teacher is a vampire.

So what if Frank has had an awful crush on him since the school year started? He’d helped Mr. Way move into his classroom and carried a box containing issue one of Doom Patrol, a Batman figure, and splattered tubes of screen printing ink. You really couldn’t blame him for the crush. And the vampire rumors? Icing on the cake.

At least until it’s Frank’s blood on the line.
Back To School Is Pulling Season for Nerds

Teachers and faculty return to Earhart Secondary School August 15th to settle into classrooms and start the year off with department meetings. Frank Iero, Italian teacher (Italian Department, really, as he’s the only one) helps new Fine Arts teacher Gerard Way carry boxes into his classroom, just around the corner from Frank’s own. They shake hands, Frank notes that the new guy looks to be around his age and is totally cute, and that’s the end of that, as far anyone could assume then.

Students return to Earhart Secondary School September 3rd to pick up schedules and trek off to their classes. By the end of the week, it’s rumored the new art teacher is a vampire. By the end of the second week, Mr. Iero is aware of the rumor and fondly rolling his eyes at one of his students. “I’m pretty sure he’s just a nerd. We talked comic books when we were moving in.”

“But that makes you a nerd too, Mr. Iero.”

“Did I ever try to pretend I’m not a nerd?” His student laughs, and shrugs. It’s not wrong. Everyone knows Mr. Iero is a horror movie fan, and knowing about a comic book before he does is a rare badge of honor.

Over the next month, Frank finds out his planning period is the same as Gerard’s, and they waste time that should be spent on lesson plans and emails talking comics. Gerard’s taste is somehow even more esoteric than Frank’s. Friendship comes fast, and Gerard’s label in Frank’s head goes from ‘Mr. Way- New Art Teacher’ to ‘Gerard’ fast. He doesn’t know anything about him outside of work, even though Frank sort of assumes he’s a bachelor like Frank is. No wedding ring, at least. No family he’s mentioned yet.

Gerard is friendly, if sometimes incredibly strange, and he’s read everything but watched almost nothing, somehow, so Frank has some remedial teaching to do here, clearly. Good luck fitting that in when Gerard gets started on the films he does know as an art medium. Frank needs to show him Blade Runner. He has a feeling Gerard’s jaw would drop open and stay like that even though Harrison Ford’s narration.

“But film noir is alright, even if it’s just German Expressionism gone far too Americana.”

“Not into American red-blooded men?” Frank snorts.

Gerard makes a face. “Not really. Are you?”

“Not really, no.”

“See?” Gerard looks like he’s just proven a point. “It really only served to let the people nostalgic for black-and-white hang on a little longer. And anything they try to do now is awful, no one gets the clothes right.”

“Really?”

“Not even close. The cuts are all wrong, they’re wearing them all wrong.”

Frank leans back to consider. “I guess I never noticed. But I barely know a good suit from a bad one now, so…”

“If it’s not the one you had in high school, you’re probably fine. It used to be a lot more important, but it was also pretty much daywear.”
Frank nods, looking at the verb lists he’s found on Quizlet and considering. Gerard goes quiet next to him and leans over to look.

“Just verb lists. Vocab. Dentista, attore, ingegnere, cameriere, poliziotto, cuoco, lavoratore… Job titles.”

Gerard nods. “Freshman?”

“Mhmm. Good old Italian 1, all lists to memorize.”

“I don’t miss it.”

“What language did you take?”

“Oh, Italian is my first language, I had to learn English.”

“Oh shit, really? I had no clue.”

“You’re the only one that would understand me, so I don’t really use it all that much.”

“But now you will? I swear, my mom speaks to me and I can feel my Italian getting rusty.”

“I can, yeah.”

Frank switches over “Do it now.”

“Are we having a conversation about anything anymore?”

“Well, no. Guess not. Keep telling me about vintage suits being all wrong while I run copies?”

Gerard does, and Frank listens to the fluidity of his accent and nearly sighs. He does miss really getting to speak Italian some days.

After that, their friendship is much closer, even though they’ve yet to hang out outside of work, or even talk much about their personal lives. The semester rattles on, weather turning cold and gray and wet. Frank slumps into the break room in the D wing, carrying a far too tall stack of worksheets to grade. Copying them out of the textbook is easy, but grading them is hell. He sits next to Gerard, other seat at the table taken by the Chinese teacher, grading a similar stack with earbuds in. Gerard nods a greeting at him, reading something about a gallery on his laptop. Frank manages a tired “Hey.”

Usually, sitting next to the art teacher would be more of a thrill, but today Frank is too damn tired. His crush has not gone away at all from talking to the other teacher. It really only gets worse. But that’s a bridge Frank sort of intends to burn when he comes to it. He’s not trying to be that guy dating a co-worker. And definitely not the new coworker.

He mindlessly starts flipping through the stack, putting messy slashes on egregiously wrong answers with a sigh. The Chinese teacher slumps down onto her arms, eyes sliding shut. Frank barely notices Gerard moving until there is a hot coffee at his elbow and Gerard smiling at him. And there’s the usual fission of warmth from Gerard’s presence. “Thanks.”

“You looked like you needed it.”

“I probably do.” Frank takes a deep drink and sighs with pleasure.

Gerard slides back into his seat. “Every week, I have another reason to be glad I don’t have to hand
out worksheets."

“Fuck off.” There’s no real heat to it, but Gerard laughs anyway. Frank feels a smile pulling at his lips. He shoves his sleeves up, heating finally having kicked in and the language wing now too hot for the sleeves of his cardigan, and Gerard makes a sound of interest.

Frank offers him one arm. “I’m gonna need that arm back for grading, but you can have it for a minute.”

Gerard’s fingers are cool, and he gently takes Frank’s wrist and rotates it, peering at his ink. Frank fidgets, realizing how close they are, furiously hoping his stupid crush isn’t written all over his face. At least the Chinese teacher is still asleep.

“They’re beautiful.”

“Thanks. They’re mostly from my uh, delinquent college years. Hence the long sleeves all the time.” Frank half shrugs. Gerard traces the ‘I wish I were a ghost’ that wraps around Frank’s wrist.

“Oh. Do you regret them?”

“Nah.”

“Good.” Gerard releases him and Frank pulls his arm back to finish grading with a final smile at Gerard. Gerard returns it and Frank is dazzled for a second before he pulls himself together. He’s thirty, and it was a touch on the wrist, for shit’s sake. Gerard leaves not long after and Frank rushes through the rest of his grading, able to pass it back to his next period, but still far too tired for the end of 5th period. Probably shouldn’t have watched that second movie last night.

That’s their longest conversation until early November, planning periods not lining up, projects due on opposite weeks. Gerard always seems to have a smile for Frank when they pass in the halls, and Frank starts working up the courage to ask Gerard out for drinks or something but he isn’t sure Gerard drinks. Or eats, for that matter. He has coffee in the break room when the rest of the D-wing teachers are eating lunch, but never solid food. Frank chalks it up to the vampire rumors his students can’t shut up about and wonders if he should jokingly offer his blood for Halloween.

The quarter is about to end, and everyone, including teachers, is in cram mode. Frank is trying to re-write his midterm, and is copying out a third draft to check over in print when he slices his hand open. It’s really not even his fault, he put his hand out behind him to lean on the table, and somebody had flipped up the guard on the paper cutter and not put it down when they were done.

“Fuck!” Frank’s palm is pretty well slashed open, reflexes dulled by another long week, and there’s a fair amount of blood running down his palm. Gerard shoots up from the teachers table and is at Frank’s side in an instant, taking Frank’s wrist in a rather firm grip as he leans over to look at the gash. Then Frank’s world goes dark, and he’s looking at the ceiling of the break room, Gerard holding him like he’s Mary holding Jesus in the Pieta and looking twice as worried. Frank blinks.

“Did I pass out?”

“Yeah, I- I think it was just shock and the blood loss. Here, don’t look at it, I don’t want you to pass out again. Lemme get the first aid kit.”

Frank doesn’t look at his hand. “I’ve never passed out at the sight of blood before.”
“First time for everything, I guess.” Gerard is quick and gentle with the bandages, wrapping gauze and tape around Frank’s hand the old-fashioned way. Frank looks at it when he’s done. His hand doesn’t even hurt that badly.

“Thanks for catching me.”

Gerard shrugs it off and helps Frank to his feet, surprisingly strong despite not being much taller than Frank and an art teacher. Frank glances at his watch. He was only out for about three minutes, not rushed before class yet. Gerard guides him to a chair. “You’ve got time before class, sit tight and let me get you a granola bar?”

Frank shrugs, flushing a little. He doesn’t think he needs to be fussed over this much, but he doesn’t mind Gerard’s attention, even if he does seem flustered. Gerard slips out and back in again a moment later with Frank’s favorite of the vending machine granola bars. Frank stares at the label as he takes it. Apparently he’s not the only one paying attention to his coworkers. But there’s no way to ask Gerard out now, Frank is way too busy to do anything this weekend, and he bets Gerard is too. So he just accepts the fussing and slinks back to his room to nurse his hand and his crush in the relative peace of seniors trying to get him to cancel their midterm. At least they beg in Italian.

When Frank gets home, he peels back the bandage, expecting the cut to look bad. It’s almost totally healed. Frank squints at it. That can’t be possible. Unless Gerard is magic. Or actually a vampire. But that would mean his mouth- his mouth!- was on Frank. Frank would remember that. For sure. So he replaces the careful wrap Gerard did with a regular band-aid and goes straight to bed, putting off any grading.
They make it through midterms, winter break in sight, and Gerard looks pale and peaky until Frank runs into him alone in the staff room, on the last Thursday before break. “Hey man.” Frank pours himself coffee and raises the mug in a toast to Gerard. “We fuckin’ made it.”

Gerard weakly raises his mug back, and Frank decides to be bold and slides into the seat next to him. Now or never on asking him out.

It feels like nothing has happened, but Frank suddenly feels strangely displaced, like coming up from under deep water, and watches Gerard get up, pulling a lunchbox out of the staff fridge and offering a yogurt to Frank. Frank accepts it, too confused to not. Did he just zone out? A glance at the wall clock says twenty minutes have passed. Frank spoons yogurt- blueberry, same brand he bought last week- into his mouth and tries to remember what he spent the last twenty minutes doing. It’s a total blank.

Gerard breaks the silence. “So, I told you my ever-so-exciting I’m-not-leaving-the-couch plans for break, what are you doing?”

“Oh, uh, probably the same. Binge watch horror movies and drink beer. Gain ten pounds of shitty takeout. Call my mom on Christmas. Probably spend New Years at a bar with Jamia.”

“Oh, is Jamia your girlfriend?”

Frank laughs. “No, she’s just a friend. Not really into women, here.” Frank realizes as soon as he’s said it he never really came out to Gerard, but maybe the guys got a good gaydar. Still, probably better safe than sorry “Hey, how’d you know I’m gay?”

“I didn’t know- I honestly asked to be polite, I didn’t know.” Gerard looks embarrassed.

Frank shrugs. “It’s not like, a big deal, I just didn’t remember ever mentioning it. I’m not like, in the closet but I’m not out-out here at work, you know?” Gerard probably has no clue. He’s probably straight.

Gerard nods. “Yeah. Sex life and work life should stay separate. I understand.”

“I mean- dating is one thing, just- I’m not really gonna tell my students about a hookup.”

Gerard nods. Frank grimaces, scooping the last of the yogurt into his mouth and gulping it down. “I should go. Thanks for the yogurt. Have a good break, if I don’t see you?”

“Yeah, you too.” Gerard smiles at Frank, looking a little less peaky now, coffee in his mug drained. Frank leaves fast, still trying to figure out what he must have said for fifteen whole minutes to Gerard.
Frank spends winter break pretty much exactly how he expected to, reading through a stack of student essays and bitching to Jamia and his mom over text. Jamia drops by with beer in the interminable days between Christmas and New Year to order pizza and become one with Frank’s couch, and Frank makes her laugh so hard she spills beer on her shirt telling him about Gerard and the student’s vampire rumors. Frank may have let on that he’s friendly with Mr. Way, and now they’re clamoring for ‘proof’ in ever more ridiculous ways.

Jamia gets her laughter under control and tells Frank “No, no, tell them you’re the real vampire of the two of you guys, and that it’s like, I don’t know, rude for you to throw an innocent human under the bus to hide that you’re a vampire!”

It’s Frank’s turn to lose his shit laughing at that. “Oh my god, can you imagine? The shock and horror! The betrayal!”

Jamia nods, still giggling. “You gotta warn this dude before you do it, I don’t know if he’d be pissed, but it’d be so fucking funny!”

“I will, I will, I promise.” Frank wheezes back, trying to decide which class would be funniest to ‘break the news’ in and deciding on his junior Italian 3 class.

Four days later, he spends his planning period in the break room, somehow losing another twenty minute stretch of time. But he does tell Gerard about what the students are saying. He doesn’t seem thrilled, looking uncomfortable about it.

“I don’t know if you should tell them you’re a vampire. That’d just whip them into a frenzy wouldn’t it? I mean, it’s back enough they suspect me-”

Frank opens his mouth to protest, flashes a tiny smile in greeting at the biology teacher from his hall that walks in and rebuffs Gerard’s worry. “They don’t suspect you, Gerard, it’s not like vampires are real, it’s just a rumor. I didn’t mean to upset you, they’re just saying it because you’re super pale and never like, eat.”

Gerard still doesn’t look happy. “Please don’t add fuel to the fire. I’ll look into putting the rumor down.”

“Vampires are real though.”

Both Frank and Gerard turn. Bert McCracken, biology teacher and unofficial ‘most likely to attempt necromancy/build a Frankenstein’ title holder is sitting down at the table across from them, looking deadly serious. “My friend was killed by one.”

“What the fuck?” Frank really needs to stop swearing on campus, but this is a new one. “How was your friend killed by a vampire? They’re fictional, come on. We would know if they weren’t.”

Bert stares down Gerard. “No, they blend in pretty well. Until they don’t.” Gerard flinches, and Frank can’t blame him. Bert is creepy all the time, but this is downright unhinged. “He got his throat ripped out. We tried to hunt down the shitstain that killed him, but he ran.” Bert bares his teeth, and Frank leans a little further back, out of range. “But any vamp that crosses my path is getting staked.”

“Isn’t that a little excessive? It blows that your friend got killed, that sounds like an awful way to go, but dude, vampires aren’t real.”
Bert turns to stare at Frank. “Someday I’ll save your life from one, and then you’ll understand. They’re all monsters. They should be put down.”

Gerard stands up. “Well, uh, plotting murder aside, I’ve gotta go. One of my students emailed.”

Frank makes a hasty exit behind him, mumbling some half-assed excuse. Bert stares at them the whole way out into the hall. Frank shakes his head. “Dude, I am so sorry. That was so creepy.”

“It’s not your fault. But maybe don’t mention vampirism again?”

“Yeah, no shit. Someday he’ll save my life and I’ll understand? What the fuck does that mean?”

Gerard shrugs, looking a little shifty. Frank shrugs back and unlocks his door with a “See you tomorrow, I guess.”

“Yeah, see you tomorrow.”

Frank and Gerard make their way through third quarter, drawing up on spring break. They’ve started trading DVD’s and trade comics back and forth, filling each other in on things they’ve missed and rehashing old favorites. It’s never a boring discussion.

Two weeks before spring break Frank gets a nasty head cold, and sniffles though classes, cough drop a near-permanent fixture in his mouth. The students allow him to suffer quietly, and he cancels a test as thanks. Gerard keeps dropping by during his lunch break, bringing Frank hot food and mugs of tea. Frank appreciates it, wondering if this is just friendly or something more. He’s kind of hoping it’s more, and that it lasts through him feeling awful.

He sleeps the first 48 hours of spring break, and is over the cold by Wednesday. A long phone call with his mom confirms that yes, he needs to be resting and sleeping more during school, yes, he’s a neglectful son and should visit more, and that a mother’s mothering never ends, not even when you’re 30.

The Monday school is back in session, Frank is in high sprits, bearing four comics to pass to Gerard and a fully researched, in-depth opinion on the remastered Star Wars prequels.

Gerard looks like death warmed over, and Frank quiets down as soon as he sees him, herding him to the shitty couch in the break room and grabbing him a mug of coffee. “Damn, did I give you my cold? You look like hell.”

“No, no, I’m okay- thanks.” Gerard takes the coffee, looking hopefully at Frank as Frank sinks down to the couch next to him. “Are you feeling better?”

“Peachy. I was fine by Wednesday. Typical, right?”

And Frank blinks, and Gerard’s mug of coffee is empty, Frank’s stomach is growling, and he has three minutes to be back in his classroom. “Holy shit!” Frank shoots up off the couch, nearly stumbling, and scoops up his bag. “Shit, I gotta go, I can’t believe I fell asleep right there, I’m sorry!” Gerard closes his laptop, watching Frank rush.

“You looked like you needed it.” Gerard looks like he’s had a full night of sleep in the time it took Frank to apparently pass out for 45 minutes. Frank feels like he’s on the verge of something, but his head is all fuzzy, and he’s too high on the adrenaline burst of ‘you’re almost late, go go go’ to stop and put a thought together.
Frank makes it before the bell, vision worryingly blurry, and greets his class- freshman- then turns to power up the projector and blacks out. This time, he remembers it, vision tunneling out like it’s supposed to when you faint, and he’s aware of falling, but not as far as he should. He wakes up to the murmur of students, and Gerard leaning over him, looking very worried. He’s actually nearly in Gerard’s arms. The door is open, and Bert is peering in as well, quelling the freshmen with a look.

Frank blinks. “Uh, shit.”

“You fainted. You didn’t eat your lunch, I saw in the fridge and was gonna drop it off and saw you go down.”

“Oh. Sorry. Thanks?” Frank struggles out of Gerard’s arms and back upright. Bert is giving them the strangest look, probing and inquisitive. Frank widens his eyes and looks as innocent as possible. Gay intuition tells him he doesn’t want Bert reading anything into the way Gerard is holding him, even though Frank wants to read everything that isn’t even written there between the lines. Bert looks to Gerard.

“Good timing.” Gerard jerks away from Frank, who sways and grabs the projector cart. “You caught him just in time.”

Gerard shrugs, shoulders hunched in. Frank decides to cover for him. “Lucky me. Would hate to have brained myself on the projector.”

“Lucky you. And lucky Gerard brought you his lunch so you don’t pass out again.” Bert vanishes from the door. The lunchbox Gerard dropped next to where he caught Frank is indeed Gerard’s, even though it’s Frank who recently has been eating the food in it. He hadn’t noticed the pattern until now.

Frank looks at Gerard. Gerard looks at Frank, looking strangely guilty for a man who has just prevented Frank from possibly concussing himself. “I should go.”

Frank manages a nod, says “Thanks again for catching me.” and closes the door behind Gerard, turning to his class and taking a deep breath. “Okay, well, drama about my low blood sugar now over, let’s get started, shall we? It’s Monday, so new verb list, soon as I get the projector on.”

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Frank is unsettled the rest of the day, and walks to Gerard’s room at the end of the day to return the lunchbox. Students have cleared out, except for two that Frank knows from his own classes. He smiles at them and holds the lunchbox out to Gerard. “You’re my hero. Seriously.”

Gerard takes the lunchbox with a small smile. “It’s no problem, really, I shouldn’t have let you sleep that long and made you rush up.”

Frank shrugs. “Either way. Can I buy you dinner as thanks?” He knows both students are totally listening in on this now, but the speed of fluent Italian ought to be a deterrent.

“Oh, um, sure, I guess. When?”

“Tonight? Before we’re both grading again?”

“Okay.”

Frank grabs the sticky notes on Gerard’s desk, scrawling out his number. “Here, text me before you leave, I’m gonna try to head home and maybe nap for an hour or two, I still feel kinda out of it.”
“Okay, yeah, that’s probably good. Uh, here’s my number.” Gerard writes his own out and Frank takes it, opening his bag to finally give Gerard the comics he’d brought that morning.

“Thanks. I’m giving you homework, too.”

That gets a smile out of Gerard, and Frank leaves, herding the students with him and overall pleased. He has Gerard’s number and a promise for dinner. And, Frank reminds himself firmly, a goal. He needs to get to the bottom of his alarming new bouts of narcolepsy. They seem to only happen around Gerard.
Gerard texts Frank while Frank drives home. “Do you want to go out somewhere? I can eat pretty much anywhere.”

“wait, u eat?! but no, I was really wondering if we could talk? this year has been weird”

There’s a long pause, Frank getting all the way home, parked behind his building, and upstairs and settled into making dinner before he gets a response.

“Then I guess you could come over? I live at 487C Marshall St.”

“ok. sorry, i started making dinner- i can come over in twenty?” Frank really is out of it, if he forgot he was going to get Gerard dinner. But it’s been a strange day.

“Works for me.”

Frank eats leftover roasted tofu and gets in his car. He’s unreasonably nervous, sitting at a stoplight to try to figure out if he’s asking Gerard out or accusing him of vampirism. Asking him out seems like it should wait, now that Frank is starting to question his own memory, and starting to worry more about Bert.

He parks outside, and has to look for apartment C for a second, before he realizes it’s the basement. Frank frowns to himself for a second, then heads down the stairs to the front door, past two brown and spindly plants, dead in their planters. He knocks and waits.

Gerard opens his door, looking pale and hunched and unspeakably nervous. Frank flashes him a smile. “Hey. Sorry to like, spring myself on you.”

“It’s no problem. Today was.. strange. Please, come in, you’re always welcome.” The last part feels oddly formal, and Frank steps across the threshold trying to remember if he’s remembering vampire lore correctly. Can they cross into homes they aren’t invited into? Frank can’t remember.

Gerard’s apartment is spartanly decorated, and the more Frank looks, the more certain he is that Gerard is halfway through moving out. “Are you moving?”

“No? Why?”

“Oh. I guess I have a lot more crap around my apartment than you, sorry.”

Gerard looks around at the threadbare couch, the coffee table with one mug, a pen, and a sketchbook on it, and the bare kitchen counters. He shrugs. “I’m not much of a cook, honestly. That’s probably part of it.”

“Oh.” Frank nods, taking a step further into the apartment. “I cook all the time, I feel like there’s always dirty dishes in the sink. That’s probably it.”

Gerard shrugs at him. “Want to sit? What did you want to talk about?”

“Uh, mostly the fact that I keep passing out on you, and I never remember feeling tired. It’s weird.”
Gerard almost flinches. Frank presses on. “I mean, I’m not gonna do something crazy like accuse you of being a real-ass vampire, because I’m not Bert fucking McCracken, but I’ve never passed out like that before. And it’s been happening kinda a lot.”

“Wanna sit down?”

Frank does, flopping onto the sofa and looking at Gerard. It’s a very much ‘Well?’ Sort of look, one that Gerard knows because it’s the same one Frank employs when he’s just told Gerard he’s wrong about a comic book character and is waiting to be rebuffed.

Gerard leans against the wall. “Do you actually believe in vampires?”

“Not really.”

“They are real. I am, uh, actually a vampire.”

Frank’s eyebrows go up, a classic, silent, “Are you fucking shitting me?”

Gerard just grins sheepishly. Frank nods at him, managing to make it look like he doesn’t believe Gerard at all. Gerard sighs, “I’m not lying to you. I’ve been drinking your blood.” He pauses, looking incredibly guilty. “Which is really, really, really wrong of me- but you cut your hand open and you just looked at it all surprised and I hadn’t fed in a while- I’m sorry. That wasn’t even the only time.” He’s starting to hit a stride, guilty and confessional. “All your blackouts are because I’ve been biting you. I don’t take a lot- just a little. Just enough to keep myself going. I was scared of telling you because you might have made me stop, or tried to kill me. I’m sorry.”

Frank just stares. Gerard is looking hopelessly at him.

“I understand if you hate me now.”

“….What?”

“If you hate me? I’ve been drinking your blood.”

“I’m still not sure I believe you. You realize this sounds more like you’re making fun of me? For liking horror movies, or some other dumb shit.”

“I’m not! I swear, I’d never make fun of you. I’m serious.”

Frank stares at him for a second. “Prove it.”

Gerard pauses for a second, then nervously opens his mouth. He’s got a set of fangs sitting over his blunter, human teeth. They’re weirdly curved and slot together over the front of his mouth to make his nervous smile look less like two rows of teeth and more like a set of ribs. Frank squints at them across the room.

“Bull fucking shit. Those are fake.”

“They’re really really not.”

“Come over here, then.”

Gerard does, slowly like he’s trying not to spook Frank. He gingerly sits down on the coffee table in front of Frank. “You can touch them if you like.” They don’t appear to be inhibiting his speech at all, or changing the shape of his mouth. Frank still shakes his head no to touching them.

“I’m not putting my fucking fingers in your mouth, dude. Vampire or not.”
Gerard shrugs. “Then you’ll have to take my word for it that they’re real. I don’t have a pulse either.” He offers his wrist.

Frank doesn’t take that either. “I don’t know how to take somebodies pulse, that doesn’t prove anything for me.”

Gerard shrugs. “Well, that’s the proof I have.”

“Why don’t I remember you biting me, then?”

“Vampires have uh, a venom. It knocks you out, and makes you forget being bitten. I think it like, keeps us safe? Because you wouldn’t remember my face if I just came up to you on the street and bit you.”

Frank is starting to look a little freaked out. “So you’re saying I keep having fucking blackouts and temporary amnesia because of vampire venom?” Gerard nods seriously.

“I’m still not sure if I believe that you’re not lying straight to my face. Because if you aren’t lying straight to my face, Bert fucking McCracken is right. About vampires.”

Gerard’s mouth twists. “Guess why I was so spooked when he said I was one and he’d have to save you from me. I didn’t think before that that I was hurting you. But I am.”

Frank opens his mouth to rebuff the ‘hurting me’ part, then realizes he really can’t. If Gerard isn’t lying, and that’s a massive if, because the stubborn part of Frank’s brain is telling him there’s no fucking way vampires are real, he’s on Punk’d, and he’s still clinging to that despite the rational part is saying there’s a vampire in front of him, and the fear factor lizard brain parts saying Frank should have been running three minutes ago just in case. Whatever the truth ends up being, drinking Frank’s blood is hurting him, and lying about it is pretty bad too.

And isn’t that just Frank’s luck? The teacher who Frank is still totally quietly in love with, who has become one of his best work friends ever, full stop, is a vampire. Who has been snacking on him. And isn’t that the fucking cherry on top of this bullshit. Frank drops his face into his hands and mutters, “Jesus Christ.”

“I’m sorry Frank.”

“Of course you’re fucking sorry, you're telling me you’re a creature of the night who needs blood to live and you're fucking sorry.”

Gerard flinches back a little, fangs sliding back up into his gums, even though Frank can’t see them anyway with his head still in his hands. “I am sorry, though. Honestly. I’ll stop feeding off of you.”

Frank snorts, completely without humor, and looks up to fix Gerard with an accusing stare. “Okay, let’s say I believe you. Can you actually stop, or can you just stop lying to me about it?”

“I can stop lying about it. And I can stop feeding off of you. I’d need to feed, but I can do it somewhere else.”

Frank has a sudden vision of a pale corpse in a dark alleyway, drained dead victim of Gerard’s wayward hunger and feels himself go cold. “You can do it ‘somewhere else’? That’s somebody’s life, Gerard!”

“I know. Trust me, I know that.”
“Do you? How old are you?”

“345. 47. Sorry. Three hundred and forty-seven.”

“So you were born in, uh, 1664?”

Gerard nods.

“Oookay. Sure.” Frank is right back to disbelief.

Gerard looks a little put out. “I don’t know what to tell you. That’s the truth. I just- how can I prove it?”

“You could bite me.”

“You wouldn’t remember it. And I promised I’d stop.”

“What if I gave you permission? Just this once to prove it.” This is the stupidest thing Frank has ever done, he’s totally sure of it. And if he ends up dead his mom is going to dig him up again and kill him.

“I- I could. But you’d have to write down that permission. Because you won’t remember.”

Frank snorts. “Sure. Give me a piece of paper.”

Gerard looks spooked again, and just asks “Are you sure? Really?”

Frank digs out an old worksheet with a blank back from his bag, scrawling “If future-me doesn’t remember writing this, Gerard is Not Lying about being a vampire. xoxoFrank.”

“Yeah, I’m pretty fucking sure. You want me to believe in vampires? Sure. Put your money where your mouth is.”

Gerard almost smiles. “Shouldn’t it be putting my mouth where my money is?” He leans in from his perch on the edge of the coffee table, gently tilting Frank’s jaw with one hand to bare his neck. “Sit still, okay?”

Frank takes a deep breath and tries to relax, not looking at Gerard’s face as he leans in. His mouth is totally dry, and all bravado writing the note aside, this is terrifying, and all Frank can think about right now is dying an ugly death, neck ripped apart in bite-sized chunks.

Gerard’s fangs are warm, then Frank’s whole neck is hot with pain, and for a second his whole body is on fire, tingling slightly like he’s about to orgasm. He doesn’t get time to be mortified about that though, because unconscious oblivion is only a second behind. Frank goes limp with a sigh, Gerard’s arms around him, gently cradling. It’s the second time Gerard has fed today, but he can’t really stop himself from only taking a taste. He’s been forcing himself on a starvation diet already, and to finally have Frank’s permission?

Gerard drinks his fill, still not enough to hurt Frank, and laps over the punctures to seal them closed. Frank looks peaceful, but Gerard knows his couch isn’t that comfortable, so he carefully unlaces Frank’s shoes and places them next to his workbag, gently taking off Frank’s belt and cardigan too. Frank should be reasonably comfortable while he sleeps off the venom the rest of the night. Gerard scoops him up and carries him into the bedroom, laying him down and pulling the sheet up over him. Gerard won’t sleep tonight, fresh blood plenty to keep him running for two weeks, sleep out of the question. Instead, he goes back to the living room to get his sketchbook and settles in to draw.
Frank wakes up at two am, gasping with a delayed fight or flight response and sitting bolt upright. He doesn’t know where he is, and it’s pitch dark. He scrambles up, heart hammering in his chest, nearly gets tangled in the sheet, and trips out toward a dim light and into the hallway, catching himself on the far wall and wondering where the hell his shoes have gone. How did he get here? He remembers- he remembers coming to Gerard’s house. Gerard said he was a vampire. Frank didn’t believe him. Frank should have believed him. Frank is going to get fucking killed. There’s only one way to go down the hallway, so Frank bolts, scaring the shit out of Gerard making coffee in the kitchen by the light of a single cheap nightlight. Frank doesn’t slow down his fleeing, stomping into his shoes and scooping up his bag. His cardigan lies on the arm of the couch and a piece of paper flutters off the top of his bag. Frank sees neither, staring at Gerard, who is coming out of the kitchen.

Gerard comes out with his hands in front of him, as though he’s settling a spooked dog. Frank feels like one, about to run if running didn’t mean he’d have to turn his back. “Frank? You don’t need to run, it’s okay. Do you remember what we talked about?”

He takes another step forward as he says it and Frank flinches back. “No, I don’t remember. Don’t come near me! Please.”

Gerard freezes. “Please try to remember. I told you the truth about me being a vampire. And you told me to prove it and bite you—”

Whatever he says next is totally lost to Frank, drowned in the rush of blood in his ears. Gerard must have some freaky vampire mojo shit going on, because Frank isn’t quite that stupid, and he doesn’t remember any of that.

“You’re lying to me.”

“I’m not lying to you. You wrote yourself a note.”

Frank shakes his head and stumbles backward for the door. He finds the handle two steps behind him and wheels to unlock it.

“Frank- please. Don’t run, I can prove I’m not lying. Frank!”

Frank is already up the stairs and into the street, fumbling his key fob and diving into his car. Gerard doesn’t chase him.

Frank gets home at 2:20am, and can feel the grittiness of not getting a full night of sleep starting to override the rush of adrenaline he’s been riding. He checks to make sure there’s no vampires lying in wait in the parking lot of his apartment complex and drags himself upstairs, somehow managing to fall asleep almost as soon as he’s in his bed.

His alarm the next morning is incredibly unwelcome. Frank sort of feels like shit run over twice. He remembers the club he made up for himself last year when he got his annual death-cold and mentally renews his membership in the No Fun Club. As he starts coffee, he wracks his memory for last night’s events. He really only lost about forty minutes of sleep, it seems like. But he still can’t remember what he and Gerard talked about, after Gerard had admitted to feeding off of Frank. That’s the most terrifying part, really, the thought that Gerard had fed off him again last night, and has been all along. As Frank pours coffee, he thinks wryly that he’s not used to feeling like prey to be hunted. Which leaves him a few options. They are, as follows:

Cut loose, run, never return to this school or state again, pray Gerard doesn’t hunt him.
Skip school today, even though it’s hellishly late to call in and attempt to ward his home to vampires, then ward his classroom today.
Do that research today in between classes and ward his room before the end of the week, counting on Gerard’s adherence to social norms to keep him from killing Frank in school.
Pretend he’s remembered allowing Gerard to bite him and ask that he just stop biting Frank in the future.
Pretend he’s remembered and let Gerard do whatever the hell he wants to Frank.

They swing between two extremes, and Frank should really pick something in the middle. The first and last are really only good for fantasy, and he somehow doesn’t think that living a vampire flick is as fun as watching one. D will probably cue a capital-C Conversation with Gerard, so that’s out. B is probably a good, conscientious course of action, at least as far as Frank keeping his blood all in his body goes, but it’s 7am already and Frank really does actually love his job, and skipping today feels irresponsible. C it is. Hopefully he can avoid Gerard.

Frank does manage to avoid Gerard by being a hermit all day. He gets a list of the things he’s willing to try to implement as defensive measures and the things he’s not quite willing to do. Keeping a stake on his person will count in the second category. Keeping a stake he will do, but in his bag, like a reasonable person defending themselves from their vampire coworker. Gerard doesn’t come by Frank’s room to check on him, and Frank hopes it stays that way. Wednesday morning on a brave jaunt to the staffroom to make copies Frank finds out that Gerard called out sick Tuesday and isn’t in today either. Frank tries to not be relieved. Over the course of the week, he moves an old rosary, some garlic bulbs and a sliver class ring that Frank found in his junk drawer with his Grandfather’s name engraved inside into his classroom. Just in case. It’s a weird but not overtly threatening assemblage.

By Friday, with Gerard still gone, Frank has realized he’s missing his cardigan. It must be at Gerard’s. Frank liked that cardigan too, but it’s a write-off now. Frank isn’t Laura Croft, he’s not going to go see about getting it back.

Gerard returns to work next week, looking a little rough around the edges and somehow sad. Frank’s students speculate with each other about what happened. They ask Frank too, but he just shrugs and says he doesn’t know. Frank starts to brave the staffroom again, but only when other people are there as well. He thinks McCracken notices, but he doesn’t comment either way. By the next week, Gerard is starting to look peaky again, but Frank still keeps his distance. This is when Gerard would usually feed, if Frank’s rough estimates of the days he’d blacked out were correct. Frank spends the last half of the week decidedly not risking it, working in his room. The only upshot is that he’s incredibly productive now that he’s not discussing comic books with Gerard right down to the bell. Frank has all his lesson plans and quizzes for the year pretty much all written out, with plenty of buffer days built in. Maybe this year there won’t be a crush to the finish like there always is.

Week three starts fine, but Wednesday Frank is nearly alone in the staffroom with Gerard, and promptly hightails it out of there, wondering if he was imagining the way Gerard was watching him. It had seemed almost hungry, and Gerard was starting to look pale and underfed. Friday, Frank is pretty confident he’s the only teacher left in the school doing prep-work after the last bell, so he heads to the staffroom to take full control over an uncontested copier. He’s into his 5th run of worksheets, smugly correct about the copier being unoccupied, when Gerard walks in. Frank nearly jumps and bolts, but the copier is spitting out copy 17 of 26 of a cheatsheet on regular Italian verbs in the past participle, so he really can’t unless he’s ready to embrace being a coward.

Gerard stares at him for a second, copier whirr the only sound in the room.
“Frank?”

“Yeah?” Maybe Frank can stall till the copier is done, then he can make a break for it. “You read the new Peter Parker?”

“Oh, no, actually. I haven’t picked up my box this week, but—” The copier is done. Frank scoops them up and makes his escape.

“Shit, you should. It was fantastic. See you next week—” Gerard pins Frank up against the door, crossing the room inhumanly quickly. Frank jerks, feeling for the doorknob behind him and trying to lean away from Gerard’s mouth without exposing his neck.

“Stop. You always run away before you let me explain.” Gerard looks inhuman right now, fangs down. Frank is nearly hyperventilating as Gerard continues. “I know I couldn’t help it at first, but Frank—you were so close, you smell so good, and I don’t let myself have anything but I wanted—”

Frank shoves the door handle down and lets Gerard’s press on his chest carry them through the doorframe, Frank spinning out of Gerard’s hold and lurching for the safety of his room, Gerard right behind him and reaching out to grab him again. Gerard is hungry and pissed, and past rational thought. He and Frank bounce off another wall as they stumble, half-fleeing, half-chasing and half-embracing each other as they make for Frank’s room.

Gerard slams the door behind them—heedless of how that looked to the two students who happened to be passing by—and watches Frank stumble backwards to the wall of windows, yanking up one of the blinds. Frank stands in the bright bolt of sunlight, dropping his copies on his desk and reaching into the top desk drawer for something he can defend himself with. Gerard takes a step closer.

“I’m not trying to hurt you. I never was.”

“Could’ve fooled me.”

“You’re the one running.”

“You chased me. Or what do you call that just now? That was an attack.”

“You’ve been avoiding me.”

“I’m not your fucking bloodbag.”

“You don’t have to be, but you didn’t like the idea of me feeding on other people, and you’ve been avoiding me. I do need to eat sometime.” Frank, unfortunately, does remember that part of the conversation, and is a little ticked to find out Gerard knows him well enough to correctly assume Frank would be pissed if Gerard had fed off someone else.

“Still can’t prove I let you bite me.”

Gerard reaches into his pocket, pulling out a folded worksheet. “I told you, you wrote yourself a note.” He holds it out across the gap between them. Frank is hesitant to reach for it, so Gerard takes another step closer.

Frank snatches it out of his hand and reads his own words back to him. It certainly seems more like the truth now than it did three weeks ago when Frank woke up alone in the dark.

Gerard is standing inhumanly still in front of Frank, almost holding himself back. “Please? It’s been so long.” He’s staring not quite at Frank’s face, and Frank looks up and realizes Gerard is staring at
his neck. That sends a jolt of fear down Frank’s spine.

“Gerard, please back up. Like, three steps.” It looks like it physically hurts him to do it, but he does, and that cinches the deal for Frank. Option C, meet Option E, revision 2: Let Gerard do whatever the hell he wants, as long as he keeps it out of the school.

“Okay. Okay. I’m actually probably fuckin’ crazy, but you look like shit, so yes, okay? Yes, you can feed off of me.” Gerard is yanking Frank out of the sunlight a split second later, and Frank just barely gets a hand up on Gerard’s face before he gets bitten right there in his classroom. “Stop! Let me finish.” Gerard loosens his grip and moves his face back, but doesn’t let go of Frank, looking at him with eyes so bright Frank would swear they’re glowing. He’s never looked less human. “But not here. Tonight. Somewhere I can reasonably pass out?”

“At your house?”

“Hell fucking no, thanks. I’m not inviting you into my house to show up whenever you want.”

Gerard almost pouts, but finally lets go of Frank, looking human again even though it looks like it takes effort. “Will you come over right away?”

Frank tugs his shirt straight again and shakes his head. “I’m gonna go home, put away my work shit and grab dinner and like, a change of clothes. Then I’ll come over.”

Gerard assess that. “I’ll order us food. Veggie pizza, no cheese?”

Frank accepts the loss of that particular battle. Not like Gerard hasn’t been feeding him after he feeds on Frank for the last 5 months anyway. “Fine. Now please leave so I can lock up.”

Gerard flashes a dazzling and very sharp smile and Frank, then slips out down the hall. Frank takes a moment to breath and curse himself for his unwavering and unending stupidity. If he could go back in time and stop himself from watching The Lost Boys and getting a massive crush on Jason Patrick playing a vampire he would do it in a heartbeat, because his current life is unbelievable.

Chapter End Notes

*cackling* Here we GO the exposition is over!!!! I would like to thank all of you that have read this so far, it means The World to me!!
Frank spends the next five minutes standing stock still in his room to get his heart rate back under control, then heads for his car. He’s absolutely not thinking about the fact he is going to a vampire’s house tonight in order to let said vampire drink his blood. He is currently Googling on his phone how to replenish blood, and making a detour to CVS for iron supplements. That is coincidental. Frank does not have a roundabout deathwish.

At home, he sets down his bag and just stands in his living room for a second, brain whirring with no output. He needs to pack and leave, but the thought of actually starting to pack is a bit monumental. His eyes skid over the movies stacked on his shelves, and finds the title of the Lost Boys next to Buffy. That, if nothing else, gets him moving again.

It’s simple order to pack for a single night away, and Frank grabs and change of clothes and his work bag as well, just in case. He can leave the backpack in the car at work tomorrow, no one will have to know. Logistics sorted, he really can’t delay any more, so he scoops up his keys with a sigh and heads back downstairs.

Gerard greets him at the door. “Please, come in.”

Frank offers a tight smile back. “Is that a thing, you actually can’t go into places you’re not invited?”

“Yeah.”

“How come you can come into the teachers lounge, then? Or my classroom?”

Gerard shrugs. “I don’t know, to be honest. I think it depends on how public the place is? Like, a public building, I don’t need to be invited. And I was invited into the school when they asked to interview me, and I’m welcome there, so I’ve never had a problem. It’s like, private spaces. Homes and apartments I need to be invited.”

“What’s it like if you don’t?”

“It’s like walking into a wall? I can’t go in.”

“Damn.”

Gerard nods, and Frank sort of suspects that if it wouldn’t scare the hell out of him, Gerard would be drooling a little. On closer inspection, Gerard looks pretty objectively bad. Washed out, gaunt, skin tight and brittle around his eyes and mouth, hair somehow darker and lanker than it’s usual gothic look, and posture hunched.

“I haven’t ordered food yet, sorry. I thought you’d take longer.”

“It’s fine. How about, uh, how about I change into like, pajamas, and you can bite me now, and I’ll eat when I wake up?”

“If that’s okay with you?”

Frank shrugs. “Why not, right? You look like you need it more than I do.”
Gerard sort of shrugs. It’s no use saying he doesn’t.

Frank sighs and goes to change. He’s back in a moment, in a V-neck undershirt and sweatpants. “I hung my shirt up in your bathroom. I’m probably gonna wear it to work tomorrow.”

“Okay. Are you not gonna run screaming at me this time?”

“Probably not.”

“Okay. Where do you wanna do it?”

Frank makes a face. “Uh, suppose couch is fine? I don’t wanna take your bed.”

“I don’t sleep after I’ve fed. Well, I don’t need to. I usually end up napping.”

“Oh. Uh. Still, your bed?”

Gerard shrugs. “Unless you have too many bad memories.”

“No, but it’s pitch black in there.”

“I’ll take the nightlight in. And we’ll turn on the light.”


Gerard leads, checking to make sure Frank is following and not carrying a stake. Frank just trails, wondering if he should be nervous.

“Does it hurt? I know it’s not my first time, but I’m not that into pain.” Frank realizes what it sounds like as soon as he says it and instantly regrets ever asking. Way to not at all make that an innuendo. Gerard just laughs.

“You pass out right away anyway. And if it does hurt, you won’t remember it. Doesn’t even bruise.”

“Yeah. I know that, thanks.”

Gerard shrugs, flipping on the light in the bedroom. It’s just as spartan as the living room, bed with tangled sheets and blankets, and nightstand with a glass of water and four sketchbooks on it. Gerard’s hamper trails a shirtsleeve out of the closet, and there’s a pile of sketchbooks overflowing a Rubbermaid container by the wall. It’s weird, but Frank probably shouldn’t judge. Vampires might be wired different.

He just plops himself on the edge of the bed. “Okay. Whenever you’re ready.” Gerard sits down next to him and reaches for Frank, then pauses and folds his hands back into his lap.

“Thank you. For offering this.”

“It’s alright. I don’t think you take enough to like, hurt me, and it’s better than going after strangers, right?”

“It is, but I’ve lived for this long on strangers. So thank you.”

“Anytime?”

Gerard smiles, and Frank can’t help but smile back. Apparently even Gerard being a vampire hasn’t really dulled Frank’s crush.
Gerard leans in carefully, tilting Frank’s head. It’s intimate, and Frank takes a deep breath and closes his eyes. Gerard’s teeth pinch, then burn and Frank feels a deep tug of Gerard swallowing at his neck, then he goes limp. Gerard drinks, smiles at Frank’s still form, then lays him down and carefully tucks him in again. He’ll order food in a few hours when Frank will actually be ready to get up. For now, he leans against the far wall and starts absently sketching the drape of the blankets on the bed, eventually realizing he’s mostly drawn Frank asleep. He makes sure the book is closed and buried under another, older sketchbook before he leaves the room to order food.

Frank wakes up closer to midnight this time, the feeding much earlier in the afternoon this time, and grins to see that Gerard has left the hall light on and only half-closed the bedroom door. Frank doesn’t trip over anything as he gets up, going to get a glass of water. Gerard is watching the end of the 11 o’clock news and looks up when he comes in. “Hey. Pizza will get here in about 20 minutes.”

Frank nods. “Cool. Do you have a glass I can use for water?”

“Yeah, go sit, I’ll get it.” Gerard herds Frank to the couch as Frank yawns. Gerard fetches water and Frank downs it, and within five minutes is asleep against the back out the couch again. Gerard smiles at him and gently wakes him up when pizza has arrived. Frank eats three slices and yawns again. “I’ll have more for breakfast, if you don’t mind me eating all of it.”

“No problem at all. I bought it all for you. Back to bed?”

“Probably should, yeah. Thanks for letting me take your bed.”

“I took your blood. It’s really only polite.”

“Well, when you put it that way…” Frank snorts, already heading back down the hall.

His phone work alarm is the next thing to wake him up. Frank feels surprisingly well-rested, given that he’s just done some rather intimate blood donations. Gerard is in the shower, but the coffee-maker is dinging from the kitchen. Frank pours himself a mug, helpfully left right by the coffee-maker, and sits down at the island to check his work email and make sure he’s ready for the day. Two emails in, he heads to the fridge and pulls out the pizza box from last night, finishing the pizza as Gerard gets out of the shower and vanishes into his room to get dressed.

Frank grins at him as Gerard comes down the hall, hair dripping onto his collar. “Saved you pizza. Can I shave over the sink?”

“Yeah, sure. And thanks.” Gerard nabs it, and Frank heads to the bathroom, still a little steamy and smelling like Gerard’s soap. It hits Frank how domestic this is, and he freezes for a second. How long can he act like this isn’t anything, and how long can he act like Gerard’s comic collection in the living room wouldn’t go perfectly with his movie collection.

Frank can’t really do anything about that right now, so he just shaves and ducks into Gerard’s room to get dressed again, then heads for his car. “How long is your commute?”

“Fifteen minutes, if you leave now. Thirty-five if you leave in 10 minutes.”

“I’ll leave now, thanks.”

“Yeah, I am too.”

Frank laughs and scoops up his bag, and finds out he’s parked two cars away from Gerard. “Wanna just follow me?”
“Yeah, that’d be easiest. I know pretty much where I am, but I might miss a turn.”

Gerard nods, unlocking his car as Frank pops his trunk and tosses his overnight bag in.

Frank pulls into the parking space on the left of Gerard in the school lot just as Gerard was about to get out. Gerard sighs, and opens his door more carefully, as Frank grins and sticks his tongue out. Gerard laughs at that, and they walk into the building together.

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In Frank’s first period, one of his first students in the room gives him a funny look. “Is that the same sweater you had yesterday?”

Frank looks at his sleeve. “Yes? I wear a sweater for a couple days, usually. Why?”

“Oh. I hadn’t noticed, but I was walking to student gov yesterday afternoon, and I saw you and Mr. Way in the hallway, like, uh, well, it was pretty compromising, and you’re wearing the same outfit.”

Frank gapes at her for a second. “I can promise you Mr. Way and I are not hooking up.”

Jenna’s look is pretty disbelieving. “Ookay.”

Frank flops into his desk chair. “Jenna, I would appreciate if you didn’t spread that rumor, either. That’s fairly personal aspect of anyone’s life, and it gets more complicated when you implicate that Mr. Way and I aren’t straight. That could blow back on us, if some parent heard a rumor and decided they didn’t want us near their children.”

She sober up. “I understand. That’s bullshit, but yeah, I won’t talk about it. I was with Aubrey, but I don’t think she’s told anybody either. I’ll let her know you want us to forget it.”

“Thank you. How was your weekend?”

“It was good! Super chill.” She flops into her seat and pulls out her notebook and phone, and Frank greets the rest of his students as they come in, switching to Italian to encourage them to say good morning back in Italian. As they work on a reading during class, Frank sips a second cup of coffee and takes stock of how much better he feels today, compared to three weeks ago.

Bert is incredibly suspicious when Frank shows up in the teachers lounge during his planning period and sits down next to Gerard. “How have you been, Frank?”

“Good! I get like, death colds? And I had a slight one, and I was leery of giving it to anybody else or like, get a cold on top of a cold. Which I wish was impossible, but I’ve done it.” He shrugs. “Better now, though.”

“That’s good. Gerard and I missed you. Gerard arguably more.”

“He missed my rampant disagreement with him on comic books.”

Gerard nods. “I really did. Remind me to bring you the new Spider-Man? I just finished it and I think you’d love it.”

Frank grins. That is definitely flirting. “Sure.”

Bert snorts at them and turns back to his laptop.
Frank manfully does not snort back. He’s flirting with Gerard.

On his way home, Frank takes a second to think about how weird it is that his brain has so easily reconciled Gerard who is a vampire and drinks Frank’s blood with Gerard who teaches art and talks to me about comics. Except Frank really hasn’t reconciled them at all. He doesn’t remember being bitten, and it’s sort of easy to ignore everything inhuman about him right up until he acts very inhuman. Usually, by then, Frank is ready to flee for his life, and isn’t really thinking about ‘oh, this is Gerard.’ He’ll probably have to do that sometime, but Frank puts it off for now. Right now, he has Spider-Man and the renewed balance of his work relationships to look forward to.

That works out well for quite a while. Frank, as expected, adores the issue of Spider Man Gerard brings, and ends up recommending an indie work he wants Gerard to look at purely for the art. McCracken continues to snort at him, and in a flash, two weeks have passed, and Gerard knocks on Frank’s doorframe at the end of the day with a smile.

“Can I come in?”

“Oh, now you have to ask? Yeah, you’re always welcome.”

Frank’s last student is leaving for the day, and he waves them off with “Have a good weekend!”

And turns expectantly to Gerard. “Did you bring me comics?”

“Oh, no, actually. I was wondering if you could possibly come over tonight?”

“Oh. Oh! Yeah. Uh, could we maybe, uh, shit.” Frank doesn’t know how to ask. “Could you- could I donate blood a little later in the evening? Waking up in the middle of the night is a little rough, and I’m staring down 31, here.”

“Oh, of course. You could read that Doom Patrol I keep forgetting to bring you? I can order food again?”

“Yeah, that works. I’ve got a few work things I wanna do, but I can come by around dinnertime? Is that too late?”

“No, that works for me. I’m not- it’s not like last time, I’m not starving. A couple hours won’t matter at all.”

“Okay. Good.” Frank has so many more questions, but school isn’t the place to ask.

At home, he makes a list of the things he wants to ask Gerard on a sticky note. They’re mostly stupid questions like “Do the fangs hurt? How do you know how often to eat? Does blood taste good? What happened to your family? Are there other vampires? How many other vampires are there on the East Coast? What did you do before you were a teacher? Does getting turned into a vampire freeze you at the age you’re at or do you feel old? Do you remember things from when you were human?” Frank stares at the sticky note as he fills it up and sighs, chucking the pad back into his junk drawer without taking the sticky note off. This is all his crush talking.

Frank doesn’t stop himself from grabbing Twilight off the shelf and heading out. It’s still in the plastic wrapper, with a sticky note on it from a senior two years before. He’d shown Dracula the last week of class, just for fun, and she had brought this in two days after, laughing. The sticky note says “Get some modern vampire films <3 I’ll miss you, Mr. Iero! Thank you for making Italian fun!!!!”
And Frank smiles at it. Gerard’s face will be funny, at least.

He ends up never taking it out of the case. Gerard is watching Drive, and Frank flops on the couch immediately to watch it with him. They only pause when Frank’s Chinese food shows up, and then keep watching, commentary now half-muffled while Frank eats. Twilight is totally forgotten in Frank’s bag.

After the movie, and a lot of time hooking up Gerard’s school laptop to his TV to watch interviews and random clips of movies online, Frank gets ready for bed and comes back out with a yawn, bundling his work clothes up to put back in his back. Gerard stands.

“Ready?”

At the tail end of the yawn, Frank just nods and heads back down the hall. Gerard follows, sort of wondering when the other shoe will drop. Frank just sits on the edge of the bed and says “Goodnight, Gerard.” With a slightly manic giggle before Gerard bites him. Gerard smiles back and tucks Frank under the covers, leaving the hall light on again as he leaves. The fact that it’s this easy to tuck a human into his bed, this easy to get a supply of blood, even though Frank knows full well what Gerard is taking from him, is sort of unprecedented. Gerard’s old ex-wife never had, and Mikey was really the only one who ever had. And that had ended badly—better to not even think about it now.

Gerard pulls out paints in the kitchen and mindlessly starts a warmup canvas. Gerard swears he knows the eyes that start to appear out of the brushstrokes, and he starts a new canvas. A new face, different but equally fraught, emerges. Gerard keeps painting, never quite finishing a face before ripping the canvas paper out of the book to set it aside and try again.

Frank wakes up Saturday morning to Gerard’s work alarm going off and blearly goes to slap it off, hand instead landing on top of Gerard’s. Frank blinks up at him and frowns for a second. “What’s up?”

Gerard is clutching coffee with one hand and looks physically healthy but still a little fraught. “I’m alright. I was up all night painting, and I probably shouldn’t have been.”

“Oh. Okay, you looked a little—” Frank sort of shrugs, sitting up. Gerard looked a little wild, a little hunted, and a lot scared when Frank had opened his eyes, but that’s a little heavy to insinuate at 6:25am.

Gerard shrugs back. “You can go back to sleep.”

“Not that I’ve smelled coffee, I wont. Is it okay if I go into the kitchen and get some? Or do you not want me to see your paintings?”

“No, go ahead. None of them are finished.”

Frank gets up, curious now, and heads to get himself coffee. He can’t help but look at the paintings, most of them dark, brushwork light but emotionally heavy. Gerard just shrugs. “They’re all people I’ve known. But they’re all much older than you.”

Frank shrugs. “Figured. As long as you didn’t, like, go Dahmer and murder them all and I’m next, I think that’s okay.”

“No, no, I would never.”

“Thanks.” Frank raises the mug as a toast. “I appreciate everyone who doesn’t murder me.”
Gerard looks a little less scared when Frank makes a joke of it, and Frank looks closer at the paintings. Two of them look pretty similar, so he nudges them together, then can’t help but sort them out. There are three of a man with long hair, deeply shadowed eyes and a thin face, each less complete than the first. The last is really just a jawline, like Gerard’s with less baby fat, and a vague lightness of a head. Three more are a bald man, features heavy and sharp. On the most complete, Frank is reminded of Lestat, eyes somehow totally without pity or compassion. One is of a woman, two faces on the same canvas, one laughing, then smeared to be replaced with one looking scared. The last two resemble Frank, but not quite. Frank tilts his head.

“This looks like my grandpa.”

“Hmm?”

Frank holds it up.

“He was a man I knew in New Jersey. You could be related? What was your grandfather’s last name?”

“It was mom’s dad, so Miranda.”

“Oh. Oh, Frankie Miranda! I did know your Grandfather. Yeah, I think- I might have painted him. I can’t tell if it’s him or you, actually, and now I can’t believe I didn’t realize.”

“Yeah, I’m named after him. We look pretty alike, too, according to Mom. I never met him, he died when she was pretty young. But made men, it happened. That’s why she was always leery of me doing literally anything more criminal than like, being out at ungodly hours as a kid.”

“Yeah. I was around a lot at that time, it could get nasty.”

“Yeah, shit, that’s crazy. God, I wish there was some way to tell my Mom that, she’d love to talk to somebody else who knew her Dad. Unless, like, you have awful memories of him?”

“No, no, he was alright. One of the better guys I knew. The associates could get pretty nasty.”

Frank nods. He didn’t grow up Italian in New Jersey to not know what Gerard means. “Wait, you’re from Sicily, are you a made man?”

Gerard makes a face. “Would I be teaching high school art if I was?”

“I dunno. Aren’t you kinda immortal?”

“Okay, fair, but no, I was never a made man.”

Frank accepts that. “Not like I could prove it if you were lying to me anyway, but I’m willing to believe that.”

“I appreciate the trust.”

“Gerard, I’d trust you with my life.” Frank just barely keeps a straight face and gets to watch Gerard make an awful face back at him for even saying it.

“Please don’t.”

That cracks Frank up, and he gently stacks the dry paintings up for Gerard, and heads home not long after, accepting the leftover takeout.
The next month flies by in two two week installments, each easier than the last. Frank brings over his own leftovers the fourth time to eat, teasing Gerard about fattening him up with takeout. Gerard accepts the joke with a return parry about Hansel and Gretle, and asks if Frank likes gumdrops. Franks says he’ll take the gumdrops anyway, fuck Gerard’s cauldron of stew. Gerard laughs and manages to cackle “I’ll get you, my pretty!” In a perfect Wizard of Oz impression. It sends them both into stitches. As they calm down, Frank wipes his eyes and says “Man, I’ve gotta introduce you to Jamia. You’d love her.” “Jamia, your friend?” “Yeah. She works down at Bissell.” “I’d like to meet her.” “Yeah, do you do bars? We can hang at my place, but she and I usually just hit a happy hour and shoot the shit, maybe go see if any good local bands are doing a set.” “No, I can do bars. I don’t drink much, but I’d go to be social.” “Sweet, I’ll put you in a group chat with her and I for next week.” “It’s a date.” Frank doesn’t just feel lighter from blood loss the next morning, he has a date! With Gerard! Okay, Jamia will be there, but being social outside of work or Gerard’s apartment counts as a date.

Chapter End Notes

I'm so sorry the chapter lengths are so inconstant (read, getting longer every time) but it is.. probably not something that will uhhh,,, improve. I am just a single woman, trying to pace things in a way that makes sense and gives all plot points due diligence.
Monday, Frank sheepishly realizes that he doesn’t have Gerard’s phone number. They see each other so often Frank had never even realized he didn’t have it. So, he drops by Gerard’s room at lunch and boldly looks past all the students leaving for lunch and announces “So, you never gave me your number, how are we supposed to go out?”

The statement is only flimsily shielded from the students by virtue of being in Italian, but Gerard turns a little red, and some of these kids are seniors of Frank’s. Jenna passes by and gives Frank a look that says she absolutely understood what he said. Frank only shrugs back, totally innocent.

Gerard pulls out his phone and opens a new contact, handing it to Frank. “Here? I’ll put mine in yours.”

“Oh, will you?” Frank says it before his brain filter kicks in, and now it’s his turn to almost blush, but Gerard just sniggers at him and takes Frank’s offered phone.

“Yeah, maybe I will.”

Frank snorts back and taps in his phone number, adding his last name to the “Frank” contact and saving it before handing it back. Gerard looks at it and grins, handing Frank’s phone back. “None of the kids leaving heard you asking for my number, did they? Or am I going to have to defend my single status when they get back?”

“Jenna probably did, but she saw you chasing me into my room like a month ago and then saw me in the same sweater the next day and asked already.” Frank shrugs. “I asked her not to talk about it, or really, make news of it at all.”

“Oh. I’m sorry, I wasn’t even thinking-“

Frank puts up a hand to cut him off. “It’s fine. One kid saw it, and she’s gonna be respectful about that. Truth is stranger than fiction sometimes, and I’d rather the rumor be I’m dating you and not McCracken.”

“That’s fair enough. I’ll defend your faux-honor.”

“Better defend my real honor if he gets serious about trying to kill some vampires.”
Gerard nods seriously. “I will.”

Frank’s smile is a little smaller as well. “Thanks. And I’ll text you a time and place hopefully by the end of the day, and if not, I’ll try to get like, an hour of warning? And I promise Jamia’s bark is worse than her bite, so if she gives you shit you can give it back.”

“Noted.” Gerard grins. “Is she kinda like you?”

“Me, but she takes even less shit.”

“Wow. Okay.”

“Yeah, be ready.”

Gerard nods, and Frank heads back to his classroom, texting Jamia to —pick a place 4 friday happy hr hangz asap I got g way in—

—if u flirt in front of me i’ll kill u ded—

—rip me then lmao—

—lol—

Frank grins at his phone and opens his classroom door again for the three students coming back to work during their lunches. He grades while they work, and the rest of the week nearly flies by.

—

Wednesday night Jamia texts —can’t do friday had emergency baby shower coming over thurs good w/ u?—

—ya lemme ask g—

Jamia laughs at her phone and waits for the text back.

—

—hey, jamia can't do friday so movie my house thurs?—

—That works for me—

—sweet. 711 o’neall bldg c apt 323—

—Gonna have to break your promise about inviting me in—

—u r welcome in my home. were a little past that—

—Thank you—

—np see u @ 5?—

—

—5pm my house thurs u get to meet g—

—fuk yea—

—;*—
Thursday night, Jamia works through lunch to leave her office job early and come over to make dinner with Frank and catch up before Gerard comes over. It’s also time for Jamia to interrogate him. Frank spends a lot of that blushing and telling Jamia that he can’t ask Gerard out, that’s not how this works, and a lot of her calling him a weak-ass nerd and demanding a good reason he can’t. Frank doesn’t ever really come up with one, and Jamia is laughing at him from the kitchen when he opens the door for Gerard, vegetables now in the oven.

“Hey, come on in.”

“Thanks. Jamia is already here?”

“Yeah, she came over a little while ago. We’ve got sweet potatoes and carrots and shit roasting in the oven, we’ve got plenty if you want some too.”

“Probably will, if you don’t mind.”

Frank shrugs and turns to lead Gerard into the kitchen, where Jamia is gently twirling a beer bottle and smirking at Frank. “Jai, this is Gerard. He is my coworker.” And damn if there isn’t a bit of extra emphasis on the fact they’re not an item “Gerard, this the Jamia you’ve heard so much about.”

“Way to play down how much you talk about him, and play up how much you talk about me, fucker.” Jamia gently elbows Frank as she stands, holding a hand out to Gerard. “Nice to finally meet you!”

Gerard takes it with a smile, “Nice to meet you too. I’m not sure I can live up to it, if you’re saying you’re finally meeting me. But I’ve heard only good things about you.”

“Oh, no, he’s a flatterer, I know it.”

“Both of you stuck dick. Gee, beer?”

Gerard turns at the nickname, back to Frank, who’s rolling his eyes at the two of them.

“Uh, sure.” Frank pops the cap off the bottle he’s pulled out of the fridge and hands it over.

“You two are gonna get on like a house on fire and my life is never gonna know peace again, isn’t it?”

“Mhmm, babe, you know I steal all your boys.”

“Fuck off. You don’t even use them for anything.”

Jamia snorts. “Oh, sure, I’m too lesbian to have guy friends.”

“You already have me, you don’t need to collect gay men.”

Gerard sits down. Frank is apparently damn near reserved at work, if this is him actually relaxed. Frank looks at Gerard and kicks the last barstool on the island out, making the gesture an invitation to sit. Gerard does, and the conversation includes him, Jamia complaining about a cousin’s kid’s antics and asking if their students are that bad. Nobody in either of their classes has been arrested, but Frank asks if Gerard has heard about the one two years ago, who brought a bowie knife to school and whipped it out at lunch. Gerard has.
“I did, and that’s not even a good fighting knife, the serrations would fuck you over in a heartbeat.”

Jamia hones in on that. “You ever been in a knife fight?”

“No in a very long time. And not with any knives larger than pocket knives, thank god.”

“When did this happen?”

“I was living in New Jersey when I was younger, and it was very much a mob town, and I was on the wrong side of it at the wrong time. I didn’t start the fight.”

“Did you pull a knife to defend yourself? Damn.” Frank is looking at Gerard with new appreciation.

“Look, if you have a semblance of an idea what you’re doing with a knife, and the other party has already made it a knife fight, why purposely disadvantage yourself?”

Jamia shrugs. “Point. Still, shit dude, you are my new favorite guy, that is bad ass.”

“If it helps, I was scared shitless at the time.”

“No, that just makes it true.”

The oven timer goes off, and Frank gets up, pulling out a spatula and a few plates. “Serve yourselves, you’re competent adults. We’ll put on Whose Line while we eat.”

“Damn straight.”

“Don’t call Gerard out like that. Wait, Gee, are you even straight? Sorry, can I ask that?”

Gerard shrugs. “You can, but I don’t know if I have a good answer. I’ve been single so long I’ve pretty much forgotten my sexuality.” He pauses, putting carrots on his plate. “I guess I’m sort of bisexual?”

Frank nods, filling that information away for later. Jamia narrows her eyes at them both, looking between them for a second. Gerard shrugs at her behind Frank’s back. She just makes a face back.

Frank doesn’t seem to notice, far too busy keeping his face totally neutral. It’s a hurdle on the track of his ongoing crush he hadn’t even realized he’d apparently already halfway cleared. Might as well stick the landing.

“Good. I don’t allow straight men in my apartment. Useless and distracting.”

Jamia laughs. “Gays only club?”

“Exactly. Welcome to the treehouse, Gerard. Your decoder ring is on its way.”

Gerard laughs at that. “Thank you. I feel very welcome.”

“Good. Everybody got food? Yes, Jai, second beer? We have a date with my couch.”

Jamia nods, finishing the last swallow of the first beer and tossing it neatly into the recycling, grabbing herself a second as Frank leads Gerard to the living room. It’s small but homey, with a plush couch and a coffee table that was almost certainly once in it’s life a regular table but now has slightly shorter legs. Frank takes the middle and flips on the TV. Gerard takes the left and leaves the kitchen side for Jamia. She flops into it a moment behind. “Fuckin’ cheers. This week has been hell.”

“And we all still have work tomorrow.” Frank adds, turning the volume down for Whose Line and
picking up his fork.

Gerard shrugs. “Mine are in the middle of paintings, so I’m just working more on that church series I told you about next to them.”

Frank nods. “Mmm, yeah, tell Jai about that, she’ll love it.”

“Churches?”

“All from Batman. Super gothic, but I’m painting them more of a plein-aire style? So super naturalistic, like they were real.”

“Oh sick, that’s cool. Do you have photos?”

Gerard has a couple, and his phone gets passed across the couch for a moment, Jamia zooming in close and quietly exclaiming praise. Frank just beams at Gerard.

“Told you they were fucking cool.”

“I never really disagreed with that, you know.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Jamia passes the phone back and says “Do you do gallery shows anywhere?”

“Oh no, I just usually keep them for a year or two and maybe sell one or two, then end up throwing them out when I move. I keep my sketchbooks.”

“Oh, shit, you throw these out?”

“It doesn’t mean as much if you can just paint another.”

“I guess not.”

“Still, fucking cool. I want to see them in person.”

“Frank at one point said he wanted one, so I’m sure one or two will end up over here.”

Around a decisive bite of potato, Frank adds “And I’ll pay you for them, that’s your art.”

“Buy me a coffee or something, it’s fine.” That gets a shrug back. Half an hour later, Frank takes their plates to the kitchen and tells Jamia and Gerard to pick and start a movie. Jamia pulls up Netflix and flips to the movie section, picking some awful B-movie with a shrug at Gerard. It looks like it might be about pirates. As soon as Frank opens the tap to rinse dishes and baking trays off, she whips around to Gerard.

“He likes you. I’m sure you know that.”

“I… do, yes.”

“And I’m damn sure you’re pretty fond of him as well.”

For a multitude of reasons, the least of which is his acceptance of Gerard’s well, non-human status, but… “Yes, I am.”

“Are you gonna ask him out? Or say yes when he finally gets the courage to do it a year from now?”
“I.. I don’t know. I like him, but, there’s a lot of.. other complications? To us dating.”

“You’re two grown-ass men. I think you’re both capable of keeping it on the down-low at work, and they can’t fire you for it. Frank looked into it just in case.”

Gerard just looks unsure, and a little uncomfortable. Jamia sighs, glances at the kitchen door and turns back.

“Okay, whatever.” She levels a very aggressive finger at Gerard’s chest, “Frank is my best friend ever, and if you break his fucking heart or blow him off for a stupid reason or date him and dump him six months later I’ll find you and I’ll fucking kill you. He’s had some super shitty boyfriends in the past, and he doesn’t deserve that shit.”

Gerard nods. “I couldn’t- I don’t know if-“ He pauses and gathers the words “There’s a lot of reasons I don’t know if we could date- it’s not just being coworkers, but I promise I’ll do my best to never hurt him. I can promise that.”

Jamia relaxes. “Okay. I can believe that. You’re a cool dude regardless, but his crush is kind of glaringly obvious, and you look at him the same way.”

Gerard almost blushes, and Frank comes back in and vaults onto the middle of the couch without ceremony. “God, this looks like an awful movie. Okay, hit play.”

Jamia smirks and says, “It’s on your Netflix.” She starts it and tosses the remote back onto the table, tucking her feet up. Frank leans into Gerard and they all proceed to critically pan the movie, until Jamia’s phone alarm goes off and she says “Holy shit, it’s already 9pm. I gotta go home, that was my birth control alarm.”

Frank nudges her with a knee, “Don’t even carry your birth control with you… do you even care?”

She sticks her tongue out. “Yeah, because I live in so much fear of pregnancy. G’night. Good to meet you, Gerard.”

Frank just shifts on the couch as she lets herself out and hollers “Goodnight!” As she lets herself out, movie already playing again. “Gerard, another beer?” Frank is getting himself one, might as well offer.

Gerard swirls the last few drops of his and shrugs. “Sure.” He finishes it and hands it off to Frank, who brings back two more and settles back into the couch with a contented sigh.

They finish the movie and end up back on live TV, watching House Hunters. Frank bemoans straight culture as much as he can, and Gerard insults their taste. It gets late quickly, but neither of them notice. The beers are finished, and they’re listing toward each other. A little after midnight, it’s impossible to say which of them fell asleep first, but by 12:30 they’re asleep on each other’s shoulders on the couch, TV still on.

Frank’s alarm goes off from his bedroom to rudely awaken them both the next morning. They’re still on the couch, now both laying down with the afghan half pulled over them. Gerard has one arm looped around Frank’s waist and Frank’s face is buried in Gerard’s neck. They both start speaking at the same time.

Frank lurches toward his room, turning off the alarm and shedding his now very uncomfortable cardigan. He comes back out to find Gerard putting the folded afghan back up on the arm of the couch, looking a little like a deer in the headlights. They both start speaking at the same time.
“I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to fall asleep—“

“-I didn’t realize it got so late, you can use my shower and shave if you need-“

They both stop, look at each other for a second, both frozen with how awkward it is. The TV is off now, but the two empty beer bottles are still on the table.

Frank glances at the clock. “Okay. T-minus an hour till work. Fifteen minutes for you to drive home, then your commute. Do you wanna shower really fast here and then run home and change? You can use my razor if you need to shave, too.”

“Probably best? You don’t mind?”

“I’m gonna eat and shove last night’s dishes aside first. You’ve got time.”

Gerard nods. “Thank you. I’m so sorry I fell asleep, I shouldn’t have stayed so late.”

Frank waves it off. “It’s no problem. I was right next to you asleep, seriously.”

“Yeah, I don’t even know who fell asleep first.”

Frank shrugs. He has no clue either. Gerard peels off for the shower, Frank calling after him to tell him where he can grab a towel. Frank presses coffee into his hands ten minutes later when he passes, hair now wet and only wearing his undershirt and pants. He knows Gerard well enough to know he lives on the stuff.

“You can return the mug at work or whatever, it’s not like we don’t see each other.” Gerard takes it, takes a big slurp, and nearly sighs in satisfaction.

“Thanks.” He’s on his way to the door, keys in hand, and Frank goes the two steps with him. For a second it’s so domestic that Frank sways toward Gerard to kiss him goodbye, then remembers himself and jolts back to center, hoping Gerard didn’t see him do it.

Gerard pauses too, also unsure what to say here. He settles on “Thanks!” again, raises the mug and says, “See you in forty?”

“Yup.” Frank leans against the door for a minute after he closes it behind Gerard. He is fucking unbelievable. His whole life is fucking unbelievable.

—

Gerard drops the mug off after third period, and Frank just tries to not be horribly awkward. He’s still replaying the morning in his head, stewing in the incredibly thick awkwardness of the whole thing, and as soon as Gerard leaves Frank realizes he has no idea what they said to each other. This isn’t at all like the memory gaps of Gerard feeding, this was entirely Frank being so hyper-aware of Gerard’s body language he missed every word out of his mouth.

Frank calls Jamia at lunch, totally not hiding out back in the teacher smoking nook. “Jai, I’m doomed. I’m hopeless.” For the moment, he’s alone, so he doesn’t have to mince words.

“Wait, why?”

“Gerard fell asleep on my couch last night. With me. We woke up cuddling.”

“Oh shiiiiitt, nice.”

“Not nice! My alarm clock woke us up! It was incredibly awkward! He’s never gonna wanna hang
out with me again!"

“Oh shut up, yes he is. He likes you plenty, you’re blinded by your own crush.”

Frank moans at her. “You’re the absolute worst person I know. I didn’t think it was that obvious!”

“Maybe not at work, but to me? At home? Frank, baby, you’ve got a nickname for him.”

Frank makes a wounded, miserable noise.

“Ask him out, see how it goes.”

“I can’t!”

“Why not? We’re not straight, you’re not a cheerleader waiting for the football captain to give you his letterman.”

“Please don’t use high school metaphors. I work at one. And no, I just.. I can’t ask him out.”

She makes an annoyed, hopeless sound. “Fine, don’t. But you should, and don’t give me a reason to say ‘I told you so’ when you do ask him out and it’s fine.”

“Ughhhhhhhhhhh.”

“Sure. My lunch is almost over, I’ll call you this weekend.”

“OK. I just, I’m gonna die alone.”

“No you’re not. You’ll find a good man.”

“Not looking likely. Mom is making hopeless overtures at me about how it’s okay to be single.”

“You’ll prove her wrong yet.”

“Mhmnnnnnnnnnmaybe. Thanks.”

“Anytime. See ya.”

Frank pushes himself off the wall and slides his Blackberry shut. At least the work of teaching a foreign language to a group of apathetic teenagers is still somehow the least trying part of his life.

The whole week is awkward after that. Frank is still mortified, Gerard is wondering if Frank knows that Jamia told Gerard about his crush and that’s why he’s being avoided, and Jamia mostly rolls her eyes at Frank. It’s actually Bert McCracken that gets them past it all. He looks at the two of them halfheartedly debating comics one day and goes “The two of you, hm? What a shame.”

Frank snaps right over into rage. He knows homophobia when he hears it, and being a gay kid in New Jersey in the 90’s means he’s taken enough shit for a fucking lifetime. “The two of us? Yeah, what about it?”

“It’s interesting, that’s all.”

“Is it? See, I didn’t think it was your business.”

Bert shrugs, looks at Gerard, who just looks concerned, and looks back at Frank. “Suppose it isn’t.”
“Mm.” Frank glares. Bert shrugs again, then turns to leave with one last lingering look at Gerard.

Gerard has no response, a little surprised himself by the amount of venom in Frank’s response. He notes it for later and resolves to ask at the end of the day. That turns out to be easy, as Frank is staring at something on his computer when Gerard stops by.

“Hey, Frank?”

Frank looks up, startled by the interruption, then relaxes and waves Gerard into the room. “Hey. What’s up?”

“I sort of wanted to ask if you were alright?”

Frank looks at him for a second, tilts his head and considers, and finally says, “Yes? I suppose I am? Why specifically are you asking?”

“Your response to Bert today was pretty venomous. And I don’t think I’ve been totally imagining that you’re sort of wrong-footed around me now. After last week.”

Frank takes a deep breath. “Well, uh, that’s two sort of different things? The first bit is easy, I’m fucking pissed at McCracken for that comment. And I’ve heard enough in that tone to last me a fucking lifetime, so I did, yeah, I mean, I snapped at him.”

“And the second?”

“It’s- okay, I swear to god it’s not you. I just, I got ahead of myself, I think. Maybe? And I can’t figure out if I need to apologize to you or what, and it’s- that’s all my end. Sorry.”

“What would you need to apologize to me for?”

Frank looks out into the hallway. “Close the door?”

Gerard does, coming to sit on a student’s desk at the front of the room. Frank takes a deep breath.

“Okay, I’ve had a massive crush on you since, well, honestly, since you moved in and I carried that batman figure into your room for you with the box of paint, or ink or whatever. And even you being, well, what you are apparently hasn’t done jack shit to that crush,” Frank looks far more embarrassed about that than he should, almost certainly underplaying part of that statement- “and then we fell asleep cuddling on my couch? Like, as intimate as me sleeping in your bed sort of is, that was sort of a whole new level of, us? Whatever we are? And I don’t know how you feel about that, and I would hate to compromise the rest of our relationship. So, no, you’re not wrong having noticed I’m totally wrong-footed by you again.”

Gerard stares. He was sort of warned about this, and thanks God he’s met Jamia who warned him. “Well, I’d say it’s not unwelcome? But, I don’t know if we- if I can date you. Not because I don’t like you enough to, but because of me. Also Jamia said if I break your heart she’ll kill me.”

“Did she corner you and give you a speech? God- I should never have told her about you.”

“It does explain her saying ‘finally meeting me’.”

Frank gives Gerard a look. “It does but she’s the worst! I get dumped and sad drunk on her once and she’s never left well enough alone since.”

“I’d say that’s the mark of a good friend.”
“Sure, until she’s meddling.”

Gerard shrugs. “Meddling for a good cause?”

“That’s leading me on. Why can’t you date me, if it isn’t because of me?”

“It’s mostly because I don’t age? That’s not fair to you at all. You can’t spend your life with someone who never changes, never ages.”

“Why not? That’s pretty damn long term but still?”

“Why shouldn’t you? Because I can’t go out in the sun, I don’t eat, I drink blood to survive, and you’d never have a partner who could go through their life with you. Because I can’t age. We can’t grow old together, and we can’t have a family. You deserve better than that.”

Frank sighs. “Even if I didn’t care about any of that? I’m a gay man, we don’t usually get children. I never planned to have a traditional family.”

“Frank.”

“I- I don’t know. I’m sorry.” Frank meets Gerard’s eyes for a second, frowns hopelessly, then looks at the floor. “I wasn’t even thinking that far out.”

“I know. That’s a luxury you get. I don’t.”

“Yeah. Still, though,” Frank says softly, “Isn’t that lonely?”

“Incredibly.”

“So why don’t you deserve to be selfish and be with someone their whole life to give yourself that lifetime of partnership?”

“Who would want to do that?” Gerard sounds as though even the idea is ridiculous.

“Me?”

“You only get one lifetime. I’d have to bury you.”

“In half a fucking century or something, yeah. Fifty years is a long time.”

Gerard looks at him like he’s breaking Gerard’s heart. “Frank. It’s also incredibly short. I- I can’t take your whole life from you.”

“You really already have a year of it.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry for that. It’s not your fault. Just- in the interest of honesty, I’d sort of love to not be chasing the shadow of you the whole rest of my life.”

“What if we date for two years and break up spectacularly?”

“Then we tried and failed, and neither of us have to chase regrets and could-have-beens? I don’t know, what sort of question is that?”

“I- Okay, I don’t know either, that might be the best thing for us.”
“Who knows. We might last a month before I get tired of stubbing my toes in your apartment.”

That shocks a genuine laugh out of Gerard. “Maybe. Who knows.”

Frank smiles back. “Maybe you’ll get a sunburn on your face from a gap in my curtains sleeping over at my place and decide I’m too dangerous for you.”

“Don’t threaten that, that’s very possible. I have a basement apartment for a reason.”

“I did mentally add that to the list of possible evidence for you being a vampire when I realized that.”

Gerard shrugs. “The dead plants were there when I got there, don’t hold that against me.”

Frank laughs, “Alright, I won’t, I have no green thumb either.”

“Good. Thank you.” Gerard pauses and sits back on the desk. “I’m sorry about McCracken.”

Frank waves a hand. “People like him are almost always gonna be like that. I probably won’t deck him for it on school grounds. Life will go on.”

“Good. I kind of enjoy your continued employment here.”

“Thanks. Now get outta here so I can go home.” Frank says it with a smile, and Gerard grins back.

“Who says I wasn’t on my way out?”

“Not fucking me. Give me a second to pack?” Frank shoves his laptop and coffee thermos in his bag and leaves a stack of grading on his desk, then follows Gerard out the door and locks his classroom. They walk out to the parking lot together, squinting in the spring sunshine.

“Want to come over Friday? You can bring a movie, and I can move you to bed if you fall asleep on my couch.”

“Is that a come on or a dinner date?”

Gerard pauses “I think it might be a come on?”

“Then yeah, I can do that.” Frank smirks.

“And not a dinner date?”

Frank rolls his eyes “Yeah, yeah, I’d do for that too. I do, in fact.”

Gerard lets him have it, “Yes, and I am very grateful.”

“Keep buying me dinner.”

“Always.”

“See you tomorrow.”

“You too.”

Gerard smiles all the way to his car, and Frank cancels on Jamia with a suggestive winky face and the explanation —going 2 g’s house get jealous—
She responds with —Use protection, I kno u put out on the 1st date—
—this is the 2nd date don’t slander me—
—Hahahahahahaha—

That puts them back on good ground with each other, and they end up stepping a little closer, casual contact now unanalyzed and expected. Frank still donates blood, now usually after going to happy hour with Jamia and Gerard. They have to abandon patio drinks because Gerard starts getting sunburned as they get into summer nights, and Jamia jokes that they’re all going to end up as pale as Gerard. Gerard defends himself as having not one wrinkle and not being at risk of skin cancer. Jamia called him a 14th century aristocrat, and Frank just laughs at them both. One night in July, Frank slips out of the booth they’ve claimed and heads for the bathroom. Jamia catches Gerard watching him go.

“Still don’t have the balls to ask him out, huh?”

“What?”

“Frank.”

“Well, uh, no. Guess not.”

She presses her lips together. “Damn. You two are a good pair. You make him happy.”

“I do?”

“Mhmm. Even as friends.”

“I’m glad I can be that, at least.”

“Why are you afraid to date him?”

“Because-“ Gerard pauses to word this in a way that doesn’t really reveal his true identity. “Because I have no family and I don’t think I could give him everything he deserves in a life partner? And I get the feeling he’s a serious dater, too. So it wouldn’t be a fling for either of us. And I don’t want to fail.” He toasts Jamia with a small, sad smile. “Because if I break his heart, you’ll kill me.”

Jamia’s mouth opens for a second, then she sighs sadly. “That threat wasn’t serious. I- just don’t let that stop you. But he’s only got his mom, as far as family goes.”

“And you. You’re close like siblings.”

“Yeah, but we aren’t blood. He’s like a goddamn brother and I love him like one, but still.”

“I know, that’s not an argument.” Gerard takes a drink. “I guess I’m scared.”

“Oh. Gerard.” Jamia covers his hand with hers for a second. “I’m sorry.”

Frank comes back to the table and raises an eyebrow. “Gee, is she putting the moves on you?”

Gerard pulls his hand back and laughs. “No, no, she’s not. I promise.”

Frank levels a fake glare at Jamia and sits down again. She just makes a face back. “He’s your type,
not mine.”

“Exactly. You can’t have him.”

Gerard looks at Frank. “Do you even have me?”

“No, but damn, way to call me out for it, it’s not for lack of trying.”

“Guess that’s true.” Gerard smiles and pats his arm. “I’m slippery and hard to trap, your efforts are valiant.”

Frank laughs. “Thank you. Maybe when I discover the secret of immortality I’ll be worth keeping.”

Gerard blinks. Frank delivered it like a joke, but the core statement rings true. Gerard had never even thought about turning Frank, and even the idea sends a cold frisson of fear down his spine. Gerard has no good history with turning, and failing so miserably again would shatter him. He’d barely survived the first time, the failure sending him spiraling into a manic depression. The moment he’d realized he’d failed, looking at the body in his arms and realizing that it hadn’t worked, that he’d failed to cheat death, is still a raw wound in Gerard’s memory, one that promises to never heal. He’ll need to tell Frank. Frank presses when he doesn’t understand why Gerard resists, and with this Frank needs to be told before telling it rips Gerard totally raw.

He pleads exhaustion a few minutes later and takes Frank home quickly, almost sorry to break up the conversation and fun, but not quite. They’re barely inside when Gerard looks at Frank and shakes his head. “I can’t turn you.”

“What? Who said anything about that?”

“You’ve been thinking about it.”

Gerard sounds scared, and Frank sits down on the couch and pats the cushion next to him. “This sounds like the start of a serious conversation. Come sit.” When Gerard has sat down Frank says “I’ve considered it. Not that seriously, not yet, because I hadn’t talked to you about. But it seems like a possibility. One I would be more wiling to undertake if we were pretty seriously together, but, you know, one that is on the table for me. What’s your angle?”

“I can’t. I killed somebody- I killed my brother, my younger brother when I was young-“ Gerard’s voice cracks, and he slips back into Italian without realizing it. “I tried to turn him, and I killed him. He never woke up again. I didn’t- I did the ritual wrong. I- he was everything to me. And I took his whole life from him. I couldn’t, I can’t do that to you. I could kill you. That- that’s enough to stop me from ever trying.”

“Oh. Oh, shit Gee. I never would have mentioned it if I had known, I’m so sorry.”

“Grant. I hope I never see him again.”

“Who turned you?”

“Who turned you?”

“Grant. I hope I never see him again.”

“Oh. Yikes. Nevermind.”

“He’s- he’s bad.”
“You don’t have to talk about it, it’s okay.”

“Thanks.” Gerard shifts his grip on Frank’s shirt. “I’m sorry. You deserve better than me.”

“Hey, now. Don’t say that. You’re, shit, I can’t say fine, but you’re a good person. You’ve been through some shit, but that doesn’t make you like, damaged goods.”

Gerard half-sniffs, half-snorts at himself. “Even if I’ve killed people?”

“Why’d you kill people?”

“To feed.”

“I thought you didn’t have to.”

“Back then, I didn’t know. So I just killed.”

Frank pauses and considers that. “Do you regret it?”

“Yes.”

“Would you kill somebody now?”

“No.”

“Then I guess I can’t blame you for having to eat to live.”

“It’s that easy for you?” Gerard looks at Frank, a little worried by how easily he’s accepting this.

“Maybe. I’m imagining that you stopped killing people like 300 years ago.”

“About that. Maybe more like 280 years. I don’t remember exactly what year it was I left Sicily.”

“Same difference at this point. Yeah, I can not excuse that, maybe, but I can choose not to hold that against you.”

“Thank you.” Gerard pulls out of the hug to look at Frank. “I don’t know what I did to deserve you, honestly.”

“You like all the right comics? And look hot in a waistcoat? And give a shit about our jobs?”

“Guess so. Lucky combination.” Gerard looks at Frank, tilts his head a little and really considers him. Frank gives him a confused smile back, unsure what’s going through Gerard’s head.

Gerard just says, “I’d be very lucky if you could fall in love with me.”

Frank snorts a breath out of his nostrils. “You’d be lucky? You’re already lucky, I’ve been in love with you for months.” He sounds almost sad to admit it, knowing Gerard doesn’t quite reciprocate those feelings.

“Yes. I’m very lucky.” Gerard pulls Frank into a hug, Frank sighing when Gerard doesn’t say anything else. Gerard stares over Frank’s shoulder at the far wall and musters all his courage, hyper-aware of Frank, pressed into the hug, heart thumping steadily and so alive, so fragile and human and mortal, and that by itself nearly steals the resolve from Gerard but he hasn’t let himself have anything in years, and denying Frank is a pain all it’s own, but one that fatally compounds Gerard’s own. He breathes in and blinks hard.
“Would you date me?” Gerard asks.

He pulls back to hold both of Frank’s hands and look him in the eye. “Would you be my partner, and try, and see how long we can work for? And let me love you, and love me even when I make it nearly impossible because of how I am, how inhuman I can be?”

“Gee.. are you actually asking me, or are you asking if you can ask?”

“I’m actually asking.”

“Then yes. Yes, let’s give it the best we’ve got.” Frank twists his hands to hold Gerard’s. “And if you don’t fucking kiss me it’s not gonna last long.”

Gerard slumps, smiling hopelessly at Frank. Frank leans in, feeling like he’s half helium and about to float off the couch, and they meet in the middle for a gentle kiss.

The first kiss ends, and Gerard doesn’t pull back far before Frank’s hands gently cup his jaw and pull him back in for another one, still soft, but full of love and the gentle crest of a wave finally breaking between them. Gerard’s arms lift and wrap around Frank’s waist, pulling him closer until their knees bump between kisses five and six.

They separate, and Frank slings a leg over Gerard’s to get closer. “God, this sounds so fucking desperate, but I’ve wanted this for months.”

“I know, I could see.” Gerard murmurs it into Frank’s lips, and Frank makes half a frantic sound before it’s lost in another kiss, both of them trying to say a thousand tenuous things, a convey a thousand damming feelings to each other. Frank’s hands stall on Gerard’s waistband, fingertips just shy of rucking his shirt up.

“Jai would give me so much shit if I rushed this and put out on the first date.”

“It does seem fast.”

“It feels inevitable, though.”

“You’re just pushy.”

“Oh.”

Gerard firms up his hold when Frank shifts as if to pull back. “I just mean that you made it inevitable.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Oh, god, Frank, you know I’m awful with words sometimes, don’t mean it badly.”

“Yeah. I can forgive you. You did finally ask me out.”

“I did manage that.” Gerard sits back a little, looking at Frank fondly. “What do you want for dinner?”

“Should we celebrate with a real date? Go out somewhere?”

“We can. Where do you want to go?”

“Oh shit, I didn’t get that far. Uh, Curry Mantra? You like Indian, right?”
“Yeah. Indian sounds good. Is it casual?”

“Yeah. It’s between our places,” Frank nods to himself and frees a hand to wave as he says, “down by Roberts, on Main Street.”

“By the Goodwill?”

“Yeah. Strip mall with the Goodwill and the 7-11.”

“Oh, yeah, I know where that is.”

Frank nods. “It’s really good, for how unassuming it is.”

“Okay, I’m taking you out, I’ll drive.”

Frank kisses him again. “Okay. You’re taking me out. On a date.”

“Yes. Yes, I am.”

“Wow.”

Gerard laughs, pulling Frank up. “Sounds about right. I’m still terrified that this is gonna blow up in our faces.”

“Hey, at 20 I was dating an asshole at Rutgers, and I didn’t know if I’d ever have a career or like, live till I was 30 or whatever, and now I’m thirty and dating you, and I don’t have a fucking clue what 40 will bring, except I’m planning on being alive. We can make it up as we go.”

“Fair enough. God, twenty years ago I was living in Vermont and teaching. And I figured I’d be doing the same somewhere else in twenty years.”

“Shit, man, twenty years ago I didn’t even really know what gay meant.”

Gerard frowns. “I don’t like the thought of that.”

“Yeah, that’s weird to think about. Hey, we met as consenting adults, you never met me as a kid, you didn’t like, groom me or anything, I think we can handle the age gap?”

“Hopefully.”

“Okay. Good.”

Gerard takes Frank’s hand and weaves their fingers together. “Ready to go?”

“Sure.”
New Beginnings

Chapter Notes

I've sort of hit a stride on chapter length, so expect a little more consistency on that end!
Otherwise, welcome to domestic fluff town!

Rhode Island is a liberal place, and two men holding hands over dinner in a restaurant doesn’t get them any strange looks. They grin hopelessly at each other over curry and roasted spinach, and take the rest to go, to the amusement of their waiter. They hold hands out the door too. In the car, Gerard looks over at a red light. Frank is looking out the window, small smile fixed on his face.

“Hey?” Frank turns toward Gerard’s voice. “Are you gonna be upset if I still ask to drink a little of your blood tonight and we hold off on sex?”

Frank grins. “No. Of course I’m not gonna be mad. I’m gonna be a little disappointed if you decide to hold out on me till marriage, but tonight is already more than I was ever reasonably hoping for.”

“Okay. I just wanted to make sure. And I don’t think I’ll hold out for marriage, but I do want to take it slow.”

“Okay. I can do slow. We can do slow. Keep doing movie nights and shit, but actually plan to stay the night.”

“Yeah.” The light turns green, and Gerard smiles back, then looks to the road and keeps driving home.

Back inside, Frank ducks into the bathroom to change and comes back out shirtless, plaid pajama pants covering his legs “Okay, not gonna lie, at home, I sleep just in boxers. Is this okay?”

“Oh, yeah, it’s fine. You could have before, honestly.”

Frank shrugs. “Wasn’t sure.” He doesn’t miss the way Gerard looks at him, not just at his face, but at his chest and stomach and arms, looking at his body for the first time. It’s sort of a heady feeling, and not usually a look Frank has directed at him while he’s wearing pants. He smirks. “Ready when you are, then.”

Gerard stands up, following him to the bedroom. “Are you gonna surprise me again, now that we’re dating?”

“Dunno, when’s the first time I surprised you?”

“The first time we hung out at work. Movie night. Where I met Jamia and accidentally stayed the night.”

“Really? How was that surprising?”

“I realized how much you censor yourself and hold back at work. With Jamia, and well, with me as time went on, you’re a lot more open, you say more, and you’re just, I don’t know. More comfortable? I thought you were relaxed talking to me at work, then I saw you at home and realized
that even at work you’d hold yourself back. Am I gonna realize you were holding back on me again?”

Frank considers that. “Damn. You pay a lot of attention to me, I don’t have that deep an analysis of you at all. But maybe? I tend to be pretty cuddly? You’ve seen the way I lay on Jaima.”

“Then I suppose I’ll only be a little bit surprised.”

“Does this mean when I wake up tomorrow we’re gonna be cuddling?”

Gerard considers. “Maybe. I still won’t sleep after I feed, but I can read in bed if you don’t mind the light, then I’d be here when you woke up.”

“I think I’d like that.”

Gerard smiles. “I sat in here sometimes, when you were asleep. I’m pretty sure I’ve drawn your hands at least ten times.”

“You’ll have to show me sometime.”

“I will. Tomorrow?”

“Works for me. Give me a kiss before you bite me?”

“Gladly.” Gerard does, and Frank isn’t tense at all when Gerard bites him, just lets out a breath and sinks into Gerard’s embrace while Gerard gently laps at his neck.

Gerard tucks him into bed as usual, then spends a minute breathing hard, staring at Frank’s body. He’s going to fuck this up, he knows it. It’s just a matter of when. The thought is terrifying, and Gerard doesn’t even want to consider the ways it could go wrong; he could kill Frank, Frank could die, Frank could find a human who could give him everything Gerard can’t, he could come to hate the way Gerard never ages, never changes, he could decide he’s wasting his life on Gerard and leave, Gerard could get hunted and killed and leave Frank behind. The options whirl through Gerard’s head and he ends up crawling into his bed and pressing his forehead into Frank’s upper back, the steady shift of his breathing and heartbeat anchoring Gerard, and letting him slowly calm down.

Gerard just stays where he is even after he’s calmed down. If this is going to end ugly someday, he might as well covet and collect all the precious moments he can while it lasts and memories can be made. The jealous-of-humanity, possessive vampire streak begs him to keep Frank forever, to keep him safe and out of society and Gerard’s only, but he quashes that. That voice isn’t his, and won’t be listened to. If Frank wants to leave, he will be free to. But Gerard can keep his likeness.

It’s a little after one when Gerard gets up for the first time, collecting a sketchbook and a pencil set, and settling back behind Frank and starting to draw his back and shoulder where the sheet isn’t fully covering him. He carefully shades Frank’s hair and the way it curls against the folds of the pillow, getting lost in the details and subtle gradients of shadow and light. He’s still drawing when Frank stirs and shifts, starting to wake up.

“Frank?”

“Mmmmrgh.” Frank rolls over toward his voice, eyes still firmly shut. On impulse, Gerard reaches out and runs his fingertips through the front of Frank’s hair. The sleepy lines on Frank’s forehead smooth out again. Gerard smiles, fingers still tangled gently in Frank’s hair. Gerard doesn’t know him well enough to really tell if he’s asleep or awake, but his heartbeat is slow and calm, and the
small pause between his exhale and inhale reads relaxation in anybody.

Gerard slowly relaxes as well. Maybe, somehow, they’ll get through this. Maybe if they can collect enough of these moments the big things will go away, and they might get a few good years. He slips out of bed to start coffee.

Frank is awake when Gerard comes back with coffee. “G’morning.”

“Good morning. Sleep well?”

“Yeah. Did you just get up?”

“Yeah. You started to wake up and I thought you might want coffee.”

“And you wanted coffee.”

“Maybe a little of that too.”

Frank grins at him and reaches for a mug. “Thanks.”

They drink their coffee leaning against the wall in bed, next to each other, Frank using his work laptop to read the news. He fishes out his phone a while later and sends a text, grinning as he does. The smile only gets wider when the phone beeps and beeps and beeps again a minute later, three texts coming in at once. Gerard looks over.

“I may have just told Jamia.”

“Oh.” Gerard hides a small smile. “What did she say?”

Frank flips up his phone. “Uh, in order: ‘Oh shit!’ ‘fucking finally’ and ‘ur mom is gonna love him’”

He smiles a little wider at the last one.

“She thinks your mom will like me?”

“Yeah. I mean, I think she will too, but we’ll have to see. Would you come visit her with me?”

“Yes. Are you going to go down again this summer? I know you went down for the 4th of July.”

“Wasn’t planning on it. Probably Christmas?”

“Christmas is good. And it gives us a little time to not be brand new when you introduce me to her.”

“I’ve told her about you already.”

“Still, one thing to hear about me as a friend and co-worker, a little different to be introduced as a serious boyfriend. What if she didn’t like me because she thought I was rushing you?”

Frank takes another sip of his coffee. “Don’t think she’d see it that way, but I wasn’t thinking pacing. I dumped a guy for not wanting to meet her, I don’t think she’d read too far into meeting you like, next month or something.”

“You dumped somebody for not wanting to meet her?”

“That and a few other things. Mostly that was where I ended up drawing the line. If he wasn’t gonna be mature and serious enough about me to meet the most important person in my life, he wasn’t gonna be the one.”
Gerard nods. “Makes sense. What about your father?”

“Fuck him. He walked out when he found out I was a fag. Haven’t seen him since mom got full custody in court, and that’s just fine by me.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

Frank shrugs. “’s what it is. He and I were never close when I was a kid, so it wasn’t a huge loss. I’ve still got his last name, though. Mom went back to Miranda, but it was expensive to get my shit all changed, so I said whatever.”

“What’s your mom’s name?”

“Oh, Linda. Linda Vaughan Miranda.”

“That’s pretty. I’m glad I asked, or I probably would have called her Ms. Iero.”

“She’s gonna make you call her Linda anyway.”

Gerard shrugs. “Still, good to know.”

“Yeah.”

Gerard leans over and rests his head on Frank’s shoulder. “I’m still terrified we’re gonna fuck this up, or that I’m gonna hurt you.”

“Same. But we’d never know unless we tried it. And I’m pretty damn happy with trying it.”

“Okay. As long as you’re willing to try.”

“We’ll talk it out before we start hating each other for anything.”

“Okay.”

“Model good relationships for the kids.”

Gerard laughs. “Maybe that too.”

“Yeah. Like I know Trohman wouldn’t fire us for dating, but kid’s parents could flip and pull their kids out and demand to the super we get canned.”

“Mhmm. So we don’t advertise it at work.”

“Yeah. Much as I’d like to be able to stop giving a shit, yeah.”

“The fact that people like us wouldn’t get hanged for something like this is still incredible to me.”

“Shit, yeah. You’ve lived through it all. You ever been married before?”

“Once. She tried to kill me.”

“Oh.”

“Maybe a story for another time?”

“Yeah, that sounds heavy.”
“It wasn’t great.”

“Mm.” It’s Frank’s turn to wrap an arm around Gerard. “Thank God for the 21st century. Maybe we can get married someday. The whole US is starting to push for it.”

“Yeah. That’d be something.”

“Yeah. A gay couple, legally married and legally recognized everywhere in the US.”

“That’s enough of a bombshell, honestly.”

“Yeah. I can’t imagine.”

Gerard nods. “That’s why I said I was maybe bisexual? I’ve been with other men before, but it not something I’m at all used to being safe to even consider, let alone advertise or pursue.”

“That makes sense. I wasn’t gonna push you on what you said your sexuality was or is, either.”

“I know, but it’s relevant.”

Frank nods, setting aside his coffee. “I’m gonna warn you now, I’m gonna go super domestic. Because this is really nice, and I could really get used to it.”

“I could too.”

“Good.” Frank turns his head to kiss Gerard’s hair, and Gerard smiles. That sets the tone for much of the rest of the summer, both of them spending quite a lot of time at each other’s apartments, often working and sometimes debating teaching literature and best practices. Frank quietly thanks God that they don’t teach the same subject, or they’d have a lot more fights and a lot less casual disagreements about methodology.

August rolls up quickly, and teachers troop back into the school building, wilting across the heat rolling off the parking lot. At least they aren’t in the marching band, standing outside and practicing. Gerard gets three sunburns during the first week, each healing quickly, but itching the whole time they do. It makes him grumpy, and Frank ends up letting Gerard bite him the night before they have to be in a ‘Seminar for School Sprit and Student Guidelines!” Its much easier to just carpool the next day, so they walk in together. Their timing is perfect, as Bert McCracken is just walking up.

Frank greets him with a “You going for tenure here too?” and a bold grin.

“They let you back in?”

“They threw me a fucking parade, listen.”

Bert doesn’t think that’s as funny as Frank does. “And you still take your life into your hands with him?” Gerard apparently, isn’t worth naming.

Frank shrugs. “If he rode a motorcycle, I wouldn’t do it. Those things are death traps.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Bert, we’re standing in the goddamn sun, can you please give up the farce that our coworker is a vampire?”

“I will not until I can prove it.”
“Let me know when you submit your research for the Nobel Prize, okay?”

“I don’t need honors, I just need less monsters in the world.”

Gerard snaps “Then go fight children in Iraq.”

“Those aren’t monsters.”

“Half the US seems to believe they are.”

“I don’t.”

“Then why do you believe I am?”

“Because I know your kind, I know what you’re taking from him, and I know how to kill you.”

“Well he’s sure as hell not taking my virginity,” Frank mutters under his breath. Gerard looks at him and Frank remembers again for the fourth time to ask about super vampire senses.

“If you think you’re gonna kill me with a stake, I’m pretty damn sure that’d kill anyone.”

“Not quite as spectacularly as it will you.” Bert sneers.

“I’ll bolt my windows shut, thanks for that.”

In the auditorium, they take the first two empty seats together, squeezing in between the gym teacher, Greg, and one of the four identical English teachers, making sure Bert can’t sit behind them. It works, and he sits on the other side of the auditorium.

Frank visibly relaxes. “If he’s threatening to come at you with a stake, does that count as a deadly weapon? Can we get a restraining order, or is that just crazy?”

“I think it’s just crazy. Still, be careful, he might decide to come after you because we’re friends.”

“Yeah. How was your summer, Greg?” Frank turns to the other side, resolving to leave this conversation for another day. Greg had taken his wife and young son to Rio de Janeiro, and starts telling a hilarious story about misspoken taxi requests and being dropped off outside a strip club in a red light district with their toddler in his wife’s arms. Frank is still trying to get his laughter under control when their principal, Joe Trohman, walks out to the stage.

“Good morning, good morning, welcome to back to school season!” He throws a hand up and waits for slightly sarcastic applause before dropping the bravado and starting the meeting.

“Okay, today, Jane and I are gonna go over the year’s pep rally schedule, even though we don’t have a fucking clue what the rallies are gonna be, because student gov doesn’t know yet, but uh, we’ve got those dates, and I’m gonna read you half the PDF I emailed out about excused class times, and you can ask questions, then we can all leave and you can do what you need to in your rooms, or in department meetings, whatever will best prepare you for student arrival. Which is soon! Eight days! Everybody cheer!” Everybody does manage a cheer for that, because Joe is a fantastic principal, and deep down not one teacher really hates students.

“Okay. Dates. This was also in the email, but write it down if you really want. September 20th, that’s the Thursday afternoon of the fall break early release, September 21st and 24th are reading days, so four day weekend there. Uh, Winter Sports pep rally, February 15th 2013, wow, we’re all getting old, and Spring Sports pep rally is April 26th. Only three this year.” He pauses. “You g rouches can
cheer for that, I won’t tell.” The teachers do, and Joe laughs. He’s right with them. They’re fun for
the kids, but take class time away from his teachers and send the school into a frenzy.

Joe goes through the rest of the schedule quickly, and lets them out. Frank and Gerard slip out before
they have to talk to Bert more, Gerard peeling off before Frank heads on to his classroom. Bert is
still, unfortunately, across the hall from Frank, the one science class overflowing into the arts wing.
Frank closes his door behind him. Can’t be too safe.

Students come back the week after, and Frank and Gerard barely see each other, both too busy trying
to get the year off on the right foot.

The weather decides that Labour Day weekend is fall, now, and turns toward 50’s and fall winds,
fall properly arrived. Frank drives with the windows of his car down, enjoying the weather as much
as he can. He’s heading to Gerard’s apartment now, the first three weeks of school done and his two-
week standing date with Gerard set for tonight. Frank thinks about how he’s been essentially
donating blood fairly regularly for months now, and he hasn’t had a health reaction at all. He’s been
taking iron, yeah, and trying to make sure he’s not skimping on eating, but aside from maybe losing a
pound or two, which is easily chalked up to having more time to cook well for himself over the
summer and not the the lifestyle change, he’s just the same.

His relationship seems just as sustainable. Gerard is hilarious, and it seems like every week he opens
up a little more, parrying back faster to Frank’s quips, and not at all above employing a pretty
devastating set of puppy-dog eyes when he wants Frank to change the channel or stop laughing at a
bad vampire movie. It works a little too well, but Frank has his own dirty tricks, too. Gerard is
particularly weak to contact, so Frank has leaned on him, arms around Gerard to ask him to come to
shows that Jamia won’t go to, to come out and have a drink and have fun. It nearly always works,
and if Gerard flips his fangs down to pout at Frank and try to change his mind? Well, Frank’s still hot
for that too, even if he hasn’t told Gerard that yet.

At the stupid long red light a block from Gerard’s apartment, Frank considers. Is that fetishizing your
partner, if you’re into some part of the way they are? It probably would be, maybe? It probably is,
even though it’s vampirism, and not, say, race. But on the other hand, Frank is pretty biased in that
he’s pretty damn happy about the fact Gerard doesn’t have a vagina. He’s pretty sure he and Gerard
would just be friends if he did. So where is the line? Frank’s pretty sure it’s not the worst thing he
could be into, but he can’t make himself not be into the idea of Gerard’s fangs, and the idea of all of
Gerard’s super vampire senses and strength focused on Frank. The car behind him honks, and Frank
jumps a little, then notices the green light and hits the gas.

That’s the end of that until he gets to Gerard’s, where he’s greeted with a sharp kiss. Frank breaks
away after the second to say “Hey, Gee. Have you been sleeping?” With his arms still around
Gerard.

“No last night. Or the last three. My juniors want to know how much leeway they have, so I’m
looking into all their proposals. Why?” Gerard frowns, then his eyes widen. “Oh, sorry! My fangs
are down.”

“Mhmm. Little sharper than usual, that’s all.” Frank leans in to kiss him again, not really phased that
Gerard’s fangs are down. Gerard flusters back and hides them again in the next kiss as Frank tilts his
face to get Gerard to open his mouth a little. “Gee.”

“I’m sorry, I wasn’t thinking about that.”

“I’m not mad! I’m like, pretty much the opposite of mad.”
Frank sighs and lets go of Gerard. “I thought I was way more obvious about this.”

“I think maybe I was being willfully ignorant. You ask about vampirism a lot.” Gerard sighs. Frank can be incredibly single-minded about things when he gets them into his head, and apparently he’s fixated on vampirism now. Gerard really doesn’t want to have the conversation about why he won’t try to turn Frank again.

Frank slumps a little. “I think it’s interesting. I grew up on horror films, so there’s that. But also, it’s you. It’s kinda, well, it’s pretty hot. I like your fangs. I think it’s hot when your eyes get all bright, except for that one time I woke up and you were leaning over me and staring and scared the shit out of me, but I like you. Of course I’m into you.”

“It’s one thing to be into me as a person and sort of another to have a death wish.”

“I’m not gonna ask you to turn me—so Frank still wants it, but at least he’s respecting Gerard’s reasons not to be the one to do it—-but I’m saying if you kiss me with your fangs down, I’m really gonna wanna get you out of all your clothes fast. That’s not a death wish, that’s thinking it’s hot.”

“That’s a fetish.”

“Okay, yeah. I can admit to that. But I liked you before I knew!”

Gerard shrugs. “I just—look, you know people have tried to kill me for being like this before? I don’t like letting it out. Maybe in a perfect world I could walk around at home like how you want, but what if I slip up outside? Bert would try to kill me outright.”

Frank sighs. “Then forget it.”

“Frank—“

“Gee. It’s not a dealbreaker. I’m not dating you because I have a vampire fetish. I’m dating you, and you happen to be a vampire.”

“Still. Please don’t.”

“Okay. Sorry.”

“It’s not- it’s not that big a deal, but I don’t want to lead you on with this.”

Frank nods. “Well, regardless. Dinner?”

“Mine or yours?”

“Yours? I ate a big lunch.”

“Okay.” Gerard pulls him over and into a kiss. Frank, as always, relaxes into it immediately. Sometimes, Gerard’s traitor brain wonders if Frank is always this easy to distract, if he’ll always be able to end arguments with a kiss and a hand on Frank’s dick. For the last few months, the method has been foolproof, and even if the topic comes back up, Frank has been amenable. Right now, though, Gerard just wants, wants Frank’s blood hot in his throat, but wants Frank’s throat around his dick just as much. One before the other, then, and Gerard can probably have both. If anything, Frank has taught him to be selfish with his wants.

Frank melts into the kiss, wrapping himself close to Gerard. He can put aside any thoughts of being
turned for a while. A while longer if they spend a little time in bed before Gerard’s fangs take Frank out of commission for a few hours. And oh, there’s an idea. Gerard’s fangs hot in his neck or thigh, the rush of feeding compounded on the rush of orgasm. Frank should shelve that one, for a long while, given their last conversation. Maybe something else tonight? One kiss turns into three, and Gerard tugs Frank a step backward.

“Bedroom?” Frank’s eyes gleam as he asks.

Gerard nods, eyes hot on Frank’s as he tugs them backward. Frank pushes his hands under Gerard’s shirt, tugging it out from his waistband and starting on the lower buttons. Frank’s sweater doesn’t make it to the hallway.

They’re both half-naked by the time they actually make it to Gerard’s room, and while they both stop to pull off pants, chucking them in the direction of the hamper, Frank looks over at Gerard, glad they’re past their fumbling first handjobs for each other, and asks “Whaddya want to do?”

Gerard flops backward onto his bed, crooking one knee up in a classic French girl pose. Frank kicks out of the left ankle of his pants and looks Gerard up and down, wetting his lip without thinking about it.

Gerard watches him watch and drawls with false bravado, “Well, I was thinking about your pretty mouth..”

“You want my pretty mouth on your pretty cock, huh?” Frank smirks. He knows he’s good, and unlike some people, he loves giving head.

“I think I do.” Gerard gives himself a casual tug, and Frank licks his lips again, deliberately this time, and drops to his knees to knee-walk over to the edge of the bed.

“Come sit up?” Gerard scoots to the edge of the bed for him, knees framing Frank’s shoulders. Frank looks up at Gerard from under his lashes and Gerard’s mouth drops open with a quiet moan.

“God, you’re beautiful. You’re art, Frankie, really.” He reaches out and tangle his hands in Frank’s hair, tugging gently, and it’s Frank’s turn to moan, letting Gerard tug him down and in.

They’ve done this enough now that Frank has a few tricks he knows drive Gerard wild, and he gently clasps his hands behind his back and looks up through his lashes. The pose is pure show, but Frank hasn’t yet met a man who doesn’t fall for it, and Gerard has been no exception, hips jerking forward with another moan. Frank takes him all in, breathing carefully when Gerard pulls back. Gerard starts slow roll of his hips, settling into a rhythm that isn’t particularly careful of Frank’s need for oxygen, but is getting Gerard off fast. Frank would smirk if he wasn’t a little otherwise occupied. Gerard undone and unreserved is Frank’s favorite.

“Shit, Frankie, gonna-“ Frank knows, could have told Gerard that himself, and just sucks his cheeks in a little more, flicking his tongue up at just the right time and sending Gerard over the edge.

He sits back and wipes his mouth off with the back of his hand and catches his breath when Gerard starts going soft. Gerard leans back on one elbow and runs the fingers of his other hand through Frank’s hair. Frank hums into Gerard’s soft thigh, loathe to move, and they both bask for a few moments.

When Frank shifts a little, Gerard tugs him up.

“Come here?”
Frank obliges, crawling up into Gerard’s lap as they scoot back to the wall. Gerard pulls Frank in for a kiss and slicks his other hand with the lube that now lives on the nightstand. When it’s not shockingly cold, he takes Frank in hand, coaxing his half-hard erection back. It doesn’t take long, and Frank whines a little between his teeth as Gerard firms up his grip. Gerard shakes his head fondly. “You always want more, don’t you?”

Frank just jerks a little as Gerard twists his wrist. “Fucker- you know I do-“

“I do.” Gerard keeps jacking him like that, tight teasing half-strokes that makes Frank keen, then pulls him in with a hand in his hair for a rough, biting kiss. Frank moans outright, and it’s almost enough to get Gerard in the mood for a second round. He does start jacking Frank off properly, Frank’s hands bruisingly tight on Gerard’s shoulders as Gerard nips at his lips and brings him off. Frank slumps into Gerard’s arms when he comes, uncaring that they’re going to be stuck together. Gerard decides that he doesn’t care either, and kisses Frank’s jaw. Frank tilts his head to give Gerard easy access to his neck.

“Right now?”

“I’m about to pass out anyway, to be real honest. Might as well.” Frank moves one shoulder in what is probably a shrug. That’s good enough for Gerard, some of his hesitation bled off in the months that feeding from Frank has become near-routine. So he bites, and Frank goes limp and loose in his arms. Gerard covers them with the blanket and runs his fingers down the knobs of Frank’s spine while he waits for him to stir again.

Frank stays the rest of Saturday as well, just for kicks. Half his movie collection is over at Gerard’s now, and he can grade ‘welcome back’ essays in sweatpants and one of Gerard’s old, ratty t-shirts, advertising a school Gerard says he worked at about 14 years before. Gerard sits next to him, reading a book on teaching art theory, and when Frank needs a break, he leans his head against Gerard’s shoulder and says, “Wanna call my mom? I still haven’t nailed down plans to visit this winter.”

“Sure. Do you want me to stop reading, or are you just letting me know you’re calling?”

“I was gonna put it on speaker.”

“Okay.” Gerard puts his bookmark in place, pulling his legs up under him while Frank dials. Frank leans into Gerard and balances the landline on his knee while it rings.

“Hello, this is Linda?”

“Hey Mom.”

“Oh, Frankie. This isn’t your number, is it? I thought I had you in caller ID.”

“Nah, I’m calling you from Gee’s landline.”

“Oh, that’d do it.” Gerard smiles at her voice. She has a fairly heavy Jersey-Italian accent, vowels all sounding like his native language. Frank sometimes drawls the same way, usually when he’s tired. Gerard fell in love with it immediately.

“How have you been? School is back in session, yes?”

“Yup. Third week. I’m readjusting to not sleeping again, you know.”

“Frankie..”
“Mom. I’m joking. But only a little. But the freshman this year are great, they seem really into Italian.”

“I’m glad. You’re still the only teacher?”

“Mhmm.”

“Can you handle that many students?”

“Yeah? Always have.”

“I know, I know, but I always think that it’s a lot. How is your young man?”

“Sitting next to me. You’re on speaker, by the way.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry! Gerard, isn’t it?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Gerard looks over at Frank, who nudges him encouragingly, then buts back in.

“Not to be a freshman about it, but it’s been four months now, can I bring him home over break?”

“Winter break, you mean?”

“Yeah.”

“Of course. I’d love to meet him. Do you still have that fall break?”

“Yeah. Just two extra days, though, so probably won’t go anywhere. Gee and I might find something nearby to do, I don’t know yet.”

“Then I’ll expect you near Christmas. Gerard, would you like to stay through Christmas? Frankie usually does, but he’s my son, so I can guilt him a little more.”

“I’d be honored to be invited. My parents are buried back home, so I have no plans. I suppose I thought I might celebrate with Frank and Jamia?”

“She goes out to her sister’s in LA, and her parents meet them.”

As Gerard nods, Linda asks, “How is that wild girl faring these days? I miss her mother, wonderful woman.”

“She’s just as wild. She gave Gee and I so much shit, you would not believe.”

“You’re over 30, I think any shit is warranted.”

Gerard can’t help but laugh at that. Frank is so clearly his mother’s son, and their love is clear in her gentle ribbing. Frank still goes, “Mom!” and rolls his eyes at Gerard.

“Well, honey, excuse me for saying it with your boyfriend of only four months on the line, but I’d like to see you married while I can still walk down the aisle and not be pushed in a chair.”

“You’re spry, I’ve got time!”

“You’ll be old, then. Marrying a divorcee.”

“Maybe.”
“I raised you better than that.”

“Oh my god, wait till you meet Gee. You’ll like him. You’ll approve, too, because I have a trump card to make you love him.”

“Oh do you?” She sounds skeptical. Gerard looks over at Frank, suddenly very worried he’s about to blurt out that Gerard is a vampire. Gerard can’t see Ms. Miranda loving that. Frank just looks smug.

“He’s a native Italian. So he speaks Italian. And his family is from Sicily, same as ours.” It’s all true, and sort of a neat sidestep of the fact that Gerard is the only one who ever left Sicily, and he did that three centuries ago and hasn’t returned.

“Oh?” Linda does sound approving. She switches languages with a breath and addresses Gerard. “You are, are you?”

Gerard switches too. “I am. Frank tries to get me to speak it with him all the time, I was very out of practice.”

“You sound like a native speaker still, though. My daddy was, and he taught me. I taught Frankie.”

“You taught him very well.”

Frank beams at Gerard, adding “I did formally study it when I realized I could teach it,” also in Italian.

Gerard shrugs. “They never teach accent well, formally. It took me years to manage my accent so people didn’t talk down to me.”

She scoffs, “They don’t matter. They speak one less language than you.”

“I try to keep that in mind. Thank you.”

“Of course.” Ms. Miranda sounds proud, and Gerard smiles at the phone.

He’s getting the picture of a very fierce, very proud Jersey-Italian woman, and he knows he’ll be very critically judged when they meet face to face, but he seems to have passed the preliminary round. Gerard looks at Frank to be sure. Frank beams at him and mouths, “she likes you already,” so he has passed.

Frank and his mom chat more, never really switching back to English. Gerard zones out, not wanting to eavesdrop as they catch up. Instead, he idly watches Frank’s hands move as he talks. Frank tends to spool out the invisible threads of whatever story he’s telling with his hands as he talks anyway, but in Italian, the gestures are larger, more deliberate. It’s so stereotypical Gerard nearly laughs out loud, falling a little more in love with Frank as he notes the quirk.

Frank gets off the phone with her after nailing down dates to visit her, and scoops the phone off his knee to turn and kiss Gerard’s cheek before dropping his head to Gerard’s shoulder.

Gerard hums. “I think I like your mom.”

“Yeah? You’ll love her when you meet her. And she likes you. Always asking about you when I call.”

Gerard smiles.

Frank looks up a little at the side of his head. “I’m glad you want to meet her, too. That means a lot
Gerard turns to look at him. “Of course. She means a lot to you. I’m honored you want her to meet me.”

Frank headbutts him gently. “It’s a test. If she doesn’t like you you’re out.”

“Are you going to tell her about me being a vampire? That will probably change any sort of goodwill she has toward me.”

Frank considers. “Maybe? Maybe at the end of the trip? Or, operating on the assumption we don’t break up anytime soon, we tell her next summer? So she’s met you at least a couple times in person to actually know you, and so we’ve been together for a while? Or do you want to try to not tell her?”

“I think I don’t want to tell her now. Assuming this lasts any more than two years, she might notice I don’t age. I move at least every 5 years or people notice. But next year might be okay? Can we decide that later?”

“Yeah. Plan on not telling her this Christmas, and pencil in telling her sometime?”

“That works.”

Frank nods. “Alright. God, I’m sort of glad Jamia doesn’t hang out with you enough to start asking, she can be brutal when she’s after something.”

“The less people who know, the better.”

“You’d know better than me.”

Gerard hums a yes, and flips on the TV. They stay like that on the couch for a while, both content to not work for a while.

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Every school year starts in a manic burst of energy and endless to-do lists, and by the end of the first month everything is normal again, people falling back into routine. This year is no different than last, except for two things, both perhaps equally significant.

The first is that Frank is not single. He and Gerard make an effort to not broadcast their relationship as anything other than friendship at work, but it still means that Frank can go hang out in the art room during lunch, or that Gerard will occupy a back desk in Frank’s room and draw while Frank stays after to make up work with students. Outside of work, of course, is real dating. They both still have their own apartments, but they’re often both in one or the other, closets sort of starting to meld. One day, Frank wears one of Gerard’s ties to school, and doesn’t even realize until Gerard looks at him and asks, “Did you get that from me? I think I remember buying that tie.”

Frank just shrugs at him. Who knows, at this point. They’re close enough in size that jackets and sweaters can be shared without any second looks, but they’re off sizes in shirts and pants, Gerard a little narrower and taller. In a pinch, they’ll fit, but they always make sure they’re wearing their own clothes to work, where the difference would be noticeable.

The second is that despite all this, or because of their disregard of who owed a jacket first, Bert McCracken knows they’re dating. He still has the room across the hall from Frank, and has started to be so outright derogatory to Frank and Gerard in the staffroom they’ve both started completely avoiding him. Bert still manages to corner Frank one Thursday.
"Iero."

Frank nearly just says ‘McCracken.’ back, but this isn’t Harry Potter, and at the end of the day, they’re actually both adults. “What’s up, Bert?”

“You’re dating Way.”

“I’d like to keep my private affairs out of my workplace, thanks.”

“But you are.”

Frank just levels him a look. He’s not gonna deny it, that’s stupid, but who knows who else is in earshot. Bert’s eyes narrow.

“Are you scared to say you’re not? Is that his work?”

“No!” Frank takes a step closer and drops his voice. “You may not understand people’s reasons for staying in the closet, but I have mine, and I’d like you to respect them at my workplace, where the parents of my students could make my life hell if they so chose.”

Bert shrugs. “Trohman loves you, he’d never fire you.”

“Good to know, but at the end of the day not a ton of leverage. Did you have something to say about Gerard? That you couldn’t just take up with him? You’re coworkers too.”

“He’d only see it as threats. You’re still human. I worry he’d kill you.”

“I don’t. He’s not a murderer.”

Bert shrugs one shoulder. “By who’s moral standard?”

“By law?”

“There are other ways to hurt people.”

“Look, unless you dated him and he’s secretly abusive, and I’m still in the honeymoon period or some shit, and you’d like to warn me off, I’d love to hear it. If it’s about your crackpot theory about him not being human, you can fuck right off. We’re both fucking tired of you being an ass about it.”

Bert blinks at Frank and sneers. “Fine. If you’d like to throw your lot in with him, so be it.”

Frank just sighs. “Just leave us both alone, please?”

Bert turns, seeming to be willing to do just that. For a while, he’s perfectly professional, if cold. It’s not bad, and Bert has a reputation for being a little standoffish anyway, so Frank and Gerard consider that a win and start looking at day trips they can go on during fall break. Frank is heavily favoring a ghost hike near a brewery a few hours drive away, and Gerard is both appalled at the concept and impressed enough to be interested. He has no doubt that by next Thursday Frank will have convinced him and be calling for tickets after the pep rally.

Unless the weather stays this awful. It’s one of those cold snap days fall sometimes plays with, temperature in the low 40’s, but it’s worse because this front brings with it driving sleet. Everyone’s mood is low, and Frank is sending SOS texts from his class, his classroom freezing for some reason. Gerard comes by during lunch, and Frank, still wearing his jacket and huddled at his desk, grumbles “Guess who apparently has their fucking windows open?” Gerard doesn’t need to guess at that.
Frank continues, clearly grumpy. “Amanda just came over from Bio, nearly fucking blue with cold, and told me my room is freezing because Bert has his windows fucking open. She could see her breath for a while, she said. That’s fucking unacceptable. Some kids are gonna get sick! Hell, I’m gonna fucking get sick!”

Gerard takes pity on him. Frank got a two day bug in the summer, and he’d sounded bad enough then Gerard had nearly taken him to the ER, convinced he was about to cough up a lung with his wet hacks.

“I’ll pop over and ask him to close his windows, okay? Stay warm. As warm as you can?”

“I’m gonna go make tea.” Frank shoulders his way out, arms crossed and scowling at the hallway. Gerard sighs at his back and gently pushes Bert’s door open, calling “Bert?”

“Here.” Bert steps away from the fume hood and looks over. “Oh. Gerard. What brings you down to this side of the hall?”

“The cold from your open windows finally drifted down to my room. You’re gonna get a kid sick, come on.”

“I let them go get jackets.” Bert isn’t wearing one, apparently immune to the chill that’s making Gerard’s breath puff as he talks.

“Still. Frank’s sending me SOS texts, why do you need them open? Was there a chemical spill?”

“No. We’re talking about breathing rates in mammals.”

“..And?” Gerard doesn’t follow.

Bert doesn’t answer immediately, just tilting his head and looking at Gerard. Gerard tries to look like he’s politely interested. Bert wanders to the front of his room and taps his computer, bringing up his last slide. It’s a chart of body mass, to lung volume, to average breaths per minute at rest. Gerard still doesn’t get it, and looks askance at Bert. Bert sighs, pointing to humans at the bottom of the chart.

“12 to 20 breaths per minute, Gerard. In this temperature, counting is easy, because you can see.” Bert smiles nastily. “And you took 8. And I think you only took 8 because you said things, because when I made you wait, you didn’t bother taking a single breath. Living things can’t do that. That isn’t a living instinct.”

“Humans can control rate of breath.”

“And I distracted you from doing that.” Bert throws a marble at Gerard, which he catches mostly out of surprise, then jerking a little again when it itches in his palm. Silver, then, and likely to leave a visible burn if he keeps palming it. Bert is out to trap him. Now on high alert, Gerard shifts the silver ball to his fingertips, passing it around under the guise of looking at it.

“I can multitask. What’s this?”

“Silver.” Bert stalks back over and takes it out of Gerard’s hand, then grabs his wrist and puts the marble back in his palm. Gerard jerks his wrist back, employing a little of his supernatural strength to break Bert’s grip. He drops the marble back into Bert’s hands.

“Bert. Stop. I don’t know what you want out of this, but this is out of hand. Just close your damn windows and I’ll leave you alone.”
“I’m not worried about me.”

“Are you worried about the kids?”

“No. Too obvious a target. I’m protecting Iero.”

“He doesn’t need protection.”

“Oh? Okay.”

“That’s it? You just needed me to say that?”

“Just confirmation of where he’s thrown his lot and life.”

Gerard steps back. “Neither of us are really into the way you’re accusing me of hurting him. And it’s false, I would never.”

“You say that now, but some day you will. And luckily for him, I know how to kill you, and I’ll help him when he needs to put you down.”

Gerard wants to deck him, and Gerard very rarely wants that, so he just spins on his heel and flees, Bert slamming windows shut behind him.
Frank and Gerard make a pact that night to avoid Bert in any non-professional capacity, Gerard more shaken than he lets on about his encounter with Bert. He decides not to mention the whole thing with the silver and the second half of the conversation. He hadn’t even realized he wasn’t breathing when he wasn’t talking. He doesn’t know when he lost the habit.

Gerard doesn’t need to breathe, really. His heart doesn’t beat, his lungs don’t process oxygen. He’s still got some blood, but what moves it through his body is some supernatural force Gerard doesn’t know enough about to question. He doesn’t need air to live, could swim forever, or walk the bottom of the ocean, if the pressure wouldn’t break his body, but to speak, he still needs to run air over his vocal cords. So he needs to inhale to actually make sound. But he can’t place when he stopped bothering to fake respiration the rest of the time. That bothers him as well, but until he can place when he stopped, he’ll keep that to himself. It’s worrying, that’s all.

Frank sighs and wraps an arm around Gerard. “I just wanted us to be normal, you know?”

“I don’t know if we can be normal.”

“We can be pretty normal. We go on super normal dates, we accidentally trade clothes, we bitch about work to each other and have great sex. All that is normal.”

“I’m not human and will never age.”

“That shouldn’t hinder us this much! We’ve been together less than a year, I’m sorry! I know you think I should be considering it, and I promise that I have, but the complications from that won’t really arise for years, and I’m willing to deal with them when they do because I don’t know where we’ll stand then. I dealt with you drinking my blood when it came up, and we’re fine.”

“That’s a luxury you have that I don’t.”

“Maybe so.” Frank sighs. Gerard frowns and Frank opens his mouth again. “Look, it’s bullshit either way. But we should be able to both go to work without being fucking harassed.”

“He thinks he’s going to help you kill me.”

“In his fucking dreams. I like you as alive as you are, thanks.”

“He thinks he’ll have to. That I’ll hurt you.”

“Are you planning on it? You don’t act like an abuser about to drop the other shoe on me, and I would be kicking you to the curb in an instant if you did, so I don’t think we’d get there.”

“Of course I’m not. But that’s how he thinks.”

“And you’re worried it’ll somehow be true?”

“Yes!”

“Gee, can I worry about that and not you?”
“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’d be hurting you!”

“And you’re not planning on hurting me, and you’re very much trying to not hurt me, so I don’t know where you think you’re gonna go off the rails on me.”

“I don’t know either but that’s what I lay awake thinking about when you’re passed out next to me from my venom!”

“Oh, Gee, shit.” Frank sits up to look at Gerard. “I’m sorry. If you’re that worried about the blood loss, I can be okay with you going elsewhere for food, as long as you don’t kill anybody.”

“I’m less worried about you physically, but I’m-“ Gerard pauses. “Wanting you like that… isn’t like the way I love you as a partner, it’s covetous. Possessive.”

“So you’d piss in a circle around me to stop other vampires touching your bloody supply. I get that. That seems pretty reasonable. I’d piss in a circle around you at a gay bar to keep other dudes off you.”

“That’s not the same thing.”

“It’s the closest metaphor I have.”

“Frank, I don’t know how to make you understand I’m dangerous! You can act like this is nothing, act like I’m pretty much just another human, but I’m not! I will never be again! I lost that in 1692! I could very well kill you, I have killed people, and I have hurt people!”

Frank pulls back, turning to face Gerard on the couch. “So you want me to dump you because you’re about to break at any second and rip my throat out? Because from what I’ve fucking gotten to know of you, that doesn’t seem likely.”

Gerard slumps a little. “I’d rather you didn’t, but I want you to be aware.”

“I am. Trust me, I can’t forget you’re inhuman when you’re still as death when we cuddle. I know, like, consciously that you’re immortal, but I don’t always think about that because it doesn’t impact us day to day.”

“Alright. Fine.”

Frank relaxes as well. “I don’t want to fight about this. And especially not over Bert.”

“Okay.” Gerard scoots closer and holds his arms out. “I’ll try to worry about it less.”

“Let me know of anything comes up, like when you told me about your brother, but otherwise, I think we can be okay.” Frank scoots back and hugs Gerard, exhaling on a long sigh and holding Gerard close.

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Next Thursday afternoon, Frank is more than ready for the fall break, tired and itching for a long weekend almost as badly as his seniors are. He sends them off to the pep rally unsupervised,
knowing full well half of them are just going to leave school early. Frank wishes he could do the same. But he’s obligated to be here until the last bell, even though the pep rally will end the day. So he might as well get sort of prepped for Monday. That means he needs the laptop cart. It’s in Bert’s room, according to the Google Sheets.

Frank swears to himself. He hasn’t said as much as hello to Bert for the last week and a half. It’s been nice, even, to not have to deal with him. At least this should be fast. Cross the hall and grab the cart, say minimal words.

Frank lets his door close gently behind him, room key attached to his badge. Bert’s door is closed, but the light is on, so Frank knocks. Bert opens it a sliver and looks somehow unsurprised to see him. “Laptops, I presume?”

“Yes, please.”

“Come get them.” Bert opens the door and jerks his head back toward the lab stations at the back of the room. Frank slides past and heads to the back, wishing he wasn’t hyper-aware of Bert behind him. Frank leans down to unplug the cart as Bert comes up behind him. Frank stands to find his nose and mouth covered with a foul, sickly sweet smelling rag. His vision swims and tunnels out, and Frank’s thrashing fight bleeds out of him just as quickly.

Gerard goes to see Frank halfway through the pep rally, sneaking out past one of the less kind administrative assistants with the excuse of ‘bathroom’. Frank should be in his room, and Gerard is getting a headache from the screaming. Frank’s room is unlocked, but the lights have flipped themselves off, room empty for too long. That’s strange, and Gerard pauses when he walks in. Something feels wrong. He hasn’t lived this long on bad instincts, so he opens his ears and listens with all his superhuman senses. There’s no one else in the room. No one human, at least.

Frank’s bag is still at his desk, laptop open and asleep. His phone and car keys are in the top drawer. Whenever Frank left, he didn’t plan to be gone long, or gone at all. That is almost more worrying. It’s a completely unhelpful urge, but he checks his own cell phone to see if Frank has texted him. He hasn’t, but he has a new email, from his work account. Gerard opens the app, even more surprised to see it’s from Bert McCracken.

All it says is “upper field, football equipment shed.” It doesn’t need any more text to say “Come quickly, I have Frank.” Gerard knows. Gerard swears to himself, pockets Frank’s phone and keys, loathe to make them sneak back into the school if they have to flee. He takes Frank’s workbag too, packing it and locking Frank’s room as he heads back to his own, which he locks up for the break as well. Armed with only his and Frank’s phones and keys, he jogs across the upper fields, trying to outrun the sunburn he can feel forming.

The shed door is closed, and Gerard pulls it open and slips inside quickly, closing it again. Bert is sitting on a box, and with a flourish, pulls a rag away from Frank’s face when Gerard steps in. Frank twitches a little. Gerard’s fear crystalizes into anger.

“What did you do to him?”

“Knocked him out. It’s chloroform, he’ll be awake in a minute or two.” Bert twirls his phone. “I sent you that email about 15 minutes ago. I’m a little surprised you’re so bait-able.”

“Did you really think I wouldn’t come after him?”

“No, not really. That’s why I took him. Has he ever seen you all wigged out?”
“What do you mean?”

Bert pulls out a knife, lifting Frank’s arm and pushing his sleeve up. Gerard twitches. “What the fuck are you doing?”

Bert just smirks and makes a short, deep cut in Frank’s arm. Blood wells up and drips down his arm. Gerard can’t help his eyes flaring bright. Bert’s smirk gets wider.

The pain gets through Frank’s foggy pain sensors, and he moans quietly, pulling his arm in to put pressure on it. “Wha-?”

“Frankie?”

Frank blinks. “Gee?” He turns his head a little and sees Bert. “Fucking christ.” He lets his head fall right back against the wall. “Did he cut me?”

“Yes.”

“Look at your boyfriend, Frank.”

“M looking.”

“What is he?”

“Same as always.”

“His eyes are glowing.”

“Yeah. You like, filleted my arm.”

Gerard takes a step forward. Bert pulls a stake out of the back of his pants. The tip is cased with some bright metal Gerard really hopes isn’t silver. Gerard stops. Frank’s eyes go wide. “Bert, no.”

“I’m doing you a favor, Iero.”

“Gee, run!”

Gerard shakes his head. “I’m not leaving you here.”

“Please?”

“No. I’ve outlived worse than him.”

Bert just smiles and whips the stake through the air. It hits Gerard in the torso, just below the ribcage, and the sharpened point stabs right into him. Gerard staggers, and Frank yells, fighting his way upright. Bert shoves him back down and approaches Gerard. Frank hits the back wall and slides down it, bumping into a pile of spare bricks from the foundation of the shed. He grabs one and tries to get back on his feet. Gerard is grappling with Bert, trying to stop him from shoving the stake up higher to his heart.

Gerard is losing that fight. The shock of being staked is shutting his body down very quickly. Bert snarls at him. “This is what your kind deserves. Every single fucking one of you.” Gerard coughs and whimpers. “Bert, don’t- don’t- not to Frank.”

“I saved him. You didn’t turn him. He can still live.”
“Fuck you.” Frank shoves himself off the wall, brick in hand, wheeling back to strike Bert on the back of the head. Bert turns halfway, but that only means Frank clocks him halfway across the face. Bert drops like a sack of bricks, and Gerard goes down with him, hitting his knees heavily. Frank grabs his shoulders, half-embracing Gerard over Bert’s body.

“Gee-Gee? Gee? Are you okay? Are you gonna heal? Can I pull the stake out?”

Gerard whimpers. “Frank, Frankie, I’m gonna die.”

“No the fuck you’re not. Don’t say that.”

“I am. I am. It hurts, Frankie.” Gerard tucks his face into Frank’s neck.

Frank reaches down and gently takes the stake, trying to gently pull it out. Gerard groans weakly.

“Gee, bite me. As soon as I get this stake out. You told me about the super-healing, you can do it.”

“No, no, I’d kill you.”

“You don’t have to kill me. Just take like, half of mine, and go hunt. Just enough to close the hole.”

“I don’t know if I can.”

“Well, you better fucking try, because I’m not fucking watching you die in my fucking arms.” Frank chokes up. “I’m taking you home to meet my goddamn mom, I wanna fucking marry you. Grit your goddamn teeth, I’m pulling this out.”

“Frankie-“ Gerard is about to pull back, but is almost too weak to move, now.

“You fucking heard me.” Frank gets a grip and tries to draw the stake out gently.

Gerard keens into Frank’s neck. Frank gets it clear and presses a hand against the wound. “Bite me, Gee.”

Gerard is too weak to say no. Frank’s been saturating the air with the rich smell of his blood for too long, Gerard’s face has been buried in his neck right next to Frank’s pulse for too long. Gerard bites.

Frank expects it, and makes sure he doesn’t fall onto Gerard. Gerard drinks until Frank’s pulse is weak, then tears himself back, tears on his cheeks. He’s taken too much. Either he needs to get Frank a blood transfusion and soon, or he needs to turn him. Gerard sobs, holding Frank close.

Bert twitches between their knees, and Gerard starts. He’s still weak, but adrenaline is a hell of an endorphin, and he scoops up Frank and turns to flee. They’ve been up in the shed for a scant 5 minutes, the pep rally will keep everyone else busy, and Gerard is parked on this side of the school.

It’s a hellish trip, but Gerard gets Frank into his car and peels out of the school. The panic of the decision is setting in. Does he take Frank to the hospital, himself half-covered in blood, with a tear in his shirt from a stake? Or does he hope to god he doesn’t kill Frank and save them both the fastest? Gerard has never trusted himself with that decision.

Frank stirs in the passenger seat as Gerard parks horribly. Gerard feels bad instantly, apparently too caught up in drinking from Frank to actually put enough venom in the bite. “Frankie?”

“Gee? You alive over there?”

“Well, no.”
“Okay. Sorry, I feel like shit.”

“I’m sorry, you don’t need to apologize. I took too much blood, Frankie, I’m sorry.”

“Too much?”

“Too much. Do you want me to take you to a hospital?”

“Am I gonna die?”

“Maybe? Probably.”

“Shit.” Frank blinks. “I don’t wanna die, Gee.”

“I know, I know, I’m so sorry.” Gerard is crying, now, tears streaming down his face.

“Where are we?”

“My apartment.”

“Are you gonna take me inside?”

“Is that what you want?”

“I think so. I don’t know, Gee. Everything is fuzzy.”

“I’m sorry.” Gerard sobs, slipping out of the car and going around to help Frank out. Frank clings weakly and stumbles down the stairs with Gerard.

“Gee. I don’t wanna die.”

“I know.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Why are you sorry?”

“I made you kill me so I didn’t have to watch you die.”

“I-..” Gerard pauses. “Frankie?”

Frank makes a vague sound.

“Do you trust me?”

“Of course?”

“Do you trust me to try to bring you back?”

“Like your brother?”

“If I can.”

“Will it hurt?”

“No, Frankie. Just like any other bite.”
Frank nods weakly. “I love you.”

“I love you too. And I don’t wanna lose you.” Gerard lays Frank down. “If this doesn’t work, will you forgive me?” It’s the stupidest question, but Gerard still needs to know.

“I won’t know, will I?” Frank manages a smile and reaches over to cup Gerard’s cheek. “I’m only a little sorry, too.”

Gerard manages a watery laugh and leans forward, tipping Frank’s jaw up. It’s a pathetically short time for him to swallow the last of the blood tripping weakly through Frank’s veins. As soon as he pulls back, Gerard knows he’s on a timeline and stands up, refusing to look at Frank’s dead face.

He has no backup plan if this doesn’t work.

It’s quick to grab a knife from the kitchen and slice his own arm open, blood slowly dripping down. Getting Frank to swallow it is a little harder, Gerard gently coaxing, scared to even speak because he needs to say the prayer correctly—can’t mess it up again—can’t lose another person dear to him like this. Frank finally swallows, last breath of life used up there, and Gerard clears his throat and starts to speak. It takes him nearly ten minutes to get through the right words. Frank doesn’t move.

Gerard nearly collapses, then remembers something his one vampire friend told him once. ‘Turn someone, then pray the rosary over them. They’ll wake again when you finish—if it worked.’

He has to scramble to find his rosary, but at least he still has one. Gerard kneels by the bed, any other pose feeling wrong, and spares one glance at Frank’s body before he starts to pray, voice breaking into a whisper. His hands shake even when he’s more than halfway through.

He has to fight not to rush the second half, fear starting to set in as he gets closer to the moment of truth. He wishes he had a clock in his room, but immediately is glad he doesn’t, anyway. If it had become too late he would be in a bigger panic. He says the last prayer and pauses, fingertips white on the beads.

Frank gasps.

Gerard slumps forward and reaches for his hand, tears running down his cheeks again.

“Frank? Frankie?”

Frank manages to make a vague sound of pain.

Gerard scrambles up.

“Hey, hey! It worked! You’re alive?”

Frank just hacks at him, trying to sit up.

“Wait, wait, Frankie, slowly.” If Gerard’s heart still raced, it would be going fast enough to trip out of his chest. He puts a hand behind Frank’s back and helps him sit up. “Let me get you water. Sit still.”

Frank nods weakly, blinking at Gerard. He croaks “Did you turn me?”

“I did.”

“You didn’t kill me. Hey, Gee, I’m still alive.”
Gerard can’t help but smile. “No, you’re technically not. But yeah, I didn’t kill you.”

“Yeah.” Frank tries to take a big breath in and coughs.

“Water. I’m going. Wait a second.” Gerard hurries out of the room to Frank’s nod.

Frank does, sitting there and thinking that he really feels the same. Did anything change? He doesn’t feel dead, he doesn’t feel different. When Gerard comes back in Frank realizes that yes, he does feel something. He feels hungover. The water gets chugged, and Frank tries moving. It aches, but his limbs go where he wants them. Frank gets up slowly and finally stands up.

“I feel super hungover.”

“I’m sorry-” Gerard is hovering, looking incredibly worried. “It does hurt, getting turned. I- I should have told you.”

“I was kinda busy dying.”

“Still.”

Frank shrugs, looking around the room. “It’s brighter in here. Or maybe I just do feel super hungover.”

“It looks brighter to you. But the light on probably isn’t helping.” Gerard flips the light off and Frank gasps.

“Holy shit. This is what you can see?” The whole room is dark, that much is clear, but Frank can see the baseboards clearly, can tell the shade of the blue shirt that is half-in the hamper, can read the subtitles on the comic book on the nightstand.

“Yeah. You too now.” The gravity of the whole thing hits Gerard, and he slumps a little. “I’m so sorry, Frank.”

“Why?”

“I killed you.”

Frank flaps a hand. “That is a problem for later.”

“Frank.”

“Gee. At least tomorrow, please?”


Frank actually looks grateful, looking at Gerard in the dark with his eyes faintly glowing. Gerard stares for a second, caught up by the richness of the faint amber glow and how it somehow highlights and sharpens Frank’s cheekbones to make him otherworldly beautiful. He has to shake himself to remember why Frank looking like that is a bad thing.

“Frankie, you’ve gotta dull your eyes.”

“What?”

Gerard lets his brighten and gestures at his face. “You’re like this. Gotta be like this.” he lets them dull again.
They’re all bright right now? I can’t even tell, shit.” Frank’s arm drifts up like he’s going to feel his eyeball for the difference. “How do I do that?”

That gives Gerard pause. He’d taught himself sobbing in front of a church window in the early hours of the morning, desperate to look human again. He has no idea how to teach this.

Gerard starts slowly. “You can sort of feel a difference? Bright feels sharper, like you’re looking more intently. So... soften your gaze?”

Frank nods, a line of concentration etched on his forehead, and blinks slowly, relaxing his whole face and shoulders as well as unfocusing his eyes. It’s probably more than he needs to do, but it works. His eyes go back to their human dullness.

“Okay, look at me?” When Frank’s eyes don’t go bright again when he looks over, Gerard considers it a win. “How do you feel now?”

“Sort of weird? I feel...” Frank pauses, looking for the words, “hollow? Like I haven’t eaten all day. Or like there’s less in me.”

“None of that sounds abnormal, I think you’re gonna be okay.”

“Cool. Thank God, right?”

Gerard nods fervently.

Frank reaches out and takes his hand, then heads down the hall to the living room, sitting down on the couch.

“This is weird. I feel the same but still all different. What day is it?”

Gerard sits down next to him. “It’s just after 2:30, same day.”

“God, the pep rally is just ending.” Frank suddenly shoots up. “Fuck!”

“What?”

“We left McCracken knocked out on the floor! My classroom is unlocked!”

“I locked your classroom, but shit, we did leave McCracken.”

Frank looks at him a little wildly, brain whirring. “Okay, go put on a not-bloody shirt we gotta sneak back to work. He’s gotta get arrested for this shit.”

“Your arm is healed.”

“He still fucking chloroformed me!”

“He’s gonna be able to testify.”

“He’s gonna sound like a raging lunatic.”

“I don’t know then, but we can’t just leave him there!”

Gerard gets up, putting his hands out to calm Frank. “Okay, okay, I’m changing right now. We have time to get back before three.”
Frank nods, looking a little panicked. “Shit. Shitshitshitshit, this is gonna be so fucked!”

Gerard comes back in a clean shirt. “Okay, we can do this. Ready?”

Frank nods, and they head for the car. Gerard can drive fucking fast when he wants to, and they pull up to the back teachers lot with a spare 15 minutes before everyone will be out of the pep rally. Gerard runs across the field for the shed, Frank breaking into a run behind him as well, squinting into the sun.

Bert is still there, just starting to stir. Gerard grabs the stake and pushes it out of reach. “McCracken.”

Bert groans and looks up. “ Didn’t I kill you?”

“You tried. What are you going to tell the cops you did when we call them?”

“I’m going to tell them you’ll kill your boyfriend, who I kidnapped.”

Frank steps forward. “I’m right fucking here, and I’m pretty damn alive.”


Frank looks at Gerard. “They’re gonna have to put him in a psych ward.”

“Probably. How’s your memory, Bert?”

“I staked you.”

“No, you didn’t. You tried.”

“You’re dead.”

“No, I’m not.” Gerard stands up. “Frank, I’ll stand guard here outside the shed, make sure he doesn’t make a break for it. You run and get Joe or the security officer. Tell them he drugged you, tried to stab me, and that you clocked him with a brick.”

Frank nods, staring at Gerard. “Are you gonna be okay?”

“Yeah. I’m gonna be outside, okay. Go.”

They shut Bert in the shed behind them, and Gerard flips the latch down. Bert thuds against the door behind them. “Frank, go.”

Frank gives the shed one last look and takes off down towards the main building.

Gerard is pretty sure Bert is trying to stake him through the door, based on the scraping thuds and the way the door shakes. Gerard stands off to the side and hopes that Bert doesn’t get through the door before Frank gets back. That could get ugly.

Frank ends up coming back with both school officers and the Joe, all jogging back at a good clip. None of them really want to be the ones telling Frank to slow down.

Halfway there, Frank blurs to Joe, “We’ve been dating. Gerard and I. We figured we’d keep it as out of school as we could- in case parents got mad- but Bert saw us leave together and he knew.”

Joe nods, hair bouncing a little. “Okay. That’s okay, you know I won’t hold that against you, but it does sort of explain his motive.”
“Yeah. Yeah, I guess. He said some really fucked up stuff.”

They come into view of the shed, where Gerard is standing a good four feet back from the doors, watching them with concern. The security officers come up to flank him, and get to watch the gleaming tip of the stake finally fully punch through the plywood. Joe looks at Gerard in alarm, and both officers pull their guns. “Mr. McCracken, this is the police, stand down! Back away from the doors!”

There’s a shuffle inside, and Bert peers out of the hole. “I’m not the ones you should have your guns on. Try the two of them. Mr. Iero swung a brick at me.”

“You chloroformed me! You deserved to get bricked!”

“The chloroform didn’t hurt you.” Bert pauses, then adds. “Should’ve used something that would, considering you’ve tied yourself to an enemy of humanity.”

“Mr. McCracken, stand down.” The officers step closer to the door. “Drop your weapon and put your hands in the air.”

Bert makes a derisive sound and stabs the stake into the wood one last time, leaving it in the door. The officers unlatch and open it slowly, guns up. Bert raises his hands and is promptly put in tight handcuffs, second officer radioing for a car. “We’ll need the two of you to come and make statements as well.”

Frank nods. “Can we drive ourselves? I’d like to get my workbag out of my room before the break.”

“You may, just be prompt, please.”

“Okay.” Frank nods, taking Gerard’s hand as Bert is walked away.

Joe turns to them both and sighs. “Well, I thought I’d done a reasonably good job of making my school safe for LGBT faculty, and I’m sorry I failed you both on that.”

Gerard shakes his head. “You’ve done an incredible job. I don’t think anyone could have changed his mind. He fixated on me as soon as Frank and I became friends.” Next to him, Frank shivers at the implication.

Joe looks a little disgusted as well. “Well, I hate to ask right now, as well, but do you both want to take Tuesday off? I can get you both subs.”

Frank glances at Gerard, then looks back at Joe. “I think I might take you up on that, actually. Thanks.”

“Of course. Gerard, you too?”

Gerard looks at Frank and nods. “Probably would be a good thing.” One extra day to get Frank settled in as a vampire, one extra day of distance if Gerard can convince Frank they need to cut and run.

Joe nods to them both. “Well, I’ll see you back Wednesday.” He rubs his forehead. “Shit. Okay, I’ve got a couple things to take care of. And you two have to get down to the station.” He turns back toward the school building and mutters “Happy hour better not be over by the time I’m outta here.”

The three of them troop back, Frank and Gerard splitting for their rooms. Frank is surprised his feels as normal as it does. He feels like it’s been eighty years since he set foot in it. The clock tells him it’s
just under two hours. He gathers his bag and laptop, then heads to Gerard’s room.

“Hey, Gee, do you know where my phone and keys are?”

“Oh, oh, sorry! I picked them up when I stopped by your room to look for you. Here.” He returns them to Frank, who nods thanks, suddenly looking very tired. Gerard looks at him carefully. “Meet you at the station? Do you want me to drive?”

“I think I can. I think just, everything’s hitting me.”

“Yeah. I’ll see you soon.”

Frank nods again and heads out, suddenly immensely grateful for the light cloud cover that has rolled in and is probably the only reason he hasn’t burned up into dust yet. Is that even something he needs to be worried about? Can vampires turn to dust? Frank has to consciously turn off that train of thought. He has to ask Gerard about it later.

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The police let them give their statements informally sitting in the break room, but the officer does take an audio recording. Frank doesn’t talk much, letting Gerard tell the story of how he found Frank missing, saw Bert’s email, and ran. How Bert went off the rails, tried to stab him, thought he’d succeeded, and how Frank had knocked him out with a brick, then they had gone to get the officers.

Frank just describes being woozy as hell, and how scared he’d been to see what looked like Gerard being stabbed, and how he’d grabbed the first weapon he’d seen and swung it. They leave shortly after, Frank squinting at the sun. Gerard takes his hand and squeezes for a second.

“You’re gonna be okay. I promise.”

“Thanks.” Frank looks over. “Can I stay with you tonight?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“Okay. Thanks.” They’re parked on opposite sides of the lot, so they split for a moment and meet back at Gerard’s. Frank is on the phone with his Mom, having called her on the road home.

“-Yeah, it’s been a hell of a day.”

Gerard chooses not to listen to Ms. Miranda’s side of the conversation, just unlocking the door and waving Frank in. Apparently that’s enough of an invitation.

“No, no, I’m okay, Mom. It wasn’t me he tried to stab. Yeah, Gee is okay too. He got a little bruised up, but he’s okay.” Another pause while she asks something else. “Yeah, I’m spending the night at his house. No, fuck that, we’re not going anywhere this weekend. Yeah, too much excitement already. We’re both pretty beat.” Frank smiles at the phone. “Yeah, call me tomorrow. I’ll be here.”

That makes him think about how close they both came to not being here tonight, and Frank has to say his goodbyes and I love you’s quickly so she doesn’t notice how choked up he is. He’s standing in the middle of Gerard’s very spartan living room and about to cry, so he just looks at his boyfriend and shakes his head hopelessly. Gerard somehow understands, and steps forward to pull Frank into a tight hug. Frank clings back, dry sobbing as he tries to get himself under control. Gerard is steady and still under him, as he’s always been.

“Frankie, Frank, it’s okay. You can go on.”
“I just-I don’t- I don’t know what happened today.” That’s not quite true, Frank does know what happened, could tell you that this afternoon Bert attacked him and tried to kill Gerard, and that Gerard turned him into a vampire to save himself. But comprehending the scope of how his life has changed in one afternoon? That is currently impossible. Frank is unmoored, watching the harbor he knew drift away behind the horizon and out of reach forever.

Gerard hushes him quietly. “I know. I know, it’s okay. I’ll help you. You’ll- we’ll get through this.”

Frank nods. “I don’t- I do know what happened today, I just don’t, I don’t know what it means. It just hit me.”

Gerard pulls back a little bit. “I think you’re in shock. Come sit down, I’m going to make you tea, and then we are going to go to bed. In the morning, we’ll talk, okay?”

Frank nods again, taking a deep breath. He prys his hands off Gerard’s and sits down, staring blankly at the wall.

While the water boils, Gerard hangs onto the counter with a white-knuckled grip to hide the way his hands are shaking. He killed his boyfriend. He just murdered Frank, barely with his consent, and doomed him to the half-life on the run Gerard lives. If he had been thinking at all- if he hadn’t been on the verge of death himself, instinct to keep living winning out- he would have just died peacefully. He’s lived long enough, seen enough. Frank will come to hate him for it, Gerard is sure. But in the meantime, doesn’t he owe it to Frank to teach him how to live as a vampire, as a small way of paying for his forgiveness? Gerard doesn’t know other vampires, would never take Frank to Grant anyway and lost contact with Lindsey decades ago, so it’s up to him to teach Frank. The kettle hisses and Gerard pours two mugs, resolving to at least give Frank his best.

They both drink their tea in silence and Gerard urges Frank to bed not long after. Frank clings to Gerard, sniffs twice, and falls asleep. Gerard ignores the tug of exhaustion and stays up to watch over him. He misses the gentle rise and fall of Frank’s chest, the slow and steady rhythm of his sleeping heart, all the signs of life that are now gone, stolen by Gerard.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the uh.. double whammy. I didn’t want you all to think that this was all gonna be lovey fluff. We’ve gotta raise the stakes a little bit >:) And now we get to explore all the ways Gerard having turned Frank will shift and alter their relationship and it’s course...
The next day dawns cold and grey, perfect for two vampires. Frank drinks coffee at Gerard’s table and says quietly “If I overstay my welcome, let me know, okay?”

“I don’t think that’ll be a problem.” Gerard sits down with his own coffee. “Okay, I think I’ve told you a lot about how I work before, but it’s probably best if I tell you everything I know about we work, and then you can keep asking questions and I’ll do my best to answer?”

Frank nods. Gerard looks strangely fragile, like he’s expecting Frank to yell or something. Frank just takes another sip of coffee. He’s not going to be mad at Gerard for believing Frank when Frank told him to kill him, even though the decision was pretty rushed. That’s Frank’s cross to bear.

Gerard takes a deep breath and says “Okay. I’ve mentioned most of this I think, but maybe not in detail. We talked about your eyes yesterday. You don’t really need them to be bright to see better in the dark, so it’s mostly for show. As far as I can tell, anyway. You can always see fine. It’s just a matter of calling it up. Sort of like raising your hackles, you know how dogs do?”

Frank nods. “Are fangs the same?”

“Yes, pretty much. Can you feel yours?”

“No? Do I grow them or are they there?”

“They should be there.” Gerard clicks his own down and considers, then flips them back up and raises a hand to his mouth. “They sit above your human teeth, so if you feel you should be able to feel a ridge? Try lightly pushing on that, and they should drop down. Then you’ll know what it feels like.”

“Will I bite myself?”

“Doesn’t matter. You won’t bleed and vampire venom doesn’t affect vampires.”

“Oh.” Frank reaches up, feeling around under his upper lip. His eyes widen when his fangs drop, bottom set clicking out too. He feels them carefully. “Can I go look in the mirror?”

“Yeah. And the thing about not having reflections is false, I’ve always had one. We’re still solid matter.”

“Okay, good. I didn’t want to have to learn to shave. Or is this Interview With A Vampire style where I won’t need to?”

“You’ll need to. Hair and nails all grow as normal. The only thing that stays pretty much the same is my weight. I just don’t think vampires gain or lose weight easily.”

Frank pokes his stomach. “Well, I can live with this, so that’s okay.”

They troop to the bathroom, and Frank practices clicking his fangs up and down, watching Gerard do the same next to him. Gerard makes him practice eyes too, just for a second. Frank gets the hang of that pretty quickly and grins at Gerard, fully vamped out for a second. The voice in the back of Gerard’s head still leftover from Sicily nearly purrs at how pretty and dangerous and inhuman Frank looks. Gerard’s gut twists. He’s made Frank a monster. He manages a weak smile back.
Frank puts everything away and looks human again. “How does eating work?”

“You can still eat human food, but it won’t really do anything for your hunger. Caffeine still works. Alcohol is dangerous, just because we don’t really have a lot of blood, so pretty much one drink will get you drunk. If I have two beers on an empty stomach, I’m drunk. Hard drinks are out of the question.”

“So eating food still slows it down?”

“A little bit. Still, assume you have about a quarter of the tolerance you did before. Like, at happy hour I know you could have a beer or two if I’m driving or you’re ordering food as well, but now that’d get you pretty well drunk.”

“Oh. Damn.”

“And drinking blood, that’s different. You’ll need that about every two weeks, and it doesn’t feel like human hunger.” Gerard pauses. “Actually, I don’t know if that’s true, I don’t remember what that felt like. But it’s sort of a whole-body hollowness.”

“More hollow? I already feel a little empty.”

“Yes. But you’ll need food in a couple days. You’ll feel it when you do.”

“Okay.” Frank nods at his reflection. “I look the same. I don’t know why that’s surprising.”

“Trauma usually shows on humans. Oh, also, vampires heal fast. It’s definitely superhuman. If you break a bone, grit your teeth and shove it sort of back into place and your body will work it out right. Cuts and scrapes heal as fast as you can get them, unless you’re really underfed. Eventually it’ll take a lot out of you and you’ll need to feed, but you would survive getting hit by a car for sure now. Or jumping off a building, but it’d still hurt.”

Frank looks a little shocked. “Okay. I really hope I never break a bone. The hospital would freak if I come in dead but walking.” He pauses. “Oh, shit! What if I get sick!”

“You won’t. We don’t catch human diseases. I don’t know all that much about how infection works, so we might be carriers or something, but you’ll never get sick from something. Dead body, can’t shut down your system twice. I lived though a few bad years, malaria, yellow fever, smallpox, polio, all of that. Worked as nurse a few times, just because I could work hospice and not be the next one sick.”

“Damn.” Frank looks at Gerard with new respect.

Gerard shrugs. “We’re just more robust in general, I think. I never had a problem carrying you, even though you probably weigh about as much as I do. If you ever get in a fight with a human, you could break bones pretty easily. Or just outrun them and get away.”

“Designed to be able to prey on humans, huh?”

“Maybe, but please don’t think of it like that.”

“I mean, that’s not my mindset, but that’s how evolution works, right? If you’re gonna need to get your mouth on something to live, you’ve gotta be able to get the jump on it somehow, right? So vampires got faster and stronger and better night vision?”

“I suppose.”
Frank shrugs. “Sorry.”

“It’s alright, but I feel bad enough making you a monster, it’s unsettling to see you embrace it.”

“Gee, I’m not embracing anything. This hasn’t sunk in at all, trust me. You’ll know when it does, because I’ll be in the corner of your tub shaking.”

“Really?”

“Really really. Ask Mom how I ‘coped’ with Dad leaving and all that shit. I snuck out at night, drank myself stupid, and holed up in nooks and crannies and cussed out anyone who looked at me. I’m not exactly a paragon of coping mechanisms.”

“I’m sorry, Frankie.”

“I mean, I lived. I’m just saying, this could be happening to someone else for all I’ve actually managed to reconcile it with my life right now.”

“Are you gonna be okay when you do?”

“Probably. It’ll probably be bit by bit, but no reason to lose it now. Worst is over, right? I’m not facing my death anymore. That shit is behind me.”

Gerard nods. “Guess so.”

Frank shrugs at their reflections and deflates a little. “I don’t know, Gee. I mean, I’m a fucking vampire right now. I don’t know what to make of that. I’m gonna have to drink human blood. Jamia is gonna expect me to go to happy hour with her tomorrow and shoot the shit over a few beers, and my Mom is gonna expect me to get my seasonal cold. She’s gonna expect us to both be human when I take you to meet her over Christmas.” Frank shakes his head. “I don’t know. It’s gonna have to be day by day for me right now.”

Gerard nods. The fact that he’s even included in any future plan is sort of miraculous, though Frank might just be clinging to what his life was before.

Frank nods back and scrubs his hands over his face, sighing. “Hey, at least I’ve got you, right?”

“Yeah. I’ll do as much as I can for you.”

Frank steps forward for a hug. “Thanks. I love you.”

Gerard carefully puts his arms around Frank as well. “I love you too. I’m sorry this turned into such a mess.”

“We’re both upright and in pretty good shape, right?”

“Yes?”

“I think, given the mess in question, we’ve done pretty damn well, then.”

Gerard smiles. “Guess so. For you getting kidnapped and me getting staked, I feel pretty good. And I’m glad I was able to bring you back.”

“Yeah. I’m pretty happy about that, not gonna lie.” Frank pulls back with a small smile. “Mom would’ve killed you herself if you’d put me in the ground. And I would’ve haunted your ass in the meantime.”
“I believe that.”

Frank leans in and kisses him. Gerard kisses back, helpless not to. Frank pulls back a moment later and says, “Thank you for being the best vampire boyfriend and not like, turning me and running.”

“I’m still considering running. Bert will say I’m a vampire on the stand, we shouldn’t be here.”

“Wait, are you serious? No!” Frank shakes his head. “That would, A, look shady as fuck and B, no! I’m not quitting my job over this!”

“Do you want to get staked?”

“Uh, no. But still, have I made you watch 30 bad vampire films with me for nothing? Running. Looks. Suspicious. If you really want to move, and I’ll defer to your judgement on this, because you’re older, we move next summer. Tell Joe that as much as we love it we can’t stay at the school we both got assaulted at and leave then.”

Gerard sighs. “Can I budge you to winter break?”

“When on winter break? We’re driving to Jersey on the twenty-third, back the thirty-first, and school starts again the second. We don’t have time to move and get a place and get settled and get jobs.”

“We don’t need jobs right away.”

“Okay, I don’t know about you, but I don’t have a ton of money put away. Like, I have a savings account and shit, and I can pay my bills, but I can’t afford to move and then not work.”

“I can pay for it, and you’ll find any paycheck goes a lot further when you don’t need food.”

“You can pay for it? Are we moving in together, now?” Frank has gone a little hysterical.

“If we move, we could. Unless you don’t want to.”

“I don’t not want to move in with you, but it’s a little fucking sudden, that’s all. I don’t wanna move. I really really do not want to flee over winter break. Can we find a middle ground?”

Gerard sighs. “I don’t feel like we’re safe here, and I don’t know if your apartment is safe.”

“Can we go check it? Vampire-proof it? Or I can move in near here, something, but let’s stay put a little while? I need to get my legs under me as a vampire. And we have, like, long term plans and work contracts. All of that.”

Gerard sighs. “We’ll go check yours later tonight. And you could move in here, if you wanted. Move in with me? Is that something you would want?”

“Yes, Gee. It- we haven’t been dating quite long enough I was ready to bring it up, but-“ Frank scrubs a hand through his hair, “we’re kind of tied together now, or at least I’m tied to you because I don’t know what the hell I’m supposed to do, so sure. Can we keep my couch and not yours?”

Gerard’s face splits into a smile. It’s so Frank, with his disarming ability to be mundane about world-bending circumstances, to ask about the couches. “Yes, we can keep your couch. I like your couch more too.”

Frank smiles back. “Cool. I’ve got a lot more shit than you, though.”

“It’s not like I don’t have room.”
“I still don’t know why you don’t own anything. Is that a vampire thing?”

“It’s a me being ready to flee thing.”

“Oh.” That admission stops Frank in his tracks, and he just looks at Gerard for a long moment with something like pity in his eyes. Then it hardens. “I don’t want to live like that. I’m more of a stand and fight guy.”

“That’ll get you killed.”

“The only guy here who wanted us dead is gonna be thrown in jail. Why can’t we stay the year?” Gerard sighs. He doesn’t have a concrete reason he has to flee, but the idea of staying is a deeply uncomfortable one. “I don’t feel safe somewhere after something like this.”

“I’ll keep you safe. We’ll be okay here.”

“If you really want to stay, we can stay, but not for more than a few years.”

Frank puts his hands up. “I’m not gonna fight you on that, I know we’re gonna have to move before people notice we don’t age, but I want to stay the rest of the school year. That’s all I’m asking for right now. Enough time to get my feet under me without uprooting everything else.”

“Okay.”

“And I guess I’m moving in here? When do you want to do that?”

“Now, I suppose? No reason not to.”

“Okay. My lease runs through August, and I don’t really wanna pay to break it, but I can pay some of the rent here.”

Gerard shakes his head at that. “Don’t even bother. If it’ll make you feel better we can split rent after that, but I can easily afford this. Basement apartments are cheap, and I don’t eat, and I don’t buy a lot of stuff. I’ve got the money.”

“Are you a secret millionaire?”

“I’m not that secret? Most of it is in bond funds, investments and stuff. I can’t like, go buy a Rolls Royce tomorrow, I don’t have money like that.”

“Holy shit, Gee. That’s- shit, I think I’ve learned more about you today than I have in nearly five months of dating you.”

“Frank, that’s what being a vampire is, it’s hiding a lot from humans. But the money isn’t really anything, it’s just, stuff I have. I keep enough so that if I ever had to run I could just start over somewhere, but I donate a fair bit to charity too.”

“Still.” Frank looks at Gerard with new eyes. “I guess I’m gonna get to know the real no-holds-barred vampire you are then, huh?”

“I suppose you are. But I’m still not gonna walk around with my fangs down and all that.”

“Guess not.” Frank sighs. “Let me make a list of stuff to move, okay?”

Gerard nods, and they camp at the table, Frank making a list and asking Gerard what he has, what he
doesn’t have, and what of his he wants to keep versus being willing to replace with Frank’s. They’ll bring over Frank’s things tonight, and then move the bigger things in fits and starts.

Gerard goes to clean and move things around so there’s room for Frank’s clothes and toiletries and such, mostly just moving things to the unused linen closet in the hallway. “Hey, Frank?”

“Hmm?”

“Do you have any storage furniture? Chest of drawers or something we could put in the living room for some of this stuff?”

Frank comes to see what stuff Gerard is talking about and nods. “Yeah. That light wood one is mostly empty, we’ll grab that.”

“That’ll help.”

“Yeah. Just make it a pile right now?”

Gerard does, with Frank’s help to reorganize some things. There’s already a lot of Frank’s stuff over, it’s just a matter of formally making room for it. Gerard looks over at Frank as they work through the closet in the midafternoon. Frank is folding up Gerard’s collection of scarves and the spare set of sheets that they’re going to replace with Frank’s sheets anyway and has the sudden flash that this could be his forever. The barrier Gerard had considered insurmountable, his vampirism next to Frank’s humanity, has been well and truly passed, and they’re both standing on the other side, sort of looking at each other and wondering what’s next. Gerard could marry Frank and not worry so much about having to watch as he grew old and frail and died. It hadn’t even been an idea he’d considered before now, the long view absolutely out of sight when he turned Frank, but now, sitting on the floor of his apartment, Gerard looks at his boyfriend and considers forever.

Frank rolls another scarf and looks at Gerard. “You have one neck. Why do you have nine scarves?”

Gerard starts, back to the present. “Because I get cold? You try staying warm in winter without blood!”

Frank sighs at him, fond and exasperated all at once. “Okay. But you need a bin, seriously. I think I have one, we can put these in it with my scarf and gloves.”

“Okay.”

“Time to live like a real human again.”

“I think I’ll survive.”

“Yeah, I might even be good for you.”

Gerard grins and cedes that to Frank. He makes Gerard happier, that’s for sure. It’s not hard to assume he’ll force Gerard to be a member of society in more than just name in the future.

That night, a little after sunset, they head out to Frank’s place, list in hand. They share the elevator up with another tired looking woman, all silent. Frank and Gerard get off first, and as Frank unlocks his door, he hisses at Gerard “Why could I hear her heartbeat? Why is that something that sounded appealing to me?”

Gerard follows him into the apartment and sighs, closing the door behind them. “You’re probably
hungry. You haven’t fed yet, but the hearing is something you can tune in or out of. I could always hear yours, and I ignore all the students, most people’s, unless I’m hunting.”

Frank looks appalled. “I don’t want to hear that. I could- my mouth was itching!”

“Frankie, I know. I’m sorry. Look, we’ll go hunt together in a minute, but lets pack a little bit and then go. Maybe just your clothes?”

Frank nods, but he still looks scared. “I don’t want to hurt somebody.”

“I won’t let you. I never hurt you, did I?”

“No, but you’re old. I trust you. I’ve never done this.”

“I had to feed for the first time once too.”

“I guess.” Frank wraps his arms around himself and takes a deep breath. “Okay. Okay, I’m dealing with this. Let’s pack some shit up. Okay.”

Gerard steps closer to give him a hug. “I’ll be right here with you every step of the way, okay?”


“Anytime. Let’s go pack.” They break apart and Gerard guides Frank to his bedroom with a hand on his back. Frank leans close the whole time they fold and pack all his work shirts and pants and most of his loungewear. Frank elects to leave the rattiest sweatpants and thinnest shirts.

“If I don’t miss them by August, we can just toss them. It’s fine.”

“Okay. That works.” Gerard picks up one suitcase, leaving Frank a box. “Let’s go put these in the car and we’ll head out to hunt.”

“Are you gonna hunt too?”

“I should. I could go another week, but I’d rather not. And this way you can watch me and then hunt yourself.”

“Okay.” Some of Frank’s uncertainty is creeping back in.

“Frankie.” Gerard pulls him close, setting down the suitcase. “You can do this. And you won’t hurt anybody. I promise.” He presses a kiss to the corner of Frank’s mouth.

Frank huffs out a breath and turns to steal one real kiss. “Alright. Okay. Let’s go.”

Gerard drives him to the older, more industrial side of town. Frank watches the streets go by and says “There’s a lot more people out than I thought.”

“There are a bunch of small bars and clubs around here. Good hunting.”

“Good hunting.”

“Mhmm.” Gerard frowns at the road and parks in a half-full lot, taking a ticket for the payment. He hadn’t really been paying attention to the way Frank had flatly repeated ‘good hunting,’ Gerard turns to get out of the car and is a little surprised when Frank locks up and shakes his head.

“Gee, I can’t. I can’t hunt people. I’m a fucking vegetarian, I’m just gonna fucking starve or break
“Frankie, you can do this. I’m sure you can. It’ll be instinctual.”

Frank shakes his head wildly again.

A little short on options, Gerard sighs to himself and reluctantly pulls out his trump card. “Frank. You have become something beyond human. You yourself said designed to hunt. How many vampires, in all the movies we watched, have failed at hunting?”

“None.”

“You won’t either. Because you’re just like me, and just like them.” Gerard climbs back into the car to take Frank’s hands gently. “Just this once, I want you to be that kind of monster. We’re gonna go out there, we’re gonna walk, and somebody is gonna step too close too far from everybody else, and I’m gonna tip them into the shadows and bite them. Then I’m gonna help you do the same thing.”

Frank actually looks a little calmer, like he’s shutting down his panic and latching onto having a plan.

“Frankie, you know what else?” Gerard waits for Frank to look at him, not past him at the street, and clicks his fangs down and eyes bright, “We’re gonna get away with it too.”

Frank manages a shaky smile. “Okay.” He nods to himself and gently lets go of Gerard’s hands. “Okay, let’s go before I lose my nerve again.” Gerard is quick to follow.

As they walk, Gerard takes Frank’s hand and gives it a reassuring squeeze. Frank squeezes back, reassurance more than welcome. As they round a corner they come up on a man walking alone. Gerard drops Frank’s hand and Frank throws a glance at him. This is the guy Gerard is going to feed off?

It turns out it is, as they pass on the sidewalk, Gerard half turns and checks the man into the alley, following him quickly enough he doesn’t make a sound other than a surprised “Hey!” Frank turns to look into the alley and finds the man already unconscious, Gerard taking slow and careful swallows from his neck. It’s the first time Frank has ever watched Gerard feed, and it’s strange. It feels like watching a movie, but then Gerard gently lowers the body to the ground and says “Frank, listen to his heart for a moment.”

Frank does, suddenly hyperaware of it’s steady thump. Gerard continues. “See how steady it is? You should always leave them like this. He’ll be fine when he wakes up. As soon as the heart rate spikes or slows you need to stop, okay?’

Frank nods, staring between the man and Gerard. “What do I do if he yells?”

“Get your fangs in him fast so your venom shuts him down. Ideally, you’re fast enough they don’t have time to. Trust me, you’ll be faster than whoever you’re hunting.”

“Okay. Can you tell me who to pick?”

“I can do that. Do you want me to basically do the same thing I just did, except you step around me when I do and bite?”

“Yes, please.”

Gerard nods, and they keep walking, putting a couple blocks between Gerard’s hunt and Frank’s. As they walk, Gerard switches to Italian and tells Frank “Sometimes I’ll get nearly mugged and just end
“Good to know.”

“You think you’re ready?”

“No. But I think when I have to I’ll manage.”

“Alright. I’d let you wait more, except I don’t think it’d be healthy. I’ve never been around young vampires, I’m playing this safe.”

“Okay. I mean, I don’t know if I feel hollow because I haven’t eaten or if that’s a base thing.”

“I don’t know either. Let’s get you fed and find out. That man, the one walking toward us.”

“Oh, right now? Shit, okay.”

“Yes.” Gerard segues into talking about a restaurant he went to years ago, and Frank is confused before he realizes that falling silent would be more suspicious. Their prey gives them a friendly nod as they approach, and Gerard returns it, then shoves him into the alley. Frank ducks around him and takes two quick steps toward the man, who is just regaining his balance. He opens his mouth to say something, and Frank’s new vampire instincts take over. He pins the man’s arms to his sides and bites. Whatever the man opened his mouth to say is lost in a gasp of pain, and Frank has a body in his arms.

He barely notices. Blood, it turns out, is the easiest thing in the world to drink, and feels like the first sip of cold beer when it’s hot out, like chocolate melting in your mouth, like the savory goodness of fresh carrots, roasted, like Mom’s Thanksgiving dinner hitting your senses. Frank swallows and nearly moans, mouth already half-full of a second gulp. Blood pours out of the man’s neck, and Frank sucks it down as quickly as it does, fangs still in deep, then Gerard is slipping a hand over his face, saying something in Frank’s ear.

Frank remembers Gerard saying he would stop him more than he actually understands the words, and pulls back, letting Gerard check the man’s pulse and lay him down as Frank staggers back. His whole body has lit up, and every sense is amplified. Frank can hear the music at the bar around the corner, sense more than individually hear the mass of heartbeats thumping away under the bass, can tell there’s a cat or raccoon in the dumpster 40 feet away, can see every wrapper and cigarette butt on the ground like they’re picked out by a spotlight.

Gerard approaches slowly, and Frank realizes he must look insane. He makes a real effort to school himself, reaching out for Gerard to cling to his hands. “This is what it’s like?”

“All your senses, yes. Some of this is just the rush of feeding, though.”

Frank looks around again. “You didn’t describe it like this. This is like, if I woke up Friday with a boost, this is hyperdrive.”

“Really? It’s more than that? It should be about the same, just more present. I can never turn off my hearing for a while after I feed.”

“No, it’s a whole new step up.” Frank blinks at Gerard. “And the blood, holy shit.”

“Eventually, that becomes mundane.”
“Jesus. That’s like meth becoming mundane.”

“Maybe. You stopped though, which I’m glad about.”

“Yeah. You had to remind me though, my whole brain like, whited out.”

Gerard coaxes them back to walking, headed back to the car. “I’m not surprised. But you’ll learn to control that.”

“Hopefully. Thank you, though.” Frank squeezes Gerard’s hand, still looking around a little like an owl.

Gerard squeezes back and they walk in silence nearly all the way back. They pass a woman walking alone, and Gerard gives her the same friendly nod he gave Frank’s meal earlier, and Frank’s stomach turns over. She passes without incident, but Frank only gets about another thirty feet before he tugs Gerard to a stop and dry heaves.

“Frank? What’s wrong?”

Frank heaves again before he can answer, but he only gets the burn of bile in his mouth. Apparently the blood will stay down. “I-I was a vegetarian. And I just drank somebodies blood, and he didn’t know. Holy shit.” He heaves again, spitting bile out to the concrete.

Gerard rubs his back. “Yeah. You did. I wish we didn’t have to either, but trust me, it’s very rare for a person to offer like you did. Unfortunately, we’ve gotta do it to live.”

Frank nods miserably and straightens up to wipe his mouth. “Jesus. I thought it was alright, but then it hit me.”

Gerard nods sympathetically. “Let’s just go home, alright?”

“Okay.”

“We’ll see if the house lets you in or if you get your first brush with being blocked without an invitation.”

Frank nods, and it’s half the silent drive home before he picks up the conversation again. “How strict is that, by the way? Like, if I go home and Mom says come in once would I be able to get back in if I left to get groceries and came back?”

“Probably. It’s more based on how open the welcome is. With your Mom’s house, you could probably walk in without her at the door, if you called on the way and said you were headed down and she said she’d been home at 3, she’ll see you at the house, because you’re welcome there, you know?”

Gerard pauses and considers. “Jamia’s you’ll need an invitation in, but if you’re expected to be there for the night, you know, you could walk to the lobby to pick up the pizza or whatever and get back in fine. You just wouldn’t be able to let yourself in without her knowing next Tuesday.”

“So it’s an ‘are you welcome here’ more than a formal invitation?”

“Those started out formal. The magic of the block or whatever just shifted with the actual words of the permission to be in the house.”

“Huh. That’s good.”
“Very, trust me.”

At Gerard’s place, Gerard carefully doesn’t say anything to welcome Frank, and Frank uses his spare key to unlock the door. He walks in fine. Gerard follows, sets down the box of Frank’s clothes, and kisses him.

“Welcome home.”

Frank smiles wide. “Thanks. I guess I already considered it home too.”
Chapter Summary

I would like to thank all ten or so of you for reading this and sticking with it. I love you guys so much 😊 Have uhh, some more angst and some road-trippin'

The next few days are the biggest adjustment. When he’s not eating, Frank feels pretty good. He moves into Gerard's apartment pretty well, and finds his balance with Jamia and his mom. It’s a lot more secrets from either of them than he’s used to keeping, but he has Gerard to lean on.

They take the extra day off and mostly sleep, then return to school on Wednesday. They're happy to see Frank back, peppering him with stories of McCracken's arrest and wildly disproportionate details of the crime scene. Frank denies all of it, then cracks and gives them the bloodless cliff notes version, pretty much just saying ‘look, Mr. McCracken snapped and tried to kidnap me to get back at Gerard. I knocked him out, but not before he’d tried to stab Gerard.’

Gerard is attempting to deal with the questions by just not answering, a strategy that falls through halfway through first period. Finally, he just quiets them down and tells them a shorter version of Frank’s already abbreviated version of the story. There's awed silence when he's done. Most of the kids hadn’t considered the terror that Gerard had felt. His telling of it was going to make school history, and by one pm, everyone in the school has a mostly complete story.

A few of the details are still fudged,
— mafia deal gone bad —
— romeo and juliet style shootout —
— McCracken was trying to kill Mr. Way 'cause he's a vampire, you saw how Mr. Iero's blinds are closed now —

Gerard just kind of hears the rumors and laughs, because somehow the kids' stories make the whole thing a little less terrifying. He actually recounts a few of the better ones to Frank during lunch break. That cracks Frank up, and makes Gerard fully reenact the best ones. It gets them through to the end of a day that really shouldn't be as exhausting as it is.

They spend the night moving a little more of Frank’s furniture in, and arranging their things together. They get all the household supplies worked out, and Frank brings in a couple more boxes, dumping them in the living room and going to fishing hanging up his clothes.
Gerard hauls in the other box from the hallway. "Why does this one weigh so much?"

"Uhh, books. I do have to do research for my classes. They're probably all in Italian actually. If you want to read one."

"Might have to at some point. Haven't had to read much in Italian since 19...37?"

"Is that when you emigrated?" Frank does some rough math and comes up with "Hey, were you in Europe during the First World War?"

"Yeah." Gerard stops to think. "I actually don't remember where I was for most of that. Ottoman Empire maybe?"

"Out of the way, huh? Probably smart."

"I'm not really proud of that. I just kind of...disconnected for a while. Didn't have much to do with humanity as a whole. It was kind of a dark patch, honestly."

"Oh. I'm sorry to hear that. But you up and moved and it got better?"

"Yeah, sorta. I came here, that's been pretty good- well, except for the 50s I guess. Actually, I take what I said earlier back, I had to read some Italian then."

"What happened in the '50s? If you don't mind me asking?"

"Mob involvement. That's when I knew your grandfather, but that wasn’t the bad part. So the kids were almost right, it happened, it was just before you were born."

"I can picture you as a really successful mobster, actually. All the suits and tommy guns?"

"That was more 20s aesthetic." Gerard sighs. "I don't know, I guess I was about as successful as you can be with a strong hatred of killing people."

"Threats you don't intend to carry through. I woulda assumed you knew that." Frank's grinning like he would've liked to be there.

"Yeah, that was the part I was good at. Apparently I was 'creepy' enough for the job."

Frank looks at him and bursts into laughter. "I can imagine it now, shit. Do you ever do the same thing to your kids? Glower at them?"

Gerard gives Frank a light shove. "Of course not. I won't lie, I think about it sometimes, but I've never actually done it. And I thought you were gonna unpack?"

"I am." Frank waves the last shirt at him. "Keep telling me stories?"

"Hmmmmmm... I was in Austria for a while in the... 1800s maybe? I lost track of time at some point, but it was pretty nice there."
"That's not a story that's a fact. Try again, we both teach liberal arts we both know better."

"I dunno, give me a time frame and I can tell you what was happening."

"Hi, I'm Italian-American from Jersey, tell me more about the mafia please."

"350 years and that's all you want to know about?" Gerard rolls his eyes. "Alright. I ended up in with the Genovese, they were the largest. Still might be, I'm not sure. Anyway, I kinda got captured, that wasn't so great, they thought I was a hitman from another family. I freaked, did the whole eyes-and-fangs thing, and it was enough for them to decide I might be useful alive."

"Only you would wander into the mafia by nearly getting killed, christ." Frank shakes his head. "So they knew?"

"Yeah. Nothing else I could do, they were gonna kill me. Trust me, vampire or not, you take enough shots to the head and you're gonna die. So they started using me as a threat."

"Somehow I can't see them keeping you like a circus freak is the best course for somebody with perfect night vision, ridiculous speed and at least a little less susceptibility to bullets...." Frank sounds like he's planning something, hypothetical raids and hits and robberies

Gerard catches his tone. "Frank, we are not robbing a bank. Or a business. Or anything. But yeah, eventually I got tired of it, faked my own death, and moved around for a while."

"We don't need to rob anywhere, we have good jobs I'm just saying....."

"Frank, we are not breaking into banks for fun."

"Not anytime soon either. But before it all goes digital and somebody has to learn to hack... I'm saying we could. Join a crime ring for a lifetime. Be interesting."

"It's not nearly as fun as you think it is, but somehow I don't think you're going to be convinced. But seriously, though. We don't need the money."

"I grew up playing I was in the mafia, excuse a boy. Yeah yeah secret millionaire, how much money do you actually have? How do you keep it that long?"

"It's taken a lot of money transferring, but I've got some bank accounts that have been around a few hundred years. Plus a couple of investments that worked out pretty nicely, and it's not like I exactly live lavishly or whatever, so..."

"Damn. Can't lie, I've got a teachers salary and a 401k. And only 30 years of savings."

"It's not like I was expecting you to match a few centuries worth of interest and whatnot. Also, you end up saving a lot of money when you don't have to buy food, so that's a bonus."

"All true, I guess. I mean, I could support and feed a human on what I had, so I figured I was doing alright."
"You were doing fine. Don't worry about it." Gerard looks around. "Anything else that needs unpacking tonight?"

"Unless you want to look at my books, not anything urgent." Frank turns and shrugs. "I guess I don't have that much crucial stuff."

"I don't have much either, really. Couple of photos, couple of drawings and stuff, that's about all I really take with me consistently." Gerard remembers something they'd talked about a few weeks ago. "You still wanna see my wedding photos? You have to promise not to laugh, though. Fashions were a little different then."

"Yes! No promises I won't laugh if your hair is especially stupid though. I can deal with a dated suit. As long as you don't still own it."

"God, no. Gimme a sec." Gerard goes into the kitchen and searches through the doors, coming back with a stack of photographs. "These are mostly then, might be some other stuff mixed in."

Frank sits down on the edge of the bed, taking the old glass prints gently. He hold up the first one. "Turn on the light, I wanna see the details."

Gerard clicks on the light and groans. "These are all the super formal ones."

"Didn't know they took anything else. You look a little dead. I don't notice it on you normally, but were you freaking out?"

"Yeah, that is all they took, I just forgot how stiff they looked. And yeah, I was terrified." Gerard looks down. "It's weird having a wedding with no family of the groom, but I set myself up as a war orphan."

Frank nods. Gerard has been telling tiny details of his past over the last few months, Frank has heard the story of this failed marriage, how she tried to stab Gerard after their wedding night.

"Damn. They were good to you though? Up until-" He waves a hand to mean the attempted murder. "Just wedding day jitters or vampire jitters?"

"Mostly just wedding day. And yeah, her family was perfectly nice. So was she, for the longest time. Then the murder attempt, and I left the country after that."

"Hell of a story she had to tell her family. 'Yeah, uh he was a creature of the night and I decided to kill him and I don't think I succeeded and he's gone.'"

Gerard laughs. "Must've been quite the conversation, yeah."

Frank snorts. "She was pretty though. Looks like the kinda girl my Dad woulda wanted for me. Which, actually probably goes to show how that would have ended." Frank's sorting through the photos, laying them out beside him gently.
"Yeah, she was gorgeous." Gerard gingerly tugs a drawing out from in between the photos. "This is Mikey."

"Your brother?" Frank leans in to see the drawing. "Oh shit, you painted him! Forever ago, when you did all the paintings that night when I was passed out. I recognize his jawline."

"Oh, yeah. I did. No photography around when he was alive, but I drew this when he was...22 maybe?" Gerard smooths out the corner. "I miss the little dude."

"I'm sorry. What was he like?"

"Smart kid. The education system at the time was kind of abysmal, so not so much in a school way, but brilliant all the same. And he had the most deadpan humor, it was great." Gerard takes a shaky breath. "I guess I should tell you the full story of how he died."

"Only if you want to." Frank reaches out and takes Gerard's hand.

Gerard squeezes his hand. "It was only a couple months after I was turned. Mikey was the only person that really knew, and he understood that I didn't want to have to hurt strangers. So he offered his blood, but one day I lost control, and when I came back to myself, he was empty. I told you that part, I don't know if you can remember it now or not. What I didn't tell you was after I realized he was dead, I tried to turn him. Tried to do the ritual. I didn't want to just let him die. I made it to the prayer stage, got through it three times just fine, and then- I don't know, everything just hit me, that that was my little brother lying there and I had killed him. I stumbled over my words, and- and that was it. He didn't wake up." Gerard's voice trembles. He suddenly sounds very young, very small.

"I'm sorry. I- I don't know what else to say, honestly. But I am sorry."

Gerard gives up on trying not to cry. He just sobs into Frank's shoulder for a minute, wondering how the wound is still so fresh after so long. When he manages to pull himself together, he says quietly, "That's why I was so scared to do it to you. Because if I fucked up again..." He can't finish the sentence.

Frank nods, just enough that Gerard feels it. "You're brave as hell." he manages eventually. There's a lump in his throat as well, and Frank keeps swallowing, trying to get it to go away.

Gerard shakes his head. "You're the brave one. I told you I didn't know whether you'd survive, and you didn't hesitate."

"I wasn't gonna let you fucking die on the floor in front of me, sorry." Frank thinks of how empty he'd have felt if that had happened and has to blink back sudden tears.

Gerard just presses himself tighter into Frank, wiping away his own tears. "I love you. So much."

"I love you too." Frank squeezes him tighter, like he's never going to let go, and buries his face in Gerard's hair.

They stay that way for a very long time, until Gerard finally pulls away. “Can we go to bed?”
Frank nods. “Yeah, let’s go to bed. We’ve done a hell of a lot for a weeknight.”

Frank lays awake for a while, wondering if all this change is going to end up changing too much between them. It seems a little like their relationship has started a whole new chapter since Frank was turned last Thursday. The fact that it’s been less than a week is a little worrying.

Frank’s worry is assuaged by the next month. He and Gerard hit their stride, figuring out how to share the bathroom in the morning, and work out which chores to split. Jamia comes over to make dinner with Frank in Gerard’s kitchen, and tells him she thinks he’s crazy for moving in the middle of the year, but more power to him. Frank just tells her to get her head out of his sex life, and she fake gags and drops the topic.

Frank tells Gerard when he gets a supportive text later that night, and Gerard smiles and hugs Frank a little closer on the couch. Frank turns and gives him a kiss.

On a Friday in the middle of November, Frank is grading at the table when Gerard flops into the other barstool and says, "You wanna go somewhere? It's dark out by now, has to be."

"Go where?"

"I don't know. Anywhere you want. Movies, dinner, anything."

Frank sets down his pen. “Movies. I haven't been since the summer. Anything you wanna see?"

"Mmmm I don't know. We can just figure it out when we get there?"

"Sure. Feels like a high school date, I'm excited." Frank stands, reaching for his shoes "Want to walk? It's been nicer out."

Gerard laughs. "I never really went to high school. But yeah, let's walk."

"You know the tropes, it's close enough." Frank grabs for Gerard's hand as they head out the door.

Gerard almost backs down for a second as they start to head outside, his hand going slack in Frank's grip. Then he shakes his head and holds on tighter, stepping out the door.

Frank notices. "You afraid to be seen with me, Mr. 350 years old?” he teases.
Gerard tries to laugh, but the attempt falls flat. "It's just, I grew up in a time where we could get killed for this. Couple hundred years of living around people that think that way's enough to scare you. But I'm okay. We're okay."

"We're goddamn great." Frank says firmly. He's fought this and he's never going back. "We're great, and we're safe, and we could outrun pretty much anybody if we really needed to, right? That enough?" He looks at Gerard, serious and passionate.

Gerard actually does laugh at that. "Yeah. You're pretty convincing." He squeezes Frank's hand and keeps walking, head a little higher.

Frank's smile relaxes and they make their way to the closest theatre. On the way in, he nudges Gerard slightly to the left "Is that Michelle and Andrew? Holding hands?"

"I do believe it is. There goes that 'pretending to hate each other' act."

"Bust~ed" Frank singsongs quietly. "Wait, why are they out for a 10 o'clock movie? They need sleep."

Gerard nudges him. "Frank, it's Friday. I know we're still teachers, but lots of people go out on Friday."

"Fine. I said nothing. What are they seeing?" Frank looks up at the marquee, judging the action and romance flicks displayed.

"If they go to whatever that, like, vampire one is, I will most definitely have to embarrass them about it." Gerard looks up too. "I don't even know what we're going to see, none of this looks particularly spectacular."

"We're going to the shitty vampire movie. Do your students not tell you about Twilight? That's the last movie. We've gotta see that."

"If you say so." Gerard pulls Frank into the line forming. "I'll buy."

"Will you really? The one who has ancient fortunes?"

"Quiet, or I'll make you buy popcorn."

"Oooh horror, making me buy snack foods I love. You trying to make me fat?"

"I'm sorry I've trapped you into this horrible abusive relationship. If I buy Junior Mints will it make up for the horrible psychological harm I've done you?"

"Yeah. Might steal like two Junior Mints. How much popcorn are you gonna eat? I might just get a small."

"Small's fine. And steal as many Junior Mints as you want, I don't care." Gerard steps up to the counter and buys the tickets, before returning to the snack food debate.
"Small it is. Are the kids doing Twilight? I gotta be ready to make new seating charts."

"Don't know, I lost track. I think it was." Gerard scans the crowd. "Yeah, don't see them. And I totally don't feel like a stalker."

"Hush, it's not like we don't know them. New seating chart it is then, if you're right about what they're seeing."

"They were holding hands, there's no way it's not a date."

"Exactly. Don't tell them we saw them, I want to be feared as knowing the right gossip." Frank grabs his popcorn and turns back "What number are we in?"

Gerard snickers. "Yeah, you're terrifying alright. And I think 8."

"Give me 40 years, I'll be unstoppable. Let's go."

"Oh god, now I really am scared." Gerard lets Frank pull him toward the theater, handing the tickets over.

"You should be." Frank picks seats about two thirds of the way up, and a little off to the right.

"I'm glad you're going to use up the next 40 years of our lives for revenge on students. That seems reasonable."

"No revenge, just honing my skills in accruing gossip and using it to my advantage. That's a useful skill anywhere." Frank's slipped back into Italian, humming along to the second trailer.

Gerard turns to laugh, but ends up not turning back, just staring at Frank's outline in the glow from the screen. He wonders if Frank could be persuaded to sit still long enough for Gerard to draw him.

Frank notices in a moment and glances over. "What? Something on my face?"

Gerard ducks his head. "Nothing. You're just pretty, that's all."

"I'm pretty?" Frank smiles.

"Yeah. Definitely. You've got a nice profile, and your hair's just curly enough to frame your face, it's very pretty."

"Thank my parents then, I guess?" Frank honestly doesn't know what to do with a
compliment like that. He's done his share of mocking ones, and a few genuine ones from guys he's dated, but never with quite the gravity of this.

“When I meet your Mom, I will.” Gerard leans against Frank's shoulder, interlacing their fingers. Frank just smiles silently and shifts to give Gerard a little more room as the movie starts.

Gerard spends most of Breaking Dawn Part Two just snuggled into Frank's side, laughing at the more ridiculously inaccurate bits.

As soon as the movie ends, Frank's nudging him “Was that awful? That was awful right?”

“So so awful.” Gerard drops into the movie vampire accent, laughing.

Frank cracks up, mimicking a limp-wristed Volturi and making a prissy gesture.

Gerard laughs harder. “That’s about it. Can you do the accent?”

Frank tries and fails immediately. Gerard thinks about it and nails it. Frank smacks him gently, walking out of the theatre at the back of the crowd. “How’d you do that? How many accents can you do, anyway?”

“A bunch, but I still speak Italian in what's pretty much my natural accent. As close as I remember, at least. Everything else is just mimicry.”

"You really have to think about everything you say? I though it was natural eventually. Like I know mine's shifted."

"No, no, it's natural after a while, but I don't like to stand out more than I have to, so I just kind of switch it on my own. I just kind of fall into it now, mimicking the accents of people around me."

"Weird. Even weirder to think someday I'll be doing that too.” Frank shakes his head to himself. As they leave the theater, Gerard cautiously puts an arm around Frank's shoulder. Frank leans into him, matching his stride.

“Do you want to go anywhere else tonight?”

“Uh, no, unless this your way of telling me I'm gonna need to eat again soon?”

Gerard looks at him carefully. "Hard to tell from the outside. How do you feel?"

"I don't know. Something feels heavy. Like there's a storm coming.” Frank looks up. "That might be the actual weather though. I really don't know. Does feel like I can hear and see and smell
“I don’t really want to get bad, I saw you like that once. So yeah. Tomorrow night works.” Frank tilts his head into Gerard’s shoulder and stops breathing. It’s still an odd sensation to get used to, but his hearing and vision seems to sharpen as he does it.

Gerard hears the difference and smiles. " Weird, right? It's like you're underwater, but you're not drowning."

Taking the shallowest breath he can to speak, Frank replies. "Feels like I don't exist. To other people I mean. Like they couldn't see us if we didn't want them to. Can we do that?"

"Not in the literal sense. Like, you can't become invisible, but you can kind of... fade out. Be less noticeable. I can't really explain it."

"How? Can you show me? Or teach me? I want to know how to do it."

"We can try." Gerard pulls Frank off to the side, out of the main traffic. "Don't think about being invisible, think about blending. Being part of the background."

Frank takes a last breath and remembers how he felt when he was trying to avoid the people that ruined his life in high school. His shoulders hunch slightly, but he looks up and past Gerard, looking back at the main street.

"Still there," Gerard comments. "I think you're thinking about hiding more than fading. Remember, blend. It's easier in the night."

"I probably am. Thinking about high school. How do you blend but not hide?"

"Alright, this is gonna sound like a shitty meditation video, but you have to be aware of everything around you. Don't think about yourself as a separate thing. Almost... zoom out."

"Like how I was listening after I ate that first time?"

"Yeah, like that. Just observe. Don't try to change anything."

"Ok." It does feel like a shitty meditation video, but Frank makes an honest effort. Slowly he looks up and inhales, catching the sounds of people and cars on the air. He knows how many people are out there, 30 feet away, and how little they are looking at.

Gerard takes a couple steps back, looking at the spot where Frank should be. He knows he's there, so he can pick him out of the shadows, but if he was walking by, he wouldn't register Frank's presence as any more than a disturbance in the air.

Frank watches Gerard step back and know's he's done it. He doesn't know if it'll hold if he moves but he takes a step closer anyway, still feeling no more substantial and present than any of the
shadows crossing the alley.

Gerard smiles and steps back two more feet. "You've got it. Walk up to me, see if it holds."

Now right next to his ear and taking steps with him, footsteps silent and hidden in Gerard's Frank says right by his ear, "I've been right here, babe."

Gerard bursts into laughter, completely aware that he must look crazy to anyone passing by. "That was good. Really good for a first try. I could still feel your body heat, but that's only because I knew what I was looking for."

"So nobody else would? You should walk with me. Hidden, like this. I feel like I'm going to drop it." Frank reaches out and takes Gerard's hand, feeling like the shadows shifting over his skin could be mistaken for the twitch of a plastic bag.

Gerard closes his eyes for a moment until he fades as well, almost invisible in the night. He squeezes Frank's hand, letting him know he's still right there. "Let's go."

Frank can still feel him, in the same way you get the feeling someone's looking at you. Frank takes a step into the wash of the streetlight. "They'd never know." he laughs quietly.

"Short of running into them, probably not. So long as you keep your voice down." Gerard's had hundreds of years of practice, and he's still almost jealous at how quickly Frank picked up on shadowing.

Frank moves off, weaving quietly in between passers by, still holding onto Gerard's hand. At one point, he turns and grins, sharp and bright, right into the face of a passing man, within a centimeter of brushing his face. As Gerard passes by, he reaches up to touch his face and shiver, but Frank's three steps behind him.

Gerard tugs him back. "Don't do that, you don't need to be creepier than necessary. This is for hunting more than anything."

"Well then, I better know my limits, right? He had no clue." Frank can see where Gerard is if he remembers he should be there, but it's as if you'd have to know he was there to look. Frank keeps his voice nearly silent, not quite ready to stop the game. This is fun, all the things he sort of thought being a vampire would be like.

"Yeah. And know how long you can keep it up, it gets kind of tiring after a while." If Gerard squints, he can start to see Frank's outline coming back into view.

"Fuck." Frank swears and shifts on his feet, feeling like he's a little run ragged, edges flapping to give him away. He gathers himself back up and steps into a darker patch of shadow. "Better?"

"Better, but don't wear yourself out." As they turn the corner, Gerard comes back into view and holds out a hand. "Come back."

Silently, Frank steps back into view and takes his hand. "That's kinda cool."
Gerard grins. "Yeah. It's probably my favorite part of this whole deal. And when you get better at it, you can keep it up longer and longer."

"How long could you do it, you think?"

"Couple hours, if I had to. It gets kinda painful after a while, but if it's the difference between life and death..."

"If it's life and death, you can survive getting staked."

"Yeah. That. Though this is more fun with company." Gerard stops outside their front door and opens it, Frank following him in.

They change and head for bed, easy to do now that they've sort of settled into living together, the transition from spending a few nights at each place over the summer to both living one place surprisingly easy. They curl up in bed, Frank wiggling into Gerard’s arms and wrapping one arm over his waist, face to face. It’s not bad when neither of them get morning breath, still in their sleep.

Gerard half-wakes in the middle of the night, mumbling about something incomprehensible, eyes open but clearly asleep, looking afraid and confused. Frank wakes up when he moves and shifts to sit up to look at Gerard. He's not sure how awake he is, but the dream doesn’t look like it was good.

Gerard seems to know Frank is there because he calms down just a little, enough to stop the semi-formed words from tumbling out.

Frank listens, hoping for some clue of what's troubling Gerard. Eventually he says, quietly "Gerard? What is it?"

Gerard starts awake, looking up at Frank in something like terror. It takes him almost a minute to register his surroundings.

Frank blinks slowly at him, hoping the look doesn't stay. He has some semi-rational urge to destroy whoever put it on Gerard's face. When he seems to recognize his own bed Frank asks "Babe? What happened?"

Gerard doesn't answer right away, just crawls closer to Frank and buries his face in Frank's shirt. When he finally pulls away, all he says is "Dreams."

Frank lets him, wraps his arms around Gerard to keep him close. "Gee, I'm worried. What kind of dreams are they? Because they look like nightmares from here."

"Yeah. Nightmares. Can't describe them, though. They keep changing."

"Worse or better?"

"Just- just changing. Constantly. And I don't really remember them when I wake up, just the
Frank nods. "I'll be here if you need me, okay? Go back to sleep.

"I'll try." This time there's almost no space between them. Gerard is almost clinging onto Frank, like that'll keep him stable even in his dreams.

Frank lets him, and hopes it's enough.

When Gerard wakes the next morning, it's like he doesn't remember any of it.

Frank doesn't quite have the heart to remind him, and just asks how he slept.

"I think... I think I had those dreams again." Gerard sits up, pulling a blanket around him like a cape.

Frank props himself up on one elbow. He hasn't slept more than five minutes. "You don't remember?" He sounds hopeful.

Gerard shakes his head. "Not specifically. Just a feeling... unless something happened last night and that's why you're asking."

Frank nods. Honesty is probably the best policy. "You started twitching and mumbling at about one. I said your name and you woke up, but you didn't really know where you were, I think. You looked scared shitless when you looked at me, but then I guess you actually woke up? Told me it was the dreams and fell asleep again hugging me."

"Oh." Gerard pulls the blanket tighter around himself. He's not really sure what else to say, because he still doesn't really remember any of this.

Frank curls a little closer. "You probably didn't really wake up, if you don't remember talking to me. You don't remember the dreams at all? Sorry I keep asking, but the way you looked at me..."

Gerard shakes his head. "They're not like my normal nightmares, those are pretty predictable. These...I don't know."

Frank nods and wraps his arms around Gerard. "Coffee. Then you tell me if anything happens or they get worse, yeah?"

“I will. Not sure if you’ll be able to stop them, though, I’ve had them most of my life.”

“What about?”
“There’s a reason I’ve never sought out other vampires. The vampire who turned me sort of ruined that for me.”

“You still have nightmares about the guy who turned you 350 years ago?”

“Yes. I lived in his villa for a few decades after, that’s mostly what the nightmares are about. My actual turning wasn’t that traumatic, all told.”

“Shit. That must have been awful.”

Gerard shuffles deeper into his blanket cape. “It was. I hope he’s dead. And if he’s not, I hope to God every day you never have to meet him.”

“Yeah. From the way you won’t talk about it I really hope I don’t either. Oh, in good news! I just remembered I was gonna tell you this, but Melissa and Andrew are dating for real now.”

“Oh.” Gerard smiles. “That is good. Thank you. I’m glad you told me that, that’s nice.”

Frank grins. “I do my best. Tell me if you have more nightmares.”

As Frank leaves, Gerard can’t keep a ridiculous smile off his face. He's not alone, and he won't have to worry about ending up alone again in another 40 years.

"You look way too happy for a guy with nightmares." Frank observes, eyebrows raised. "What's got you so happy?" He heads for the bathroom as he asks, but he genuinely wants to know.

Gerard's answer is almost too quiet for him to catch. "You."

Frank stops at the door, in a rumpled shirt and boxers, unwashed hair falling around his face, to turn and smile. "Glad I pulled that off somehow."

Gerard smiles back, shedding his blanket cloak. "You're just here. And I love that you're here."

"Hit the alarm when you get up," Frank says absentmindedly, then adds, "I'll stick around then. Because I love you." Frank smiles and ducks into the bathroom to wash his hair.

Gerard smacks the alarm off and goes to gather up his stuff for work. 10 minutes later, he's knocking on the bathroom door. "You know it's my bathroom too, right? I've got to look halfway decent too."
"I'm out! You can come in." Frank's hair is still wet, curling quite a lot in the humid bathroom. He's putting on deodorant and trying to brush his teeth at the same time.

"Alright, alright, don't hurt yourself. It's still early." Gerard shoves his own toothbrush in his mouth.

Frank just makes a noise at him, then finishes brushing his teeth. "You start coffee?"

Gerard shakes his head. "Nope."

"Useless. I'll start it when I'm dressed." Frank edges past him, planting a quick kiss on his shoulder.

"Sorry." Gerard finishes brushing his teeth and takes his turn in the shower, forcing his hair into some semblance of order. When he's finished and dressed, he wanders back into the kitchen. "Almost ready?"

"Yeah." Frank's got his travel mug full and steaming next to his laptop. "Checking morning emails. We've got a faculty meeting on Tuesday, something about art and language. You driving today?"

"Sure." Gerard pours his own coffee. "Is that all there is about the meeting?"

"Flyer attached. Haven't opened it." Frank grabs his briefcase and follows Gerard to the door.

"Some help you are." Gerard locks the door and checks the sky. "We're good. Let's go."

"I am a joy. Read it yourself at work or wait for me to tell you at lunch."

"I think I can handle reading it myself. Maybe. And I'll have to see if I can do lunch today, might have some kids coming in."

"If you can't, you can work the crazy technology that is your laptop. If you can't manage that, I might be able to come by at lunch?"

"I mean, you can just come hang out if you don't mind students there. And I'm not that old!"

"You're the one who said you couldn't read it. I don't know if I'll stay, but I'll try to at least come by."

"I was joking. And okay, I'll deal with your absence if I must."

"If you must, ha. I'll leave you to pine your days away."

"I'm not sure I could handle days." Gerard parks the car. Frank snorts at him. Lunch ends up busy for both of them, and Frank is almost late to the meeting.

He has to kick out his stragglers saying "I have a meeting, yes. Actual work at my actual job. Yup. See you tomorrow."
Gerard's forgotten to read the email, but he does at least remember to show up to the meeting, sliding in next to Frank as it's starting.

"Teachers to sponsor and then be in charge of kids on an educational trip to Europe. They're gonna pitch some options, I don't know what." Frank whispers to him, knowing he hasn't read the email. All the other language teachers are there, and the other two art teachers as well.

"Could be interesting." Gerard grins at Frank. "Am I really so predictable?"

"Yeah. If they have an Italy track, I wanna go."

"I'm most definitely going with you if that's the case."

Sure enough, after the "Germany and religion" "England and history" "Spain and food" and a distinct lack of interest, the company representative looks around at the bored teachers. There have been about three questions asked the whole meeting. "I, uh, there's one more track? I generally show it off more to colleges, but you have an Italian department, yes?"

Frank laughs "I am the Italian department."

"There's an art history trip that goes to Rome and Sicily, if you'd be interested?"

Gerard raises his hand. "I'll go with for art. How many do you need?"

"I need two teachers and I'll need a parent. Are you two serious about taking on this trip? We can let everyone else out, if nobody else wants to take a trip?"

Gerard looks at Frank. "I'm good. You?"

"Yeah. I think the kids would like it too." Frank's smile is lurking around the corners of his mouth.

"Alright. Yeah, we'll go, I'll check with my kids about finding a parent volunteer, can you check with yours?"

The tour guy looks thrilled. "The trip will be next year, in the spring. Everyone else can go, by the way." He moves to sit near them, passing out two packets of guides and lists. "Ok, so the trip itinerary is in those folders, but the important things is both of you having valid passports and being enthusiastic so the students want to go. They'll pay a small fee, forms and information on that are in the folder as well. If your program fills, that's 20 students, the school will pay for your trip, it's part of the deal. You two will have to work pretty closely together on the trip, will that be a problem?"

"I think we can handle that," Gerard straight-faces. "Alright, when do we need to get responses by?"
Frank catches the joke "I'll teach him some Italian too, just in case."

The guide laughs a bit, saying "That might help. Try to get interest meetings going this year, then get actual numbers by the end of September of next year, I think the 21st?"

"Okay. We'll sit down later and plan this out, interest meetings and such. Anything else we need to know?"

He shakes his head. "Unless you have any other questions? My contact info and everything else should be in those folders. We'll meet up later to finalize everything, but that'll be probably next winter."

"Sounds good to me. Frank, you good?"

"Sounds good to me too." Frank grins at Gerard. "How much Italian art do you know?"

Gerard smirks a little. "I think I've got a fairly decent knowledge. Might brush up a little."

Frank nods. "I'll be sure everyone knows some basic phrases."

Gerard shakes the coordinator's hand. "Thank you. Should be fun."

Outside Frank smacks Gerard in the arm, grinning like a loon. "Italy! We're going to Italy!"

Gerard grins. "I know. I can't wait. Even if I do have to 'work closely with you,' that might be a pain."

"I know, I'm going to have to make sure you can use basic Italian phrases, just in case." Frank switches to Italian with a shake of his head. "We'll have to see each other during spring break or something. Practice conversing in this foreign tongue."

Gerard also switches over, sarcastically mimicking Frank's "I'll teach him some Italian too, just in case."

Frank just laughs. "I had to get you back."

"For what? What did I do?"

"Said you'd have to work with me. Unless that was serious, in which case I feel like a bit of an ass."

"Oh stop, there's no one else I'd rather work with. Do you wanna plan out meeting dates here, or at home?"
"Home is fine, it'll all be emails anyway. And I can put on sweatpants."

"Fair enough. So email the classes and parents tonight, start talking to them about it tomorrow?"

"I want to mention it to the kids in class before sending out mass emails that are gonna get ignored. Sound good?"

"Yeah. This is why you're gonna be in charge of logistics."

"Oh, I'm 'gonna be'? Not asking here?" Frank knows he's better at dealing with little details, so he's laughing, but teasing Gerard never gets old.

"Let's be real, if I'm in charge of that, it'll end in disaster. So I'll be in charge of convincing people."

"I know." Frank looks up at Gerard. "See, like this is perfect."

"It is. I'm excited." Gerard smiles back at Frank. "I get to take my boyfriend home."

"Yeah, they said Sicily, didn't he? Where in Sicily exactly?"

"I don't remember, we'll have to look at the brochures. I think it's mostly Rome, but I think we get at least part of a day in Sicily."

"No, where are you from? I can look at the plans and see if we can make that part of the trip."

"Bit outside Ragusa. Town might be gone, but the city's gorgeous."

"Alright. I'll look, see if we can get close. Is your brother buried there?"

Gerard ducks his head. "Yeah. And my dad. Maybe my mom, I'm not actually sure."

"Would you want to visit?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I would. I don't know if it'll work, but it'd be nice to try."

"I'll do my best to make it happen then." Back at Gerard's car, Frank waits for him to unlock the door and says "I'd like to meet them too."

As he unlocks the car, Gerard shoots Frank a small smile. "I'd be happy to introduce you."

Frank slides in with a smile. In the car, he starts shuffling papers out of the folder. "Oh, we can do like three different options. One of them has three days in Sicily, and 10 in Rome. The others go north instead. But we don't care about that. So. We get museum admittance and options for a ton of like, fun things. We can run some of that past the kids, I think, to see what they'd like..."

"Sounds like a plan. I think we're gonna want to talk a fair amount about architecture, Roman influence, move into the Italian Renaissance, cover everything up until then... I'll have to research everything that happened between times I lived there, but I think I've got a handle on everything..."
else." Gerard's eyes are bright with excitement, hands drumming on the wheel.

"Jeeze, you're excited. We actually have to get kids to go, you know that right?"

"I know, I know. But I think I've got some that will be interested, and just- it's home. I'm excited. Can't help it."

"I'm not trying to dull your excitement, I'm excited too. But we got a fair bit between now and then, including getting the kids interested. Wanna spend tonight getting everything ready to go?"

"Alright. I'm sorry, I know it's ages away, I'll try not to keep freaking out about it."

"It's not twenty years out, don't worry. Be excited. Try not to freak out so hard on your students, they might get a little freaked. I don't mind though, I know you're a freak." Frank heads inside waving the folder for emphasis.

Gerard follows him in. "You're so sweet, really. Just overpoweringly so."

"I know. Tell me about Sicily? I do want to hear about it from you." Frank drops his stuff at the kitchen island and leans against it, looking at Gerard.

"It's gorgeous. Especially in spring, it's warm but not too warm. The beaches are beautiful, and the forests- well, there are less of them now, that's kind of my least favorite thing about going back. But some of the buildings are incredible."

"We'll be there in the spring, you know?" Frank moves forward to pull Gerard into his arms, standing in the kitchen. "What's your favorite place there?"

"That's why I said it. The timing couldn't have been better, honestly." Gerard thinks for a moment. "Mt. Etna's nice. Don't know if I could choose a favorite, but I do like that. I don't know, a lot of the little coast towns are nice, too."

“I'm gonna have to get that camera. How are we gonna avoid sun on this trip?"

"Metric fuckload of sunscreen. We're gonna look like dumb tourists, but there's nothing else we can do. Long sleeves, when possible."

"Alright. It'll be fun. Mom texted during work by the way. I told her you have a garlic allergy; so, she wants to know if it's ok if she still has garlic in the house, if she doesn't cook with it. She offered to throw it out, but I told her it was fine as long as you didn't touch or eat it."

"Your mother seems incredibly sweet, honestly." Gerard hops up on the counter, swinging his legs. "Are we just gonna drive out on Friday night or whatever? We're only what? Two weeks out from heading down there?"

"Yeah. She's also excited to meet you, I can tell. I usually leave in the morning as early as possible. How early is too early for you?"

"Have you done the drive? I have no idea how long it takes from here."
"It's about six, seven hours. Depends on when you have to go around the city, how bad that is."

"So leaving super early in the morning might not be a bad idea. Say five or six am?"

"That would probably be best." Frank nods. "Cool, that's settled."

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Two weeks later, they plan to hunt that night, then pack, then leave. Neither of them can really sleep after hunting, and Frank is marginally more comfortable with going out to eat. It's still the worst part of being inhuman. Frank can't lie, the rest is pretty sweet, but hunting is something else. Gerard still drives out to the same neighborhood as before, but Frank doesn't need to be coaxed out of the car.

"Alright. Today, we're gonna see a kinda gross sports bar mostly populated by old white guys. Beautiful scenery."

"Gross. Let's go." Frank takes Gerard's hand and lets him lead the way to dinner.

When they get closer, Gerard loops his arm around Frank's waist, pulling him in tight. "The group out smoking in front of the bar," he murmurs. "If we can get one of them away- or the one right there, by himself."

Frank goes to Gerard's side easily, half playing along, half just because it's Gerard. "Your lead." He whispers back with a smile.

"I'll let you take this one, okay? I'll help you position him, though." Sure enough, they've chosen their target well. The man drops his cigarette and stubs it out, starting to move toward them with a nasty look in his eye.

Frank spares the man half a glance, then says, just loud enough the man can catch it. "You're really gonna let me lead this time? Are you sure babe?"

"Whatever you want, darling." Gerard angles them into the shadows before ducking in to kiss Frank. He looks up just in time to catch the flash of a beer bottle swinging at them.

Frank's been listening too, but only shifts enough to let the bottle clip his shoulder. He spins away from Gerard, taking a half-step back into the darkest patch. "Dude, what the hell?" The surprise is all fake, but the anger isn't.

The man doesn't even bother with any kind of explanation, just starts quoting bible verses, ending with, "All you fags are going to hell, and I'm ready to help you get there." Gerard clenches his fists and raises his eyebrows at Frank. "Anything you want to say in reply, babe?"

"Yeah. Look, motherfucker, I went to Catholic school too. You really think this is the first time I've heard that shit? You really wanna know why I'm going to hell? Come 'ere, I'll whisper it to you. Promise I won't suck your dick." Frank's smile is saccharine and deadly.
The guy takes a step closer, pulling his hand back to strike.

Frank’s a little faster, pulling his hand to the side before it makes contact and sinking his teeth in. The man’s unconscious within seconds. Gerard moves to keep a lookout as Frank drinks, looking back at him every so often. Frank drops him with a pretty heavy thunk in about a minute. "What a dick." After looking at Gerard for a moment, he clicks his fangs back and dulls his eyes.

"Yeah, pretty much. I'm assuming you didn't kill him, tempting as it was?"

"I did not. You taught me well.” Frank flashes him a smile.

“Unfortunately. What a dick. But still, better than having to run from murder charges. Let's keep heading up this way, alright?"

“His lucky day you have morals.” Franks snorts and follows Gerard back to the main street.

They follow much the same drill the next street over, picking a target and drawing them away. This time, when the person starts a tirade about how they're going to hell, Gerard can't help but remark to Frank, "There's really no creativity to this. People need to learn.”

Frank laughs, it really is true. He turns to the guy. "You need bible verses? There was a guy couple blocks back who could help you out."

A few spluttered insults and a quick attack later, Gerard's had his fill, setting the guy off to the side.

"Too easy." Frank's leaning up against the opposite wall, head tilted toward the street to listen for intruders, but he's watching Gerard.

"I'm almost getting bored,” Gerard agrees. "Still, we're done and ready to go. Let's head out."

Frank glances at his watch. "Let's pack and check time again. I don’t wanna show up too early, but sounds good."

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Packing is fast and neat, Frank and Gerard moving smoothly past each other, Gerard making sure he has one or two nice outfits, in case they go to dinner. Frank tells him to grab his suit, too, because Christmas Mass is a likely event. Gerard nods. “Should’ve known.” And adds it. “Okay, I'm done.”

“So am I. Ready to hit the road?”

The decide to take Frank’s car, only for familiarity. So Frank is the one who pulls onto the main road with a grin. "I'm actually really excited to see her. I haven't been home in a while. And this time I've
"I'm excited to meet your mom, she sounds great. I just hope I'm up to her standards."

"You will be. I can't see her not liking you."

"I'll do my best to be acceptable. And I love you a lot, so hopefully that'll be enough."

"That'll be more than enough. Oh, one thing though. You're now in charge of road trip music. Have fun with the radio." Frank flashes Gerard a quick smile, slightly evil.

Within a few minutes, Gerard finds a classic rock station he's happy with. "This okay?"

"Sure. I'm gonna judge based on what you sing along to and what you choose, but I like classic rock too."

"You're gonna call me old again, aren't you?"

"Nope. Unless you want me to."

"I'd kind of prefer that you don't do that."

"Then I won't. And I won't in front of Mom."

"I mean, as far as she knows I'm younger than you."

"Exactly."

Gerard leans back against the seat. "Let me know when you want me to drive, you just might have to navigate for me."

"I should be fine all the way, but sure."

"I won't make you do that, it'll get boring. We can switch partway through."

"If you insist, you should take the first half, because the interstate directions are easier." Frank pulls out into a gas station. "Which means we switch now."

"Fine with me." Gerard hops out and switches, sliding the seat back. "Tiny Frank."

"Fuck off." Frank's cheerful as he buckles in again. "86 South, point us to Jersey. You can manage that."

"Oh hush, or I'm leaving you." Gerard starts driving again.

"Oh yes, go visit my mother alone. Sure. That's not weird."

"We'll have a lovely discussion about how I was forced to leave you on the side of the road because you hurt me deeply."
"Oh ok. Have fun with that." Frank leans back. "I'll miss you until you come pick me up from the side of the road."

"So, like, three minutes."

"As long as it takes for you to turn around."

"Like I said, probably like three minutes."

"I'd wait longer, but I appreciate the haste."

"I get lonely pretty fast."

"Well, I'll be around, so hopefully you don't have to be lonely for long."

"I very much hope not, because I don't really like the thought of living without you."

"I'm not gonna get old and die on you Gee. Are you gonna propose at my mom's house? You're getting close to asking me to spend all eternity with you, and that sounds like marriage to me." Frank is teasing, but only a little.

"I'm not sure I'm quite ready yet, seeing as marriage and I don't have a splendid history. But maybe soon."

"I'm not saying you have to. Anytime soon or at all. I mean, considering the last person you married did try to kill you. We're practically married anyway."

"One day I'll make it official. I can almost guarantee you that."

"Sure. At the moment, I don't care that we're not officially married or anything. Someday it might matter. Right now I'm just happy with us."

"Me too. I think that's more than good enough for now." Gerard hums along to the radio quietly. Frank makes a quiet noise of affirmation and turns up the radio a notch. Gerard switches from humming to singing along, just as quietly. It's more habit than anything.

Frank closes his eyes to listen. "You've got a great voice."

Gerard stops singing abruptly. "Nah, just a song I know well enough to sound decent."

"Oh, don't stop singing. I don't care if it's just this, you sound good."

Gerard pauses for a second, self conscious now, before picking up with the song.

Frank closes his eyes again, careful not to make Gerard stop again. Sure enough, he keeps singing to the next song.

Gerard keeps it up for a while, singing along to the ones he knows and humming with the ones he doesn't.
Frank cherishes every second. Gerard's half-wasted on teaching, he's an artist himself.

After a while, Gerard falls silent, just watching the road. "Where are we? I haven't seen a sign in a while. That or I ignored it."

"Still on the interstate. I'll take over when the suns up. Try to figure out what state we're in at some point before that. I mean, it's pretty much a straight shot, but I wanna see how we're doing on time."

Gerard keeps driving, checking for signs as they go. Finally, he spots one. "I'm thinking maybe 3 and a half hours from here?"

Frank sees it too. "Yeah. I normally stop around here for coffee or something. Pull over and we can switch."

"You sure? I'm okay for now."

"Yeah. We need gas too."

"Alright." Gerard turns in at the next exit, stopping in a gas station and switching sides.

Frank fills the tank and slides in, pulling the seat forward again. "Tall fucker." He pulls back onto the interstate and flips through the radio until he finds a modern rock station.

"Your turn to sing, then." Gerard jerks his chin toward the radio.

"Oh no. I can't sing." He looks over. "You're not gonna take that as an answer are you? Fuck. Ok." He picks up with the next verse.

Gerard closes his eyes, listening to Frank's voice. It's odd, unique, but beautiful in its own way. He tells Frank as much when the song ends.

"Yeah, I sing weird. You still wanna hear it?"

"I like the way you sing. So yes, I wanna hear it."

"Alright. Don't expect to hear it too often. Unless you join in too."

"I will if you want me to."

"You should. Musical car ride. We're an hour out by the way. Do you want to call ahead?"

"Alright. What's her number?"

Frank reels it off. "I know people call while driving, but traffic here is a terror. Tell her we'll be in in an hour, and we stopped to eat."

"Sure." Gerard dials the number, trying to fight off the beginnings of nerves.

"Hello? This is Linda, who's speaking?" Ms. Miranda picks up on the second ring.
"Hi, this is, um, this is Gerard. Frank wanted me to tell you we're about an hour away, we just stopped to eat."

"Oh, Gerard! Lovely to hear from you! Well, I'll see the two of you soon! He make you drive yet?"

"I drove the first part, I offered. And yeah, nice to talk to you too. See you soon."

"Alright hon. Tell Frankie to drive safely, and I'll see you boys soon."

"I will. Thank you. Bye." Gerard hangs up and takes a deep breath.

Frank laughs, still watching the road. "My mom's shorter than I am, you know. She's not that scary."

"I know, I know, I just want her to like me. First impressions and all."

"Yeah. She will though. You offered to drive at two in the morning, she already likes you."

"I know, I know. I trust you on that."

"Good. Almost there."

"How close?"

"Thirty-five minutes probably. I was a little late on the 'hour out' call."

"Well, she's awake, I don't think it'll be a problem if we're a little early."

"True." Frank nearly misses a turn, curses and goes "I nearly miss that one every time."

"I guess that's how you know you're home. The familiar missed turn."

"True." Frank takes a final turn into a neighborhood and says "Almost there, you ready?"

"I think so. I'll try not to freak on you."

"You can freak out late at night and we'll sneak out to wander the streets. I used to do that all the time."

"Don't think that'll be necessary, but I wouldn't be opposed to it."

"Alright. It's different at night, so we might sneak out anyway, so I can show you, but if we need to as well. This is it." Frank parks in the driveway and leans over to give Gerard a kiss. "It's gonna be great. You're perfect."

Gerard kisses back. "Love you."

Frank smiles and slides out, grabbing his suitcase and heading for the door. When Gerard's behind him, he knocks. Gerard grips Frank's hand, holding tight until Mrs. Iero opens the door.
I have finished another semester of school and moved over 2000 miles and started a new job!!! Whooooo!!! Life comes at you fast and you uhhh,, forget to update your fic. My deepest apologies for any of you who were waiting.

When she opens the door a moment later Frank drops his suitcase to pull her into a hug, rather than drop Gerard's hand. "Mom! You look good! And -uh, this is Gerard." Frank is beaming, one hand now resting on her shoulder, other holding his boyfriend's hand.

Gerard is just standing there trying not to look more awkward than necessary. "Hi. Nice to finally meet you." He extends a hand.

Linda shakes her head at him and wraps him into a hug. "Glad to finally meet you, sweetie. It was about time for Frankie to bring me a serious boy home." She lets him go, looks him up and down and says "Well, come on in, the both of you. Can't stand on the porch forever."

Gerard follows Ms. Miranda and Frank into the house. It's small but comfortable, obviously well cared for.

Frank grabs Gerard's bag, and whispers "I'm gonna go drop these, don't turn down coffee," and heads down the hallway. Ms. Miranda continues left into the kitchen at the back of the house.

Gerard trails her into the kitchen. "Your home is lovely," he offers. It's a little forced, but he can't remember the last time he was in any situation like this.

Linda pulls out three coffee mugs and quips "I don't have a teenage boy living here anymore. Now, Frank says you teach too? How do you take your coffee?" Her accent is half Jersey, half Italy, thick and rapid.

"Just cream. Thank you. And yeah, I teach art. Upperclassmen mostly." Gerard takes a seat at the kitchen table.

Frank comes in, snagging a coffee off the table. He kisses his mom's cheek and says, "Mom, he speaks Italian, remember?"

“I remembered, I didn’t know if you two spoke it. It was your first language, right?” Gerard nods, and Linda nods back, eyes narrowed, but with the same fond half-smile Frank does. “When did your family move?”

Gerard decides on more of the truth. "We moved here when I was young, but my family spoke it so I didn't lose the accent."

Frank cuts in "Oh, Mom. The school is letting us chaperone a trip back, next spring! Rome, Sicily, museums, Mom, I'll visit the Vatican for you."

Gerard nods. "Art and Italian, it worked out perfectly."
Ms. Miranda looks between them, then back at her son. "It certainly looks like it did. How is the school, by the way. My son doesn't tell me much about it."

Frank mutters "Blame me, yup." but he's smiling all the same.

"It's not bad, as high schools go. Kids aren't too out of control, most of our coworkers are pretty nice- a few are insane, but most are nice."

"A few are fucking crazy." Frank nods, then glances over at Gerard. "But he's gone now."

Ms. Miranda looks concerned. "You're going to have to elaborate on this. Are you safe there?"

Frank answers first. "Yeah, mom, it's not another high school fiasco. Honestly the kids were probably in more danger. When he snapped, if he had snapped on a kid and not me, that kid would've been dead."

Gerard reassures her, "We're fine, everything turned out alright and he's in jail now, he just kind of lost it and we became the target."

Ms. Miranda glares at her son. "A student would have died you said, the man is in jail and 'we were the target', and you didn't say anything to your mother? Sounds like the high-school fiasco, if that's what we're calling it. He knows what that was, yes?"

"I've heard it mentioned, but I don't think I know the story. But I don't think it was really anything like that." Gerard grips Frank's hand under the table. "We're okay."

Frank nods. "He had nothing but anger and suspicion to go on. Mom, we can take care of ourselves. We can take care of each other too."

Ms. Miranda doesn't seem nearly satisfied with that explanation but she moves on for the moment. "Frankie's hardly told me anything about you, Gerard. Tell me about your family, where you've lived, all those things."

Frank says "Mom!" petulantly. "Please don't interrogate my boyfriend." "Well maybe next time tell me beforehand so I don't have to do it myself!"

Gerard squeezes Frank's hand. "I don't mind. We moved here when I was 5, lived about an hour from here for a while. Me, my parents, and my brother. I'm- I'm the only one left now."

Frank squeezes back. Ms. Miranda reaches over to pat Gerard's other hand for a moment. "I wont ask, hon, that's personal, but I'm sorry to hear it."

"It's alright. I mean, I'm still sad about it, but I've had to come to terms with it." Gerard casts around for another topic. "Where is your family from? Frank's given me some of the details but not all of them."

Ms. Miranda grins. "We came over with the old mob families. If you don't know the names, I wont say, but my grandfather always said they had some secrets on their side. My mother didn't marry in, and I only heard stories. We've been in Jersey the whole time though."

"Mom, you always said your dad said vampires?"

Gerard grins. "Vampires, huh? I feel like either is possible around here. Jersey's a weird place, but I kinda love it."
Ms. Miranda laughs. "I'll tell all the stories again if you two children want to hear them?"

"Sure, any of them you want to tell." Gerard sips at his coffee, trying not to laugh at the face Frank is making. Frank is looking at Gerard, trying to convey "You're a vain bastard, you know this is about you." Gerard ignores him. He's actually interested in what stories she'll come up with, how they've changed over the years.

"Well," Ms. Miranda takes a large gulp of her coffee. "My grandfather was in the mob. One day, when he was young, a little guy, you know, he was in the middle of a hit, and some guy comes wandering out of the alley they're in. But now he's seen a hit, so they gotta take him down. But nothing happens when they shoot at him. Good Catholic mobsters, all shooting at the devil himself. Then they saw the fangs. One of 'em knew about the Vampires, named the creature and tamed it. You know when you name a Vampire, it's bound to you."

She nods at them. "They used it to make threats. The Vampire would come in, better than any attack dog, because he'd look human, sitting on the edge of a desk all docile-like, then he'd show his fangs and the guys would shit their pants! None of 'em knew what he was, they thought these guys had God on their side!"

Frank gives Gerard another significant look, which he also ignores in an attempt to keep a straight face. "Wow. What happened to the, uh, Vampire?" Gerard asks, genuinely wondering how messed up the story has gotten in two generations.

Frank is trying to dig a hole into Gerard's head with his eyes, but mostly he's thinking in a panicked loop "I named you, I called you a vampire, what the hell is this binding you're talking about? Do you even want this, do you even want to be with me?" Ms. Miranda notes the stare and resolves to ask later. She shrugs and answers Gerard's question. "Died or cut and run. Granddad always said he grabbed a gun, stole some money and left, but I always thought it'd make a better story if the place got raided and the other guys took him. Vampires don't die easy, he might still be out there. Might be a Don himself, still smiling that too sharp smile." She raises her eyebrows significantly at the end. "There's half a picture of him somewhere with Granddad. I'll find it. I don't think you've seen it either, Frankie, I just thought about it."

"Wow. Sounds incredible. It'd be interesting to know the truth, someday." Gerard finishes his coffee, smiling at Ms. Miranda.

Frank buries his face in his mug. His mom is about to ask him some question he really doesn't want to answer, he can feel it coming and he's delaying it as much as possible.

Gerard senses the tension and does his best to diffuse it slightly. "Mind if we take a couple minutes to unpack, just settle in a little? I don't like leaving my stuff in bags too long, gets all wrinkly. That good with you?"

Frank thunks his mug onto the table. "Yeah, Mom, we'll just go get unpacked and settled in, okay? You go find that photo."

Ms. Iero nods, although she's still eyeing Frank with suspicion. "That's fine, dears. Whatever you need."

Gerard gets up and trails Frank down the hallway. Frank waits for Gerard to step inside and bursts out "Is it true? When you name a vampire, they're bound to you?"

Frank sits down heavily on the bed. "I named you. I just thought of it, but I named you. Back when you came after me in my room that one time." Frank looks scared, and hunches in a little more before asking "How much did that change?"

Gerard sits next to him, taking his hand. "Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Just saying I'm a vampire doesn't do anything, it's a different name. Every vampires has a secret name. It's the word that was on your tongue when you first awoke. You can taste it now, even if you don't remember it consciously. You'd have to give it to somebody or they'd have to know it for a complete binding."

Frank give a shuddery sigh. "Okay, but when Mom said that, I kinda freaked. I didn't know what it did. And I don't know what you mean about the word when I woke up, but I don't suppose I'll need it."

Gerard leans into his shoulder. "If you ever need it, you'll know it. I don't really understand how it works, but it's there."

"Sure. I'm glad I didn't Stockholm you into loving me somehow." Frank leans into Gerard's weight, feeling a lot better. They're going to have to do better about hiding some things this week, unless Frank wants to have to tell him mom about Gerard way early.

"I liked you before that, idiot." Gerard stands up and starts unpacking. "If the truth comes out, it comes out. We'll deal with it."

"Yeah." Frank watches Gerard unpack for a moment, then throws open the closets, grabbing a few hangers for himself.

Gerard starts hanging up shirts, brushing against Frank's shoulder. "We'll be fine. I promise."

Frank smiles. "Love you. This used to be my room, you know?"

"I'm thinking it didn't have all the dried flowers and stuff when it was yours."

"It did not." Frank looks around. "Still got the dye stains on the desk. It's still my room."

"What were you doing that you got dye stains on the desk?"

"My hair. I told you, I had amazing hair as a kid." Frank looks smug.

"Oh, I definitely need pictures now."

"Yeah yeah. After mom finds that old pic of you. Here, I'll go help her haul them out." Frank feels like he's been smiling most of the time he's been here, but it feels good. Everyone he loves is here.

"I will never understand why you decided that hair was a good idea, but I think it's the reddish one," Ms. Miranda answers.

"Mom? Gee wants to see my bomb-ass high school hair, which album is that in?" Frank feels like he's been smiling most of the time he's been here, but it feels good. Everyone he loves is here.

"I will never understand why you decided that hair was a good idea, but I think it's the reddish one," Ms. Miranda answers.

"Thanks mom." Frank pulls it out, flipping it open over his legs and skimming the pages. Eventually he finds a few of him and his high school band, when he'd shaved the sides and bleached them.

Gerard wanders in a moment later. "Oh dear lord. That hair is... well, you pulled it off, but it's quite
the look."

Frank laughs. "I had a punk band, I had to have the hair to match. Dyed it at home too. Came down for dinner and nearly gave mom a heart attack."

Ms. Miranda looks up. "You're still technically grounded, I think."

Gerard laughs. "How long?"

"I think it was 30 years. But I think I relented after, what, 3 days?"

Frank watches them laugh with a smile. "Yeah, it was three days. I had a show. Whole band came to pick me up and pretty much dragged me out."

"That was about how long I managed to be angry about it." Ms. Miranda laughs. She hands Frank another album. "The one picture is either in here or in this one." She starts looking through the second one.

"The mob vampire? Or more pictures of me looking embarrassing?" Frank pats the floor next to him for Gerard and opens the album.

"The mob vampire one. We'll have plenty of time to look at embarrassing pictures, don't worry." Gerard snickers and takes a seat next to Frank.

Most of the pictures are formal, a couple of a large house, some men and women posing together, a few wedding pictures. Ms. Miranda stops him on one page and points to a figure, mostly in the background. "I think that's him. There should be a clearer picture in a few pages. Your grandfather and a vampire."

Gerard looks over at Frank, expression mischievous. "I didn't expect them to look so human. Turn the page?"

Frank give the page a dramatic flip. There's two photos, one almost unmistakably Gerard, seated while another man stands, posed formally. In the second, his face is a slight blur, but as Frank leans closer, he can tell that Gerard's fanged out, eyes flashing at someone just out of frame.

Gerard touches the photo gently. "That's your grandfather?" He looks carefully at Frank and his mother. "I can see it. Something about the eyes."

"Ms. Miranda smiles and leans over. "Yes, the standing one. Frank Anthony Miranda. You could be in that photo too, the vampire is your spitting image." She's teasing gently, eyebrows twitched up the same way Frank does.

The corners of Gerard's mouth flick up. "Must be a distant cousin or something."

Frank snorts. "Long lost twin more like."

"Might have one of those, you never know." Gerard bumps Frank's shoulder.

"Guess so." Frank leans all his weight into Gerard, tipping him sideways a little.

Gerard pushes back, laughing a little. "So, any more embarrassing pictures I need to see?"

"Any picture of that kid in high school is horrible, so yes?" Ms. Miranda laughs, reaching out to ruffle her son's hair.
"Mom!" Frank ducks her hand, laughing. "I'm 31! You're supposed to show me off!"

"It's not like she exactly needs to show you off to me, I already like you."

Frank's ears heat up a little and he turns to kiss Gerard quickly. "You two are the worst, seriously. She's gonna haul out the really embarrassing ones now."

Gerard leans into him. "You've seen embarrassing pictures of me, it's only fair."

"True." Frank looks down and touches the face of the vampire in the photo. Ms. Miranda watches how they share space and smile at each other. They look like a good match. A few shared secrets, but a good match.

Gerard looks down at the old picture of himself, remembering. Frankie Miranda had been one of the nicer ones, as he recalled. Some of them had been rougher, yelling and pushing him around because he couldn't fight back, not when he was bound to them. But even then, Frank's family never mistreated them. Even then, and especially now.

Frank tilts his head onto Gerard's shoulder and looks at his mom. "How've you been? Jersey still treating you like it's queen?"

"Something like that. But I've been good. Little lonely now that you're hardly ever around, but still good. Took a job hostessing in the diner a couple months ago."

"Aw, Mom, you know you can always call. Where you hostessing? The old diner?"

"Yeah. And anytime I call it's always 'mom, I can't talk right now,' 'mom, I'm busy'. You're allowed to call me, you know."

Frank has the decency to look abashed. "Yeah. Sorry. It's been a crazy few months. I'll call more. Gee'll have to make me."

Gerard nods. "I'll do my very best." Ms. Miranda grins at him. "My boy been good to you? And if he hasn't, you better spill. I'll whip him into shape."

"He's been wonderful to me. You don't need to worry about that." Gerard turns and plants a quick kiss on Frank's cheek. "He's a good cook, too."

Ms. Miranda looks at her son with pride. "He tell you he uses his old momma's recipes?"

Frank laughs. "I could never betray your pasta like that."

"Well, whatever he tells you, I thought it was delicious. And I should know."

"Yes, I suppose you should. And tonight I thought we might go out to eat, as I didn't know you'd want to get up very very early to drive out."

Gerard looks at Frank. "That's fine with me, you?"

"Mom's just gonna show us off to her coworkers, I see through this scheme. I'll go."

Gerard bumps him. "You mean you don't want to be shown off with me?"

"No, no. This whole trip is me showing you off. I don't want to be shown off. These people are gonna have known me since I was younger than our kids. I'm afraid of them. They're gonna pinch my cheeks."
"Keep saying 'our kids' and your mother is going to think we adopted." Gerard shoots a grin in Ms. Miranda's direction before turning his attention back to Frank. "You'll live."

"Yeah, half of them spend half their days with one of us, there's so much overlap in our departments. Mom knows I have 48 kids already, it's fine."

"I feel like I have to parent about half of them, so I guess that's not entirely inaccurate."

"Yeah we give relationship advice, coach them through important life events, even actually teach. We've got kids. Speaking of, Andrew whispered 'thank you' to me last Monday when I changed the seating."

"Wait, really? That's great. I know they pretended to hate each other, but I can see them being good together."

Ms. Miranda laughs. "You do sound like proud parents."

"Probably as close as we'll get, any younger than that and I'm not sure what exactly to do with them."

Frank grins. "Don't they just get underfoot?"

"Something like that. I'm not willing to go anything under 15 years old, I taught freshman English one year. Never again."

Frank grimaces in sympathy. "Yeah you won't visit mine." He looks at him mom. "He won't visit my kids, he won't support them, he wants nothing to do with them. Mom, what happened?"

His mom shrugs and laughs. "Are they even his kids?"

Gerard laughs as well. "I don't think they're mine, I think he's cheating on me with the history department."

Ms. Miranda gives a gasp and reaches out to swipe at her son. "Cheating! And on such a nice young man! I raised you better than a history teacher!"

Frank laughs harder. "You should see him and the english teachers! They're like birds of prey!"

"Please, if I ever leave him it'll be for a music teacher. Maybe photography."

Frank's gasp has real drama. "Ms. Holton is married! Gee, that's too far, I wont fight off another woman's husband for you." He shakes a dramatic finger. "I will fight off biology teachers and the Spanish department, but you ask too much."

"Did you ever think about getting him into acting?" he asks Ms. Miranda. "He's very good." Then he turns to Frank and replies with the same melodrama, "I'm sorry for even suggesting that. Can you possibly forgive me?"

Frank turns his nose up, but Gerard can tell he's laughing. Haughty and amused, he asks "Can you defend me from biology teachers, arctic winds, and chloroform until the end of both our days?"

Ms. Miranda starts to look extremely concerned when chloroform is mentioned. "How many of those are a legitimate possibility?"

Frank says "None." at the same time Gerard says "All."
Gerard ducks his head. "The chloroform and the biology teacher thing was part of the, uh, incident we were talking about earlier." Frank grins shiftily at his mom, feeling all of 17 again. Gerard squeezes his hand and whispers, "Sorry."

Ms. Miranda seems to take a few seconds to figure out how to even react to that. "Frankie, what kind of school are you teaching at? Chloroform! Is there nowhere else you can find a job?"

"The school is fine, the crazy bio teacher across the hall, not so much. He decided he wanted to ask a little more about Gerard than I wanted to tell, and I got half-drugged. It's fine, Gerard walked in and talked him down."

"He helped, we got out of there fine," Gerard adds.

Ms. Miranda is not satisfied. "Teaching was supposed to be safe, not like being a rock star or being in the army or whatever else you wanted to do."

"Teaching is safe! He got fired for it. Gerard can attest, my worst actual injury was slicing my finger with the paper cutter."

"That's true. Idiot." Gerard grins at him fondly. Ms. Miranda relents, at least for the time being.

Frank grins back at him. "Thanks. You came to my rescue though."

"Yeah, I'm pretty good with adhesive bandages. It's an art form."

Ms. Miranda smiles. "You're dating a reckless idiot so I guess that's a good thing."

"He's mostly capable of taking care of himself. Occasionally I have to, like, remind him to eat or something, but other than that he's not too bad."

Frank sighs and slouches to lie on the floor. "Yeah, get all the shit talking done now, while I can hear it."

Gerard pokes him in the side. "Oh, hush. It's because we love you."

Ms. Miranda laughs. "Who else am I supposed to gossip about?"

Frank just tsks. "Other people from my high school. Some of them have to still live around here, don't they?"

"But that's all old gossip, this is fresh and new. And like he said, it's because we love you."

"Fine. Gossip about me. I'll go see what food you have, I wanna cook later this week." Frank heaves himself up and pads out of the room. Ms. Miranda turns an eyebrow on Gerard.

Gerard laughs. "We drove him off. I feel a little bit evil."

"Oh, he's only gone because he wants to go. He knows he has to give his old mother time to talk to the new boyfriend." She picks herself up and settles onto a couch. "You can't be that young, take a proper seat."

Gerard migrates to the chair next to the couch. "I'm actually a couple years younger than him."

"Oh really? How old are you?"

"28. So not a huge gap or anything."
Ms. Miranda nods. "How long have you been together, now?"

Gerard tilts his head. "I want to say a little over six months, but I'm awful with times and dates and things."

Ms. Miranda nods. "You've liked him far longer though, I can tell."

Gerard ducks his head, suddenly self-conscious. "Yeah. There were a couple months where we both kinda liked each other and weren't entirely sure what to do about it, but eventually we figured it out. Obviously."

Ms. Miranda leans over to pat his leg. "Yes. And you seem to be thinking long-term with him? It might be a little early to ask, but I am getting old."

Gerard nods. "Yeah. Hopefully. If he still wants me around after a while."

"Have you seen the way he looks at you? You could get him to stay long term, you know. If you asked." It's obvious what she's hinting at.

"I want to eventually. It's a little soon to know for sure, but... hopefully at some point."

"Good. If you weren't thinking about it, I'd have to bully him into thinking about it. And hopefully you two decide soon. You're keeping an old woman waiting."

"Sorry. I'll do my best to figure it out soon, I don't want to make you wait too long."

She stands. "See, you'd make a sensible step-son." When Gerard stands as well, she pulls him into a surprisingly strong hug. "You be very good to him, too. We might not still be in the Family, but I'll hunt you down if you hurt him."

Gerard hugs back. "You don't need to worry. I'll be good to him. Always. And I wouldn't cross you, that's for sure." She lets him go and walks back out to the kitchen, where Frank is rolling out cannoli dough, humming a Misfits song.

"Interrogation over? Did he pass?"

Ms. Miranda smiles, pushing Frank's hair back out of his face. "Yes, yes. He's good enough for my Frankie."

Gerard lingers an extra second, glancing back at his face in the old photo. Then he heads back into the kitchen, taking a spot up next to Frank at the counter. Frank moves over a step, halving the dough and passing half over. He looks up at his mom, sitting on the other side of the island. "Do I have to defend his honor?"

"No, but it could be amusing to hear. Give me your best defense argument."

"Well, he's Italian so I don't have to defend his heritage to you, he's a wonderful teacher, you can ask any of his students. And he's generous, smart, funny...handsome as hell. Uh, stood up to the worst teacher in the school for me, twice. Came over and gave me food when I got sick...Mom, he's pretty much been perfect."

"Alright, I think that's sufficient," Ms. Miranda laughs. Gerard stops rolling the dough long enough to kiss Frank on the cheek.

"Thank you for defending my honor, necessary or not."
Frank’s ears are a little red but he smiles at Gerard. "I don't know, she asked. Was it amusing?"

"A little bit. I'm very flattered that you like me that much."

"Please, you know how stupidly in love I am." Frank glances over at him.

"I have a pretty good idea. Even if I'm still more stupidly in love with you." Ms. Miranda smiles but says nothing. Frank's blush spreads a little to his cheeks, and he chances a look at his mother, who's giving him a clear "Marry that boy" look. Frank’s blush just gets deeper, and he turns back to the dough.

They finish the shells in comfortable silence, Gerard a little surprised it doesn’t feel awkward at all. While the fried cannoli shells and the cream filling chill separately, Ms. Miranda pulls out her pack of cigarettes. Frank flops into a chair at the island, skidding it closer to Gerard.

Ms. Miranda lights her cigarette with a fond smile. "You boys are old enough to have one, I suppose. Just one."

Frank leans forward. "Just for home, mom. I kicked the habit, remember?"

Gerard teeters for a moment before refusing. "Trying to quit. I'm actually on a decent run of going without at the moment."Frank pauses, about to light up. "I've never seen you smoke."

"Yeah. It's been a couple years, minus a few screwups."

"Huh." Frank shrugs and takes a drag. "Never seen any around your house. Couple years makes sense." Waving his cigarette he says 'Mom's a bad influence on me. I only smoke at home.'

Gerard shakes his head in mock seriousness. "Such a shame. Encouraging delinquency must run in the family."

Ms. Miranda puffs out smoke at him. "Cheeky boy." Frank just laughs more.

Gerard leans into Frank's shoulder. "I won't judge either of you too harshly for it, fear not."

"Better not, or you’ll be sleeping in the doghouse tonight."

Frank ‘ooooh’s that, and when she finishes her cigarette she asks if they mind filling while she watches a soap. Frank says they don’t and quietly asks Gerard how the interrogation went as they fill.

“Well, she hit me with an ‘are you gonna marry him’ about three minutes in."

"Damn, I thought at least Wednesday. You made one hell of a good first impression."

"I guess? I don't know, I think she just really wants you married off."

Frank snorts. "Sure, 3% of it is wanting to see me married." He takes a few chocolate chips out of the bag and goes to finish the last few cannoli. "All your charms."

"Mhmm.” Gerard sounds disbelieving. Frank just kisses him and plates a few cannoli to take out and eat with his mom, gesturing Gerard to follow. Gerard rolls his eyes and does.

—

Later that night, Frank climbs out of the backseat of his mother’s sedan and feels like he’s been thrown back in time. The diner looks the same, the sign looks the same, maybe a few seasons more
worn.

"Did this whole place freeze in time without me? Looks exactly the same."

"That one construction project's about it, really. Not much else has changed."

As Ms. Miranda heads for the door, Gerard shifts back to be next to Frank. "I kinda feel like a teenager on a first date," he murmurs. "We've even got a chaperone."

"That's probably a fair assessment, actually. Just picture all the old ladies as kids, they don't act much different and the same answers about you satisfy, mmk? I'll be here."

"Alright. Gotcha." Gerard opens the door, letting Frank pass. He follows him in, over to where Ms. Miranda is chatting with one of the hostesses.

Frank doesn't try to join the conversation, just waits behind his mom. "Yeah, I get what you mean about a middle school date." he whispers to Gerard.

"We'll live. Pretty sure." They're led to a table near the middle of the restaurant, two ladies still talking.

"Good. I kinda really do want to keep living with you." They all take their seats, catching the end of Ms. Miranda’s conversation. "...And he never calls but here he is, and now I've got to show him off."

Gerard surveys their seating positions and slides one to the right, ending up directly across from Frank. "Sorry. I hate sitting with my back to the door."

Frank just nods. "I know. Must be the old mafia roots."

As the waiter comes over Ms. Miranda reaches over to smack him on the arm, "You don't have any old mafia roots. And speak English, we're in public."

It takes Gerard no time at all to switch between the two languages, but back in Jersey he finds himself having to take a moment to remember the accent he's adopted, not slipping back into the one he used when he was last here. "Better?"

Ms. Miranda nods. "Much better, you don't sound like some Italian boy come to elope with my son."

"Oh, definitely wouldn't want that." Gerard looks across the table, trying to hide a smile at the face Frank is making. Frank rolls his eyes at him, smiling like he wouldn't have minded being swept off his feet.

After they order, food isn't long after. Over a few plates of burgers and fries, and a southwest omelette for Frank, Ms. Miranda asks how classes are going.

Frank swallows his food and answers, “It’s been great. I totally let slip Gee speaks Italian and he came home and went ‘why are they all asking me how to say fuck in Italian’ and I was like ‘oh, because I won’t teach them those swears.’”

“Those swears?”

“I teach them all the little old lady sayings, the ones Grandma used when I was like, ten. They all sound so funny when they use them to cuss me out over my vocab tests. They just tell me they want to sound like a native speaker.”
“Have they heard Gerard?”

“Yeah, I nabbed him in his planning period and made him give my seniors an impromptu lecture. I don’t think they understood half of it, because they were floored by his accent, but they listened really well.”

Gerard rolls his eyes. “There’s no way they actually understood me, and I was just rambling anyway, because you didn’t tell me you were going to make me talk to your class, so I didn’t know what to say.”

Frank shrugs at him, unrepentant.

Ms. Miranda smiles. "Maybe I should come out and visit your classes someday, yes?"

"Oh, that would be cool. Not sure how the school board would take it, but you'd have to not laugh at them, it's harder than it sounds."

"Put her in as a guest speaker," Gerard suggests. "Exposure to a different speaking style or something."

"Yeah, Mom, bring a couple of the other ladies from here who speak it too. We can talk about immigration and modern Italian heritage. Actually-" he looks at Gerard. "That could fit in really well before exams, because I could do a whole hell week culture thing, no tests."

"Oooh, yeah, that could work. If you bring in other people, we'll have to find them someplace to stay, but it could definitely work." Gerard looks at Ms. Miranda. "What do you think?"

She laughs. "Teachers till the end, you are. We could probably work that out. Frankie, how big is your apartment? Gerard? Could people stay with you?"

Gerard looks at Frank. "Between our apartments, maybe...two or three?"

"I've moved stuff out of my place into yours, but you don't have the extra office like I do. So I've got the master, the office, and a pull-out couch. If I give up my place to them, three pretty well, I think."

"One more on my couch if someone really wants to come. Won't be as comfortable, but it's big enough to sleep on."

"They'd have to put up with living with us though. But yeah, four at the most. Mom, who would you invite?"

"Hmmmm, not sure yet, but I'll let you know soon. I don't know who wants to travel that far."

Frank hand-waves that. "We've got four months to work that out. But it'd be cool if you could come down."

“Especially because my son hasn’t invited me to his home yet?”

“You’re welcome anytime, I didn’t want to ask you to take a seven-hour road trip.”

“I hear they’ve invented airplanes, these days.”

“Again, mom, you’re welcome anytime.”

She gives him the most mom-like look of fond exasperation Gerard has yet seen, and sets down her napkin, plate clean.
"I'm paying, Mom, don't even try." Frank raises his eyebrows at the waiter and he brings over the check. Frank hands over his card with a smile.

"You come all this way and you won't even let me treat you, what good are you?"

"I'm making up for not calling. You already treated with the cannoli."

"You did half the work on those!"

"And then I ate a bunch, what's your point?"

"Fine, fine, I'll let you pay this time. Next time, I'm paying."

"Sure." Frank winks at Gerard. Gerard laughs. "If it's such a crisis, I'll pay next time."

"Nope. You're a double guest and I'm going to pay."

"Oh, come on. Don't be old-fashioned or whatever, I don't mind paying."

"Maybe. You'll have to convince me." Frank signs the returned receipts and stands.

"I'll do my best." Gerard stands as well, moving next to him. "Where to?"

"We owe you a grand tour, so followMom." Frank wraps an arm around Gerard's waist as his Mom grabs her purse.

"Alright." Gerard leans into Frank's shoulder, waiting for Ms. Miranda to lead the way.

She looks at them and clicks her tongue. "The two of you." Gerard looks at Frank, blushing slightly. "What did we do this time?"

"Lying to me about only dating for half a year. You look nearly married. That doesn't happen that quickly, unless the two of you are exceptional."

Gerard shrugs. "I think it's only been that long." He raises an eyebrow at Frank. "You know how awful I am with time, has it been longer?"

"No? I think it was June that you got over yourself and actually asked me out."

"Okay, okay. I know it took forever, but we've gone through this before."

"Yeah. I'm glad you did when you did. It worked out."

"Yeah. I think it did." Gerard kisses Frank's cheek before starting to follow Ms. Miranda out. "But should we act less married, then?" Gerard murmurs at the door.

"Absolutely not." Frank replies, wrapping an arm around his waist. "Alright. I didn't really want to." "Better not."

"Is that a threat?"

"Absolutely." Frank takes the backseat with Gerard again. "Alright, Mom, since I'm 31 now, how about this time I admit all the places I got drunk as a teenager when we pass them on the tour?"

"I'll leave you in the woods and make you walk home, you should still be grounded. I don't know how I raised a delinquent."
Frank rolls his eyes, safely out of view. “Are we gonna go by the drive-in?”

“It’s winter, Frankie, it’s closed.”

“But it’s still cool.”

“You still have a drive-in theatre?” Gerard buts in.

Frank and his mom both nod in sync. “Yup. Hey, Mom, If we come visit during the summer, we could go catch a movie.”

Gerard catches his leading tone and grins. "I'll make him come back, don't worry."

"Yeah, yeah, I hear you saying it now. I'll wait and see."

“I haven’t been to a drive in in ages, I’d like to go.”

"Mom's skeptical we'll actually visit, not that you won’t go. I may have promised her a Christmas trip a few years ago that I never made..."

From the front seat Ms. Miranda clicks her tongue. "If I still had any power over you, you'd be grounded for that as well."

"Mom, I got sick! I even called!"

"I know, I know. I was mostly teasing you. Mostly. You could've made up for it by coming out at spring break, but I'll try to forgive you."

"Sorry Mom. I did come visit eventually. I'm making up for it, see I even brought a boyfriend."

"Yes, and he's been very nice so far. Not like that last one I met way back when you were in school. I didn't like him."

"Yeah, and you were right about him too." Frank looks over at Gerard and shakes his head as if to say 'that's a story for another day'. "Didn't you find out where he was working when I told you I'd moved out of his place, just in case I dropped off the map again?"

“Yes. After you told me how he treated you. And I kept an eye on him for a while afterward, at least through the gossip train. He went to jail for a while. Theft, I think."

"Ha. So, wait, is he still around here? Because as much as I want to shove it in his fucking face that I've got a much better boyfriend now, I don't really want to chat with him."

“He moved away. I think a few towns. Maybe north?"

“Alright.” To Gerard's questioning look, he says “My college boyfriend was uh, an experience I’m not keen to repeat. I’m actually surprised he got picked up for theft and not domestic abuse, but I guess his sorry ass stayed single.”

“I’m glad I’m not meeting him. If he was abusive, I might have had to say something a little inflammatory and start a fight.”

“He was, but you don’t need to say anything. I’ve won just by showing up with you.”

Ms. Miranda squints at them in the rear-view mirror, headlights sweeping the empty streets. “Six months and you haven’t told him about your bad relationship history?”
“I told him about Greg, the one I dumped because he wouldn’t meet you.”

“And I notice Gerard has opted to meet me. But you haven’t mentioned that other boy?”

“Not really? My bad decisions in college have mostly been kept to going in for a psychology major and not education. I don’t love talking about dating an abusive semi-alcoholic.”

Gerard gently interrupts. “I nearly got stabbed by a woman I once considered marrying. He doesn’t need to talk about this man, I know I don’t mention her until I need to.”

Frank gives Gerard a grateful look. “I mean, I can give you the gory details, you did tell me about your crazy ex and I didn’t tell you about mine.”

“I’m not keeping score.”

Ms. Miranda parks. “Well, this is the drive-in. And I know it’s up to you, but I know it still hurts you, Frankie. So I brought it up to know if he was aware.”

“I know. I’m not mad, I just haven’t talked about it much.”

“Okay. What else do we need to see tonight?”

“Drive by church? Also, I made Gee pack our suits, because I assume Christmas Mass is in the cards?”

Ms. Miranda smiles. “So I didn’t totally fail raising you. Gerard, I assume you’ll be willing to attend a Catholic Mass?”

“Of course. I wasn’t at all surprised to hear we’d be going to Christmas Mass. Will I be forgiven for not remembering all the hymns?”

“That, we can forgive. Frankie, do you want to go to confession with me tomorrow morning?”

“Mmmm, gonna pass on that one. Father Robert still doesn’t need to know about my sex life. That one’s still between me and God.”

“You know that’s not what I meant.”

“Do I need to go ask for forgiveness for lying by omission about Bob? Is this your angle?”

“No, but regular confession is good. I know I started losing this battle when you turned 14, but I still wanted to give you the option.”

“Yep, sorry Mom. Yes to Mass, no to confession.”

She shakes her head, entirely unsurprised. “Where else are we driving by?”

“Uh, the public school? Then we’ll pass the park on the way home.”

“You want to drive past there?”

“Why not?”

“Just surprised, that’s all.”

Gerard looks over. “You came out in high school, right?”
“Sure. If by ‘come out’ you mean sucked Matt’s dick in his parent’s guest room and go back to school to him telling everyone he’s straight and I’m a fag like he wasn’t the one who hit on me. He told our goddamn math teacher! In the middle of class!”

Ms. Miranda nods. “And then you got into a physical fight with him, and I had to come and pick you up in the middle of the day because you got suspended, and you didn’t ever actually come out to me, your old Principal told me what Matt told him about you and expressed the opinion you were going to hell.”

“What?” Frank’s head whipped toward the front seat. “You never told me he told you that!”

“You were miserable on the ride home, and I didn’t know what to even start to say, and then your father blew up and it really went on the back burner.”

Okay, fair enough, but wow, fuck him. Who says that to a parent?”

Gerard looks shocked. “You never told me that! You just said your father left when he found out you were gay.”

“I mean, he did.”

“Still. I’m so sorry, that’s awful.”

“Still.”

Ms. Miranda sighs. “We both did, but it wasn’t pretty.”

Frank reaches up to rest a hand on her shoulder. “I’m still sorry I shattered your marriage.”

“Oh, Frankie, don’t be.”

Gerard unbuckles and slides across the seat to hug Frank. “I’m sorry. At least things are sort of working out now.”

"Yeah, I'd say it's working out pretty well. Mom's not dying and neither are we." Frank clicks his own seatbelt out and twists fully into Gerard's arms.

Ms. Miranda sighs. “This is going to get too heavy for a Christmas vacation. I’m driving you boys out by the woods, and letting you walk home.”

Frank wriggles out of Gerard’s arms. “You want a few minutes?”

They make eye contact in the mirror, and Frank nods. “Yeah. Drop us here. I still know the way here.” She slows, and rolls down her window when Frank gets out, taking Gerard’s hand to bring him with. He leans back into the car to give his mom a kiss on the cheek. “Leave the door unlocked for us?”

“I will. Thank you.”

“I love you.”

She gives Frank a slightly watery smile, and drives off, Frank watching the car go a little ways, before jerking his head the other way down the street. “Let’s go this way.”

Gerard trails, not quite sure what delicate balance he’s upset. Frank is scuffing his feet a little on the uneven sidewalk, and when Gerard catches up, he just says “It’s okay, you didn’t do anything. It
was my dad and my school, but it was her husband and marriage too. She just wanted a minute alone.” Frank sneaks a glance at Gerard, hands both tucked into his pockets. “You want the whole story, then?”

“You don’t have to tell me.”

“I should, though. You’ve told me about Mikey and your wife, I should tell you about Matt and Bob.”

“Frank, you don’t have to.”

Frank shrugs. “I’m gonna anyway. So you don’t have to ask in front of Mom and worry you’ve upset something.”

Gerard frowns at him. “You don’t have to manage my emotions here, too.”

“I’m not wrong about you worrying you’ve upset something, though, am I?”

“Frank.” Gerard’s tone says yes, and Frank shrugs, kicks a rock into somebodies yard and turns left down the next street.

“Matt was just some hookup. It wasn’t the first time I’d blown a dude, but my friend Shaun and I would drive out a couple towns over, there was an actual gay bar that didn’t card till about 2, so I could hang out there. I never hooked up with an older dude, but there were other high schoolers who went there because it was the only place we had, so I had fucked around with a few guys from other schools. But Matt actually went to my school, and I saw him near that bar, and he sort of flirted, then flirted more at some basement gig down Ravine—” Frank indicates a street to the west with a slight lean—“and I called his bluff and we arranged to meet up when his house would be empty. All good, all fun, and we both left happy, and the next day ‘Iero’s a fag and I can prove it he begged to suck my dick!’ It’s also pretty gay to have a guy sucking your dick, but I guess the rest of the school didn’t give a shit and I got bullied pretty bad, because on top of that somebody heard my father was walking out and that just piled on.” Frank shakes his head. “I spent a lot of fuckin time in my room with my music way up or out wandering like this that year. Ended the school year and begged Mom to transfer me to the Catholic school. They weren’t super nice to me, but I just wanted to keep my head down, get into college and get out, and not worry I was about to get shoved into a locker or worse. Which worked. I graduated with a pretty good GPA, and off I went.”

Frank pauses. “Mom was proud of that. I’m glad I was able to give that to her.”

Gerard nods. “That sounds like hell.”

“It was pretty fuckin’ bad. But it’s informed me as an educator today, so I think overall I’m better for it. Thick skinned to homophobia, too. Now I just get pissed.”

“You were furious when McCracken implied he wasn’t okay with us dating.”

Frank nods. “Though the more I think about it I really don’t think he meant it as ‘you’re awful for being gay’ and more ‘you’re awful with shacking up with a vampire’, which, considering he swears up and down his buddy was killed by one, is sort of pitiable? I don’t forgive him, but he’s not as unhinged as I though he was for a while.”

Gerard nods again. “I’d still say he’s a little unhinged.”

“Oh, yeah.”
They both walk a little further, and Gerard squints at the low, grey clouds. “We’re lucky it’s winter, here.”

“I wouldn’t have offered to walk if it was sunny.”

“I know.” Gerard lapses back into silence for a while, then remembers something else. “Who’s Bob? Your Mom was talking about him.”

“Oh, I dated him for about two years in school. Probably more like nearly three. He was pretty shitty.” Frank sighs to himself. “I think I tried to date like, seriously too early in college, and I don’t think I had really worked out how I coped with my father actually being gone, or really accepted my own sexuality as anything other than like, shameful? And I got into a bad relationship. And I took advantage of a lot of free school therapy as an upperclassman and grad student.” Frank twitches a smile at Gerard. “Bob was a pretty classic story. Like, picture that guy who lives at the edge of town and wears a wife-beater and actually beats his wife and drinks a lot and just wants to hang with his buddies and doesn’t believe martial rape is a thing? Picture him in college, and he still wants a housewife, but he likes ass. That’s Bob.”

“Oh. And you dated him for two years?”

“Mhmm. That ended with me hiding in Jamia’s closet after about three months of him being a dick and literally locking me in his apartment, and her lying to his face about me being there and holding a baseball bat behind the door, just in case. God, Mom was pissed when I called for the first time in three months before she found out why.” Frank can smile at the memory now, even if it’s a little sad. His Mom had cried on the phone, and he had cried with her, then walked to campus and told his school administrator everything. He’d managed to switch his minor, which he hadn’t just failed a whole semester of, to his major, and not fail out of the school. He’s still pretty sure she had pulled some strings for him to get that through.

“God, Frankie, that’s awful.”

Frank reaches for Gerard’s hand. “It’s okay. I did my therapy, and failing out of my first major because of him is the only reason I’m a teacher today, so I’d say it worked out.”

“I guess. I’m glad you’re happier now.”

“I am happy now.” Frank squeezes Gerard’s hand. “I’ve got you. And Mom and are are pretty good.”

“I’m glad. You seem like you’re alright.” Gerard wonders if now is the time to tell Frank all about Grant and Gerard’s history.

Frank speaks again before Gerard has the courage to. “I think I am. And I think I’m happy, too. Especially with you.” Frank puts together a loving smile, and Gerard can’t bring himself to break it down again by mentioning Grant.
The rest of the evening is quieter, all of them a little caught up in their own heads. Ms. Miranda retires early, and Frank heads to bed not long after. Gerard follows, and falls asleep, surprisingly comfortable in Frank’s childhood bed. He’s woken up at 2:35am by a squeak and creak and sits up to find Frank with one leg back in the room, holding the butt of a cigarette and looking incredibly guilty. He’s been caught out smoking on the roof, barefoot and half-wrapped in the blanket from the bed.

“What kept you up?”

“I don’t know. Probably talking about Bob and Matt. And… I don’t know, seeing that picture of you earlier too.” Frank sits back down on the edge of the bed. “That was strange. One day I’m gonna be that old. And you look the same.”

“Does that bother you?”

Frank shrugs, something in the house squeaking. “Not in the break up with sense. But in the can’t comprehend it sense.”

“I can’t help with that so much.”

“I know. God, I want another cigarette. How are we gonna tell Mom about you, now that I’m a vampire too? That’s gonna be her first fuckin’ question, because she knows I’d’ve asked.”
“I don’t know. You know her better. Would the truth hurt?”

“Yeah. I think she’ll flip any way it goes now.”

“I’m sorry.”

Frank gets up and goes to the window, digging out another cigarette from a pack in the desk and opening the window to light it. The cold air trails in, but the smoke stays out. “It’s not your fault.”

“Sort of is.”

Frank shakes his head. “Timing isn’t, so stop being a martyr about it.”

Gerard sighs. “Okay. But I don’t know about your Mom.”

“Neither do I.” Frank ashes out the window as the house creaks again. “I’ll tiptoe around it, we can see how she feels. He shrugs.

Gerard shrugs back. “Bring back that blanket soon?”

“Oh,” Frank turns with a smile. “Yeah, one second.” He stubs the half-smoked cigarette out on the shingle and closes the window, ducking back inside to curl up next to Gerard again, throwing the blanket over both of them.

Gerard hugs him close. “I’m pretty sure it’ll work out.”

Frank rasps a laugh. “Thanks for the faith. We’ll figure something out. Worst case, we do actually elope to Italy. At least for a few years till Mom forgives me.”

That makes Gerard laugh too. “Okay with me.”
Frank turns for a kiss. “Love you.”

“Love you too.” They settle into each other and both fall asleep, curled up perfectly still until morning.

Ms. Miranda heading to the kitchen wakes Frank up, and he slips up, nodding a sleepy hello to his Mom and ducking outside to grab the paper while she sets up coffee.

She turns away from starting the coffee maker, "You're up early."

Frank yawns. "Used to it by now, I guess. Gee's still half asleep. I think the drive is catching up to us, can we stay in today?"

"Sure. I knew driving at some ridiculous hour or the morning would get to you at some point. And besides, I think it's supposed to rain at some point today anyway, might as well just stay here."

"Thanks Mom. And I gotta ask, before he gets up: do you like him? Do you approve?"

"I do. There's something odd about him, and I wish I knew what it was, but overall I think you made a good choice."

Frank nods, a little relieved. It mattered quite a bit that she approved, more than Frank had initially reckoned, if the lightness in his chest was related. "I'm sure all our secrets will come to light."

She raises an eyebrow. "Oh? Any secrets you want to tell me now, then?:

"None of mine, no. I mean, there's nothing life-threatening I know about either."

"That's good. I'm not sure I could approve if something about him was life-threatening. I rather like having a live son."

"Do I feel alive?" Frank pressed a hand to his own forehead. "Because I feel alive."

"You look fairly alive, and I'd prefer to keep you that way."

"Alright. I'll settle with fairly alive and staying that way."

"Sounds like a good plan. Now, are you staying up, or going back to sleep?"
"I'm up, I'll stay up."

"You going to wake him up?"

Frank shrugs. "If I make coffee loudly, he'll show up." He pours a cup and dashes cream into it, spoon clinking loudly.

Sure enough, a few minutes later Gerard appears, rubbing his eyes.

Frank nods at his Mom and slides a cup Gerard's way

Gerard catches the look between them. "He totally just baited me, didn't he."

"With coffee. And here you are." Ms. Miranda smiles. "Frankie, why do I get the feeling you spend more time sleeping together than apart?"

Gerard blushes faintly and takes a large sip of his coffee to avoid having to answer.

Frank doesn't answer either and just says "Guess that's gonna be one of our secrets."

Ms. Miranda just shakes her head knowingly. "You've never been much good at secrets, Frankie. It's just the truth."

"Yeah, I can't actually plan to keep them with you. You always guess."

"Mhm. Maybe if you hadn’t acted so married."

"Damn, paying attention. Spill what you know. Guess everything. Dare you, Mom." Frank cuts a quick glance over at Gerard. He knows his Mom doesn’t know what she’s guessing for, but he wants to check to see if Gerard's ok with it.

Gerard closes his eyes for a second and nods before Ms. Miranda starts guessing. She starts with, "Well, you're living together, obviously. Gerard's place, I assume?"

Frank nods. "Moved in a couple of weeks ago."

"I can't technically say I approve, but I also can't stop you." She shrugs. "Gerard, I think you're richer than you want to appear, not that that's important, just a little odd. You offer to spend money like it means nothing. And... you're not quite human, are you?"

Frank raises his eyebrows. "Before you hit that last one again, what about the money thing?"

"He offers to buy you things like money doesn't mean all that much, and in my experience with teachers, you don't make all that much." She's talking to Frank directly now, like Gerard's not even there. Gerard's not sure if that's good or bad, but he does know he's kind of terrified of how the next few minutes will go.

Frank slides into the seat next to him and shrugs at his Mom. "We make enough. And you get a good mutual fund going, you're pretty good."
"You're stalling, Frank."

"Jeeze Mom. Lay it on me then."

"He's not human. That much is clear, once you're looking for it. But you... are you still human?"

"Me?" Frank feels his stomach drop out. "Pretty sure once you're born human, you're human till you die."

"Not necessarily. Just tell me, Frank. The truth."

Frank looks away, catching Gerard's gaze. He really should have known this would happen, and he has no idea where to go from that.

Gerard speaks first, hoping to draw some of the attention away from Frank. "You're right. I'm- I'm not human. The Vampire in the picture- he's not a distant cousin, or some lookalike, or any of that. He's me." He's not sure how to finish. He just ends with. "I'm sorry."

Ms. Miranda looks at him for a long, quiet moment. "Did he know? Before you got together?"

Gerard nods, but Ms. Miranda is back with another question, quieter this time. "Did you turn my son?"

Frank answers instead, quiet and miserably fierce. "He had to."

"Oh? Explain why he 'had to.'" There's anger barely concealed in her voice now, and Gerard shrinks back slightly.

"Because if he didn't do it, he was gonna die. Because he got staked." Frank's voice is stronger, steel threading into it.

"Frank, have you lost your mind? Has he brainwashed you, are you- bound to him somehow?"

"No! And also no." Frank grabs blindly for Gerard's hand. "That teacher that hated us? He thought he knew about Gerard too. So he drugged me to get Gerard to come after me and fucking staked him in the heart. He was gonna die. So I told him to."

Ms. Iero swears softly in Italian. Then she turns her gaze on Gerard. "Get out of my house. And Frank, we are going to have a very serious talk about the risks you're taking with your life."

"No, Mom! Let him stay. Please. We can talk. But don't kick him out. Please?"

"No. He's leaving. Maybe he'll get to come back. We'll see."

Gerard squeezes Frank's hand. "It's okay. I love you." He kisses Frank on the cheek and walks out the door.

Frank watches him leave with something like panic welling up. When he looks back his Mom is
glaring in a way he hasn't seen since the last fight he had with his father.

After a few seconds, the anger breaks. "What did he do to you, Frankie?"

"Nothing special Mom. Read the same comics, had the same sense of humor." Frank sounds defeated. What's done is done, and he's left scavenging the working pieces. Again.

"Did he hurt you? Threaten you?"

"No. He starved himself trying not to even come close to the possibility. Ask him too. It's the same."

"I'm not going to ask him anything. He's lied to me enough. How old is he, anyway?"

"Mom we couldn't really walk in your door and put it in the introduction. He's 348. And we've tried to lie as little as possible." Frank pauses. "I wanted you to know him -to like him. As a person. The way he is."

"I thought I did. But now I'm not so sure."

"The way he acts and what kind of a person he is, none of that changes."

"He's a good liar, Frank. How do you know the things he tells you are true? I mean, a 348 year old vampire falling in love with a 31 year old teacher just seems unlikely. He's using you."

"Mom, he's a shit liar, trust me. And if he's using me, why did I have to talk him into doing it so he didn't die in front of me?"

Her voice drops again. "Did he tell you that? Because according to the stories, they can make you forget."

Frank nods. "It's not selective memory washing, it's short term memory loss of right before we bite you. But there's no way to create a false memory. I'm telling you that, because I remember pulling a stake out of his chest and begging him not to die."

She sits back in her chair. "We can. You're one of them. I don't know how to get used to this. I'm not sure you should've kept him alive, Frank. Not when this is the cost."

Frank looks down at the table. "It's not a bad trade-off. And just remember, yesterday you wanted us to get married. We haven't changed between then and now. And I'm sorry you had to find out like this."

"How did you want me to find out, then? After you were married? When I started noticing that you weren't getting older?"

"We planned to tell you about Gerard this week or next time we visited. So you could get to know him first. And when we planned to visit in the summer, I was going to tell you about me. Before you hated him on the spot for it. Which is what I was afraid of. I mean, we didn't plan to turn me. It just.. happened."

"I'm not sure I hate him. But I'm not sure I can accept what he did to you, either."
Frank nods. "Could you accept it if I pretty much did it to myself? I did slice my own arm open."

"For the love of- Frank, I thought you'd started to understand the basic concept of self-preservation."

"I never fully got that one, sorry." He offers her a weak half-smile. "Comparatively, this is far from the worst repercussion for stupid things I've done."

"Honestly, here I am thinking my son's found a nice, polite, normal boy that he wants to settle down with. But no. You have to choose some immortal creature that knew my son's grandfather, and has been using him for who knows how long. Wonderful."

Frank hunches his shoulders again. "He's not using me. I can't give him blood anymore. I don't have enough. And he didn't know that Frank Miranda was my grandfather till he pulled out some old photos he has and I recognized him. And he is nice. He's wonderful. And I'd like to stay with him."

"Frankie, you know I'm not saying any of this to hurt you, right? I just want you safe. That's all I've ever wanted."

"Yeah." Frank stands and walks around the table to hug her. "Please talk to him too though? You'd probably like how he talks about us."

"I'm not quite sure but you mean by that, but I might talk to him. We'll see. But I need to know- did he attack you before you knew? Or any of the kids?"

"I just want you to trust him. He did, a couple times, just me. I found out pretty fast. And I was mad and he was sorry and then nearly fucking starved himself so he wouldn't, and I told him to."

"Alright. I'll talk to him. Does he have his phone on him?"

"Probably not. But he won't have gone far, he's probably on the back porch. It's too sunny. You should go invite him back in."

"Alright. Go to your room, okay? I want to talk to him alone, without you defending him."

"Sure. Love you." Frank heads down the hall and Ms. Miranda opens the back door.

Gerard's been sitting on the back porch, unsure of where else to go. He jumps when the door opens. Ms. Miranda doesn't look thrilled, but she says "Please come back inside." and holds the door open for him.

"Thank you." Gerard steps back in, hovering just inside the door.

"I'd like to talk to you. Mostly about my son, but also about you. Come sit in the kitchen with me?"

"Okay." She doesn't seem angry anymore, but she also doesn't seem to have completely changed her mind. Gerard takes an uneasy seat in the kitchen.
"Did you ever use him? For anything? With his consent or not." Ms. Miranda is tired of skirting around the problem. She doesn't know how safe her son can be with this vampire.

"I was using him for- for blood. Sometimes he knew, sometimes he didn't. And I'm not proud of that, but I've apologized about 50 times, and he's forgiven me."

"Does he know about all the times now? Actually, why did you start doing that to him?"

"The paper cutter thing, the one he probably told you about, that was the first time. He was bleeding, I was starving, I couldn't really help myself. So that was where it started. And yeah, he knows."

"Why him? Why did you let it go this far?" She looks away for a moment. "What did you change about him?" The last question is the quietest, shivering into the air. 

"I didn't change anything about who he is. Everything about him, personality-wise and everything, it's all the same. All that changed is what he is."

"Then why is he hiding this from me? You're the only thing that's changed. Why does he want to hide you?"

Gerard's brow knits in confusion. "As in, why didn't he tell you earlier?"

"Why doesn't he tell me anything? And I don't mind not telling me, but he hides it?"

"He hid what I was because he wanted you to meet me first, get to know me as a person. Once you knew about me, if you weren't totally freaked out by it, we were going to tell you about him. I think he just- just wanted to know if you were going to hate him when he told you."

"I don't like that. Now everything I know about you is a lie. And I don't know if I approve of you dating my son, either."

"I'm sorry. I am. But I'm still the same person you thought I was in terms of what I'm like as a person. And I'm sorry you feel that way, but I do love him. Very, very much."

Ms. Miranda snorts. "Can you defend what he did? He's eager to take all the blame for it, but it's your fault too."

"It's more my fault than his. All of it, really. He only lied to you because I was... I don't know. Afraid, I guess."

"And? Do you have anything to say to it being your fault?"

"Just that I'm sorry. Everything I did, I thought was the best idea at the time, and more often than not I was wrong."

"What happened? Specifically. This is my sons life. And he recklessly put it in your hands."

"The attack and having to turn him and everything?"

"Everything you have to tell."
"I'll start with that, I guess. I went to ask the one biology teacher to close the window the day it was sleeting and he confronted me. Trying to figure out what I was, because he had figured out it wasn't human. He started antagonizing Frank and I about it, and apparently he decided a reasonable solution was to kidnap Frank to demand answers from me. So he called me and told me where to find them, I went up, and he started threatening me. Eventually, I guess I confirmed his suspicions and he figured it out, so he came at me with a stake. He got a hit in and I was dying. I was ready to die. But Frank kept asking me what he could do, asking me not to die, and eventually I told him. He wanted me to do it, to turn him if it would keep me alive. And... And I did it."

"This teacher attacked my son, knowing you would come after him?"

"Yes." Gerard bites his lip. "And I went. So McCracken wouldn't hurt him."

"You hurt him. Was that what you intended?"

Gerard's eyes widen. "Never. God, never. I didn't think- I mean, that's not a reasonable thing to do, kidnap someone. I didn't think he'd go that far."

"Did this teacher hurt him? God, what did you think would happen?"

"Nothing serious. I think he cut him a little, but it healed when I changed him. And I don't know, I thought- I thought he'd just go after me, try to hurt me. And that was okay, I would either deal with it or not, but..."

"Then how the hell did you end up with him begging you to kill him?"

"I was dying, and that was the only way I wasn't going to die. I guess he didn't want me dying in front of him."

"Christ." Ms. Miranda sighs. "I don't know how the fuck my son has gotten involved in this, and I don't fucking appreciate it, but he's pretty firm on you. Would you do the same for him? Can you protect him?"

"I'd do anything for him. I promise. And I'm sorry, you have to believe at least that."

"I'm going to have to believe it I think." Ms. Miranda stands up. "It is what it is then. I'm going to make breakfast, if either of you want it. Go ask, he's in his room."

"Thank you." Gerard breathes out a sigh of relief. "Thank you." Gerard heads off to Frank's room.

Frank sitting on the bed, uselessly fiddling with his laptop, trying to listen without eavesdropping.

Gerard knocks on the door. "Frank?"

"Yeah?" Frank swings it open, trying to not be too hopeful. They might be getting kicked out.

Gerard goes over to him and just hugs him for a minute, holding him close. "We're okay. She's not happy, but she's not kicking us out, either."
Frank relaxes into the hug abruptly. "Thank God." He murmurs.

"She kind of hates me. But she's still making breakfast for us, so I don't think it's unfixable."

"Okay." Frank clings onto Gerard for a moment. "I didn't want telling her to go like that. At all."

"I know. I know. But it's done, and we're okay."

"And she's not kicking us out of the house." Frank finally lets go. "She kept asking me what I thought I was doing, if I really knew the real you."

"I think you do. Do you think so? And she's not really mad at you, I don't think."

"I hope I do. And she was mad, but it's done. We've all got to deal with it now. That's how she was last time I had to tell her something this big, anyway."

"I think it seemed like she was more worried about you than mad at you, honestly. But she let me come talk to you, at least, so I guess she doesn't think I'm an immediate threat to your safety."

"Probably. I said 'we can't' talking about vampires at one point, and I think that threw her."

"Yeah, I can see why that'd freak her out. Overall she's actually taking it pretty well, I think."

"Yeah. Hope she keeps doing that." Frank breaks out of Gerard's hold. "Let's try starting with coffee and breakfast again, huh?"

"Sounds good." Gerard stands and takes a deep breath. "You ready?"

"Sure." Frank kisses Gerard, just once, then takes his hand and heads back for the kitchen. Gerard balks a second before taking the final step into the room, but he squeezes Frank's hand and walks forward.

Frank grabs a glass from the drying rack and looks at Gerard. "Orange juice?"

"Sure." Ms. Miranda is more or less ignoring them. Gerard supposed it's her way of trying to cope with everything that's just happened.

Frank and Gerard sit, quietly watching Ms. Miranda put two slices of toast in the toaster, and plop butter into the pan on the stove. "Do the two of you plan on eating human food again?" She's half turned to them, looking mostly at the eggs.

Gerard looks at Frank. "I think I'm okay. You?"

Frank nods. "Pass me a mug though? I do want more coffee.” Gerard goes to reach for one only to find Ms. Miranda already grabbing it. She gives him a look that says she's still unhappy with his presence.

Frank notices. "Mom. You talked to both of us. We did what we did. We're both okay with that. Can you-What's still bothering you?"
"Just trying to get used to this. And still angry that you both lied to me."

"Alright. I'm sorry, but we felt we had to."

"I know, but that doesn't mean I have to be happy about it. I'm not really happy about any of this, but it can't be helped, I suppose."

Frank just takes his coffee and nods. There's no good answer for that. He just has to hope she decides she's ok with it.

"And I suppose you're not going to change your mind about any of this," she continues.

Frank looks at Gerard. "Change my mind about what? There's no undoing anything, and I don't plan to leave Gerard anytime soon either."

"Alright. I've done all I can do. I suppose I'm just going to have to try to get used to this."

"I'd like you to," Frank says, quickly hiding his face in his coffee as soon as he says it.

"We'll see. But until then, I think I'm going to have to put my blessings and all that on hold."

"We can go. We can drive out tonight? Today, probably, if you want us gone."

She sighs. "No, no, I don't want you gone."

"Alright. Up to you what to do though."

"I think we'll just... just try to go back to normal, for now. I'm not really sure what else to do."

"I think that would be best. We do try to be normal. For ourselves and everyone else."

"That's what we'll do, then. What are you planning on doing today, then?"

"Planning on staying in. Playing cards? Getting to know each other? Again?"

Her eyes narrow at the last part, but she says, "Okay. Whatever you want to do."

Frank shrugs. He's kind of out of his depth here. His Mom seems to be viewing him as a totally new person, but Frank doesn't feel that way. He looks at Gerard. "Anything you feeling up for?"

Gerard shrugs. "I don't care. Cards are fine?"

Ms. Miranda serves herself breakfast and looks at them. There's a long pause, and she lets out a breath. "The two of you should get dressed at some point. You look like petulant teenagers."

It breaks the tension, and Frank smiles. "Teach 'em long enough, become one yourself."

"Apparently. Awful excuse though." She cuts an egg.
Frank finishes his coffee. “Okay, I’ll go shower.”

Gerard stands. “I need to unpack a little bit more, so I’ll do that while he showers.”

Ms. Miranda accepts the escape for what it is. “Alright.”

Frank and Gerard head upstairs and split, quiet but not as uncomfortable as it could be. When they reappear downstairs, Ms. Miranda is running her own shower. Frank washes the breakfast dishes, a bit at a loss of anything else to do.

Gerard sits at the island. "So... that didn't go as bad as it could've."

"Yeah, we could be kicked out." Frank's using the same tone he uses on students who piss him off, authoritarian and more than a little hostile.

"Frank..." Gerard takes a minute to collect his thoughts. "I'm sorry I fucked things up between you and your mom. I know how important she is to you, and I'm sorry."

"Shit." Frank turns and sits heavily on the other barstool. "It's not your fault, I'm not mad at you. I'm not mad- but it really fucking hurts, actually, that she doesn't trust me. But it could have been a lot worse, you're right."

"Hey, this isn't permanent. She'll trust you again. I'm not entirely sure she'll ever trust me, but that's okay. You're her son."

Frank gives him a tight grin "I'll try not to take out my mood on you. It just -could have gone a lot better." He stands up and starts more coffee, needing something to do with his hands.

"It's okay. Be mad if you want, I won't blame you."

"I shouldn't be angry at you though. And for that, I'm sorry."

"No, I get it. It's okay." Gerard kisses Frank briefly before Frank can sit back down. Upstairs, the shower shuts off.

Frank goes down the hall again to the living room, grabbing an old sci-fi novel off the shelves and curling up at the end of the couch, jerking his head at Gerard to follow him. “Go pick a movie and play cards with her? That’s pretty much the ultimate olive branch.”
Ms. Miranda comes downstairs to find Gerard shuffling cards and Frank reading, and smiles a little. “You boys going to play poker?”

“I think Frank is a little occupied, but I’ll play with you?”

“Alright.” She sits on the couch next to her son, and Gerard pulls the pouf over to the other side of the coffee table.

"Are we playing chips, or just playing?"

"Oh? You want to pull out chips?" Ms. Miranda smiles, all teeth. "Sure." She pushes herself up from the couch and goes to pull them out.

"I mean, no money, I just prefer playing for something."

"We can play for chips." Ms. Miranda settles back down and picks up her cards.

Gerard picks up his cards, taking them in and tossing a chip in the center. "Okay. Let's start.

Ms. Miranda matches him and asks "Raise?"

"Raise." Gerard places another chip in. They play their way through the first hand, and very soon Gerard's finding it difficult to keep the profanity to a minimum. It's been years since he had someone to play with, and he's more than a little rusty. Ms. Miranda isn't lacking for practice either. She's played, but it moves a little faster with Gerard, and she's not keeping ahead the same way she's accustomed to.

A few hands later, though, Gerard's losing rather spectacularly. Frank's mostly abandoned his book in favor of listening to Gerard swear violently in Italian under his breath. He laughs as Gerard shakes his head and finally folds. "She taught me. I can count on one hand the times I've beat her."

Gerard wins the next hand, but it's not enough to catch him up to Ms. Miranda. "I swear, I was good at this game once."

"Once?" is all Ms. Miranda asks. "How long ago?" the question is surprisingly light, considering how angry she had been.

"Mmmmmmm forty years ago? Fifty?"

"Too long, either way. That's when I started learning."

"Definitely too long. I was on my own for far too long to stay in practice."
"Make Frankie play with you. Maybe someday you can beat me." She shrugs like it's never going to happen.

"Somehow I'm not sure I'll get back up to that level anytime soon."

"Glad you're being realistic. Frankie, you should join this hand. You should always be good at one form of hustling."

Gerard snickers as Ms. Miranda scoots over to give Frank space to sit up on the couch.

"I hope you're laughing because you've got another money maker in your back pocket?"

Gerard quiets quickly. "My notable talents are few and far between, and no longer include this apparently."

Ms. Miranda shakes her head. "Practice." She deals Frank in and he glances at his cards with a sigh.

"That good, huh?" Gerard checks his own cards, only slightly better than sigh-worthy themselves.

Frank nods, then raises in, asking "If I'm broke I'm out, right?"

Gerard raises a questioning eyebrow in Ms. Miranda's direction. "Should we cut him some slack since he just joined, or take him out?"

Ms. Miranda grins. "Take him out."

When the hands are laid out, Frank's gone almost all in, laughing at himself as he does it. He also has the strongest hand. "Mom, you forgot the only times I beat you were when I just went ham on the bluff."

Gerard kicks him lightly. "I hate you. I really do. You're gonna knock me out."

Frank grins. "Maybe. We'll see."

Gerard just grumbles and puts in for the next hand.

Ms. Miranda laughs, still holding most of the pot, and lays out the first cards.

Two hands later, Gerard's teetering on the edge of defeat. It's a combination of bad cards and bad strategy, and his last desperate bluff is just weak.

Frank just shakes his head and lays down his cards, decimating Gerard and narrowly beating out his mother, three 5's to three 6's.

Gerard flops off the pouf and rolls over, burying his face in the carpet. "I hate you."

Frank reaches over to pat his side. "You were holding up until I came in."

"Not really." One of Gerard's favorite things about not having to breathe is being able to lay face
down for a significant period of time.

"Well, you hadn't flunked out."

Gerard peeks one eye out. "Your standards for my success are worryingly low."

"You're playing poker against my mother. If I had high standards, I'd be crushed."

"I feel zero percent better now, but okay."

"Sorry babe. I gotta tell it like it is. Like how I don't understand why they don't screen art classes for artistic talent."

Ms. Miranda snorts. “You complain about your Italian freshman far too much to be having that argument.” She shuffles the cards and puts them away, getting up and coming back with her cigarettes. “If you boys don’t want one, go look into haircuts. You could both use one."

“Yes, Mom.” Frank mutters, only a tiny bit sarcastic. She swats at him and he yelps, heading for the phone.

“You’re a menace!”

“You look like you’re trying to look like a hippy.”

“It’s not that long!” Frank runs a defensive hand through his hair. It’s getting there, but it isn’t that long yet.

“Mhmm. Make your boyfriend take you.”

“Gee, you want a haircut?”

“Sure?”

“Oh...” Frank dials the number pinned to the cork board. He chats with the barber for a moment, laughs, and hangs up. “Okay, he’s got room at 2pm. Can we put on a movie?”

Ms. Miranda shrugs. “Go for it.”
Frank does, and they all settle in with each other again. Poker has reset the balance, it seems. The afternoon passes quickly, both Frank and Gerard getting trims that take them from ‘the cool teacher’ back to ‘we’re in charge of this classroom.’ Gerard runs a hand through his.

“This is probably for the best, I got oil paint in mine the other day.”

“Yeah, you were between ‘homeless weed man’ and ‘goth you should cross the street to avoid.’” Frank snickers.

Gerard looks put out. “You really didn’t like it?”

“No, I’m kidding. It looked fine. Except over Thanksgiving when you didn’t shampoo for like, three days and it got a little stringy.”

“Thanks.” Gerard still looks a little miffed.

Frank parks his car back in the driveway. “I’m kidding, you know I’m kidding.”

“Sure.” Gerard gets out of the car and is ambushed into a kiss. He can’t stay that mad after that, especially because Frank does look sorry, and Ms. Miranda looks very approving of their new looks.

It actually snows on Christmas, and Frank wakes Gerard up at dawn, shaking him with his eyes vampire-bright. That shocks Gerard the rest of the way awake.

“What? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing is wrong, it’s snowing on Christmas Eve! Get up, get up, come look!” He bounds off, mattress nearly throwing Gerard out of bed, and crashes downstairs. As Gerard pulls on a shirt, he thinks to himself that if Frank’s mother wasn’t awake before, she sure is now.

Gerard meets her in the hallway, and she offers him a tired smile. “The only way to get him out of this absurd amount of snowy energy is to make him shovel. Trust me, you will need that information
in the future.”

Gerard laughs. “Thank you in advance, then.”

She smiles, and they head to the kitchen. Frank’s eyes are still bright when he spins from the window to look at them and when Ms. Miranda pauses, Gerard just sighs.

“Frank, your eyes.”

“Oh, oh shit, sorry Mom.” He dims them with a thought.

She sits down slowly. “Is that something you vampires can do?”

“Yeah?”

“Is there anything else?”

“Uh, besides uh, having fangs?”

“Yes, and I absolutely do not want to see my son with fangs.”

“Do you want to see them at all?” Gerard asks. “I’d be willing to show you mine?”

“I’d really rather not. And certainly not before coffee. Frankie, you bound up and didn’t think to start any? Ridiculous boy.” She shakes her head fondly at him and goes to start it.

Frank grabs mugs, milk, and sugar and says “Sorry. It was snowing. On Christmas!”

His Mom rolls her eyes at him and lights a cigarette. “Well, go outside and throw a snowball at your boyfriend, then.” She sounds like she doesn’t care, but Frank and Gerard both see her smile at the winter wonderland outside.
When Frank turns to Gerard he says “Not before coffee. Though I do need to get Christmas gifts out of the car before they’re snowed in.”

“I can wait until coffee. How are we gonna keep stocking gifts secret from each other? They aren’t wrapped.”

Frank and Gerard have wrapped their gifts for each other and for Frank’s mom, and although Frank is a little worried his boyfriend didn’t ask him what his mother might want for Christmas, but he’ll find out soon. But stockings are a different issue. They’re usually just a small pile of chocolate and snacks, and a few smaller, useful items. Socks are a staple, and Frank usually replaces a kitchen utensil of his Mom’s, and gets school supplies back. Gerard has been informed of this, and there are three small grocery bags in their suitcases. One they both have looked into, and is filled with things for Ms. Miranda, and the other two are theirs, with things for each other.

Gerard leans against the counter and says “Split up tonight to fill them? We can make yours in your Mom’s room, I can hand over what I have for you, you and I can make hers in your room, and you can make mine in the office? Then we can just hang them?”

Ms. Miranda nods. “That works. I didn’t wrap Frank’s gift, it was a strange shape, but Gerard, yours is wrapped, so I can put that out under the tree. You two should put your gifts for each other out too.”

“Okay, we will.”

Breakfast is a short affair, Ms. Miranda eating while Frank and Gerard sip coffee. She reminds them of Midnight Mass, which gets a grumble out of Frank and a small smile from Gerard. It’s been a while since he went to Mass, and what better time to start again than Christmas?

Frank throws a snowball at him almost as soon as they’re outside, grinning with manic glee. Gerard pelts one back and it smashes Frank in the face, turning his nose and cheeks numb. Frank calls him a bastard and puts snow down his back when he goes to open the trunk, and they call a truce, both satisfied they’re even.

The tree starts to look like Christmas with presents under it, and they spend the rest of the day listening to Christmas carols and baking more cookies than any of them can eat.
Ms. Miranda puts together a light dinner for herself and looks at Frank and Gerard, both nearly asleep on the couch. Gerard had been talked into starting a fire for them about an hour ago, and they’re both sprawled in front of it, looking supremely comfortable. She joins them, basking in the gentle heat. Bing Crosby’s Christmas record is on quietly, and it feels like a perfect Christmas. She can forgive Frank for bringing home a vampire if it makes Christmas feel like Christmas with a complete family again.

None of them move until Ms. Miranda gets up at 9 and says “I’m going to go shower so I have time to do my hair. I don’t intend to stand, my knees won’t love that, so we’re leaving early.”

Frank blinks at her. “Okay. Gee and I need to iron shirts, that’s all.”

“We’re leaving at 11. Be ready.”

“’kay.” Frank sighs and curls into Gerard a little more. Gerard wraps an arm around his waist and smiles gently.

“I’ll get up and iron. You should shave.” Gerard nudges him back up.

“Now?”

“Soon.” Gerard doesn’t really want to get up anytime soon either. They bask as the fire winds down again, finally starting to move at 10, long after Ms. Miranda’s blowdryer has shut off and she’s come back out in a robe to enjoy the last of the fire before she gets dressed.

Frank sneaks another cookie and shaves over the sink, then pulls on slacks and an undershirt to see if Gerard has ironed his shirt yet. Gerard is similarly dressed, and the iron is heating. Ms. Miranda pats Frank’s cheek. “I told Father Robert you were in town, he’s looking forward to seeing you.”

Frank nods. “Cool. Gonna be honest, I barely remember him. I remember Father Dennis from school better, because I saw him more. How old is Father Robert now anyway?”

“Old. Much older than me. But he was young when you were young.”
“So like eighty?”

“Not quite that old. I’m only 57. He’s probably around seventy.”

“Oh. Close.”

“Still young.” Gerard quips.

Frank rolls his eyes, and even Ms. Miranda just says, “Maybe to you.”

It’s such a change from two days ago that Frank and Gerard share a smile, both pleased at the change in reaction. Ms. Miranda rolls her eyes, with the same gesture Frank inherited. They finish getting ready quickly, and Frank and Gerard loiter in the living room while Ms. Miranda finishes up. Frank is smoking, swearing at himself for doing it, but still a little nervous to be walking back into his childhood church. Some of these people will still remember him as the gay kid, and probably not fondly.

“Is stupid I’m worried?”

“About going to church?”

“Yeah.”

Gerard shrugs. “Probably not. But it probably won’t be that bad.”

“Maybe.” Frank takes another deep drag. “Maybe they’ll all just remember me as the gay kid from high school and judge you for being with me.”

“Maybe. I won’t care.”

“You say that now….”
“No, I do. I don’t know any of these people. I have no reason to care what they think of me. I’m proud to be dating you. I love you.”

Frank’s shoulders lose a little bit of their tension. “I love you too.” Frank pulls Gerard into a hug. “Thank you.”

Gerard kisses the side of his head. “Of course.”

Ms. Miranda putters out a moment later, pulling out her good coat from the back of the closet and shaking it out. Frank reaches over to help her into it, smoothing down the soft fur.

“You look stunning, Mom.”

She gives him a faux-cross look. “We’re going to the Lord’s house, Frankie, stunning is not the goal.”

Frank shrugs, and Gerard picks up the slack. He smiles softly and gently takes Ms. Miranda’s hand, bushing a kiss over her knuckles and pulling out his 17th century manners “Ms. Miranda, you look very handsome. He took His time with you.”

Frank’s eyes go a little wide at that, and, improbably, his mother turns a little red, batting Gerard away. “Oh- you- flatterer.” Gerard just smiles.

“Not so much, that dress is beautiful. And you wear it beautifully.”

“Oh my god, please stop flirting with my Mom.” Frank looks a little pained, and Gerard turns to him with a grin.

“I promise you’re the only one for me, baby.”

“I hate you. Let’s just go to Mass and get this over with.” Frank twirls his keys and heads for the door, mother and boyfriend following with a laugh.
They get there early enough to get seats, which Frank mouths ‘thank God’ to Gerard for, even if they have to get up again every four seconds to greet Ms. Miranda’s friends and introduce Frank and Gerard. In a moment where Ms. Miranda is caught up in conversation, Gerard leans in to Frank. “Do you still believe in God? We’ve never gone to church, and I’ve never known you to go.”

Frank turns to him with a slight grimace at the subject. “I was raised Catholic, clearly. But the church kind of turned it’s back on me, at least institutionally. I don’t know if I have much of a relationship with God anymore. And I’m Catholic, not like, fucking Protestant, so the capital-C Church is like, important and central to faith and all that, so-“ Frank shrugs. “Maybe? I’ll take the Eucharist tonight, because I should and that-“ Frank fishes for words- “I don’t know, that never made me feel like I didn’t fit.”

Gerard nods like he gets it, and some of Frank’s unhappy tension bleeds off. “I think I’m in the same boat. I was also raised Catholic, but much closer, and much farther, in a way, to the Holy See. Who knows if He stills loves us as we are, or if we were always destined for this-“ Gerard doesn’t need to say vampirism to mean it, and Frank just nods. “-but Mass, especially Christmas Mass, has always been comforting to me. It’s changed remarkably little, and it always feels like home.”

“Yeah. Maybe we ought to find a church at home?”

Ms. Miranda has clearly overheard at least that, because she shoots them an approving smile behind Gerard’s head.

Gerard nods too. “That would be nice, even if we only end up going on feast days.”

“I don’t know how many you expect them to be celebrating, here in the US.”

Gerard snorts. “Less than I remember, I’m sure.”

“Mmhmmmm.” Frank grins at him. “Unless we find somewhere very very traditional.”

Gerard lightly hits him in the shoulder, and they settle in for Mass to start. Christmas Mass is easy to stomach, issues with the modern doctrine aside, because there isn’t much room for evangelist dogma in the Christmas Story. Gerard and Frank both surprise themselves with how easily the hymns and prayers come back to them, then both show their lapse in attendance by responding to “May the Lord be with you” with “And also with you.” While the rest of the room murmurs “And with your spirit.”
Ms. Miranda doesn’t quite laugh, but her glance their way has more amusement than anger in it. Frank makes a ‘whoopsies’ face back.

Back in the car at nearly three am, Frank pulls out of the parking lot and says quietly “That was nice.”

“How long has it been since you went to church, young man?” Ms. Miranda is still very awake, looking at him from the backseat.

Frank grimaces. “A while.”

“But you’re going to go again? The both of you? I couldn’t help but overhear some of what you were saying.”

Gerard turns to answer for them. “Maybe. The Church is sometimes not going to be welcoming to us, for a variety of reasons, but I like to think He’s still watching me, and I think Frank could appreciate being a little closer to his old faith.”

Frank nods. “I don’t know how far back in I’m going to be comfortable with, given the whole institutional disagreement, but I kind of miss the faith of it.”

Ms. Miranda nods. “I think that’s fair. I’d never ask you to deny who you are, but it brings me peace for you to have God in your life as well. I pray for you, but so does every mother.”

Frank opens his mouth, and clearly his mother knows him well, because she barrels over whatever he was going to say, something undoubtedly guilty, with “And I want you to know you don’t have to be Catholic. If there is another church that better supports your relationship with God, and this is for both of you, I’d want you to join it. I raised you in the community I was raised in, and if you’ve outgrown it, you’ve outgrown it.”

Frank backs down. “Thank you. I think I’ll just stay a lapsed Catholic. Just a little less lapsed, maybe.”

“That works too, honey.”
“Merry Christmas, Mom.” Frank says it impossibly gently.

“I love you too.”
Frank is never more glad that as a vampire, he doesn’t need half as much sleep as he did when he was human. That means that three hours after they get home on Christmas morning, he’s up and carefully placing two stockings downstairs on the mantle and starting a fire. Brewing coffee gets Gerard up, and starting French toast gets his Mom up, wrapped in a bathrobe and smiling fondly.

“Frankie, are you trying to rush Christmas?”

“Never, Mom. Why would you accuse me of that?” Frank plates French toast and sets it next to a coffee fixed for her with a blithe smile. “I’m just enjoying having my family together for Christmas.”

Gerard breaks into a smile, and Ms. Miranda looks at him as well, shaking her head, but sharing the smile.

Frank plops another piece of toast into the pan. “But also, the faster you eat the faster we get to do presents.”

“Aaaannd there it is.” Ms. Miranda picks up her fork. “Some days I’m very proud of the man you’ve become, and some days it seems like you never made it into adulthood.”

Gerard laughs, and Frank gently hip-checks him. “Don’t laugh, you begged me to tell you what I got you for a month.”

Gerard puts his hands up. “Okay, okay, I’m just doing a better job of containing my eagerness this morning.”

“You do have the advantage of more Christmases, dear.” Ms. Miranda gently reminds him.

“Maybe true.” Gerard shrugs. “I’ll just keep my mouth shut.”

Frank and Gerard join Ms. Miranda at the table soon, eating a piece of toast each, just to enjoy it. When all the plates are cleared, they head into the living room and Frank distributes stockings.

Those are a quick, if very fun affair. They all end up with small piles of useful things, socks and gift cards and new pens and planners for the new year, orthopedic insoles and a winter hat. Frank leans back against the couch. “Is it true we’re all old if I look forward to this more than anything else?”

Ms. Miranda looks at Gerard. “Oh no, that can’t be allowed. Gerard, help me grab Frankie’s gift.”

“Wait, I can’t give you mine first?”

“Is that how we want to do it? You give, I give, Gerard gives?”

“Yeah, why not? Then we get to round robin it.”

“Oh, alright.” She sits back down, and Frank passes her two heavy boxes from under the tree.

After she exclaims at the weight, she pulls the paper off to find box sets of Days of Our Lives and The Sopranos. “Oh, Frankie, thank you!”
“You were always saying the reruns were on while you were at the diner. Now you don’t need to worry.”

She beams. “I love them.”

Gerard gets his package, much smaller than the others, and reveals himself as one of those people who unfolds wrapping paper instead of ripping it. He gets teased for that, and sticks out his tongue at Frank, then his jaw drops. “Frank!” He’s holding a small set of gouache paints, small tubes old-fashioned and neat. Frank is grinning at him. “This set is like 200 dollars!”

“Yeah? You were talking about wanting them and hesitating on the price tag, so that’s what Christmas is for.”

Gerard leans over to kiss him. “Thank you so much.”

Frank grins back. “Okay, Mom since you were so eager?”

“Thank you.” She gets up, and Gerard follows. They come back and Frank stares.

“Mom, what?” She’s carrying a guitar case, and Gerard has a small amp. She lays the case down and Frank opens it, exclaiming again. “Wait, you still have this?”

“I had it. I got it refurbished at the music shop. The list of what they fixed is in the case.”

Frank picks it up and skims it. “Oh, Mom, you got me my favorite pickups!”

“I do listen when you talk. I thought you could take it and your old amp home with you.”

“Thank you!” Frank launches up and hugs her. She smiles back and squeezes him tight.

Gerard gets another small package. “Damn, Gee, we’ve gotta big box one of yours next year.”

Gerard laughs at his boyfriend. “Maybe good things come in small packages.” He can see the dick joke gears turning in Frank’s head, so he stalls them by adding “I mean you. Short packages?”

“Oh. Sure.” Frank smirks.

Gerard rolls his eyes at him and looks down at the neat leather brush roll in his hands. “Oh, wow. You guys are spoiling me with art supplies, this is really nice.” He opens it to find a few sable brushes already tucked inside, but plenty of room for his favorites.

“It’s locally made. I saw it at a craft fair, and Frank said you’d like it.”

“He was right, I love it. Thank you so much.”

Ms. Miranda smiles at him. “You’re welcome. You make my son very happy, and I’m glad you’ve come into his life. All else aside. All the vampirism. Which I still don’t love, but what’s done is done. And I’m glad it was you and not someone else.”

Gerard looks almost teary, and Ms. Miranda stands to pull him into a hug. “Merry Christmas. And welcome to the family too, I suppose.”

“Thank you.” Gerard is definitely choked up. “You should uh, you should open my gift then.” He indicates the large, flat package that even Frank doesn’t have a clue at what’s inside.

She sits back down, and unwraps a large box advertising Bristol board. “I’m going to assume you
didn’t get me school supplies?”

“Yes, you’d be right. It’s inside the box.”

She looks at Frank, who shrugs, watching her draw out a frame. She flips it over and gasps. Frank can tell there’s a painting inside and stands up to go look over her shoulder. Gerard looks a little nervous. Ms. Miranda can’t look away from it, one hand over her mouth and eyes a little wet. Frank comes over to look and discovers it’s a photo of him and his Mom at his college graduation, rendered in oils. It’s Frank’s turn to gasp. “Gee, holy shit.”

Gerard offers him a nervous smile. Ms. Miranda finally sets the painting aside and hauls Gerard into a hug. “Thank you so much. This means- thank you. I love it.”

Gerard hugs back, relieved. “I’m glad. I didn’t ask- I didn’t tell Frank what I was doing, but I hoped you would like it.”

“I love it.” They finally break their hug, and Frank gently picks up the frame and props it on the mantle temporarily, smiling at the painting.

Gerard looks over at him and says “Sorry, my gift for you is going to feel very simple, now.”

Frank shrugs that off and accepts the box. It’s a shoebox with a bunch of movies in it. Frank leafs through them and says “This is all the classic movies you think I should have, isn’t it?”

Gerard laughs. “It is.”

“I knew it. Now we’ve got new movies to watch this spring.” Frank leans over for another kiss. “I love them. Thank you.”

They all bask for a few more minutes in the Christmas morning air, then break down the wrapping paper, get second cups of coffee, and settle in to enjoy their gifts. Ms. Miranda puts on The Sopranos, Gerard pulls out a sketchbook and starts to paint, and Frank slowly tunes his new old guitar and quietly plucks out chords, snatches of songs.

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Frank and Gerard leave two days later, heading home with a few new things in the car. They drive in the day, snow on the forecast keeping the sun at bay and safe for them. They stop for gas and to switch drivers a little over the state line, and Frank leaves Gerard to fill the tank and heads in for snacks and coffee.

He’s contemplating flavors of Chex-Mix when the gas station employee comes up behind him. “Need help finding anything?” Frank was vaguely aware of him before, sweeping around the small store, but now he turns. “No, thanks, I’m just- Bob? Bob Bryar?”

Frank is pretty sure it is, or this guy looks exactly like him. Bob’s eyes narrow. “Frank Iero? Is that really you?”

Frank bares his teeth in a smile, now very aware of the corner he’s sort of standing in. “How’ve you been? It’s been a minute, hasn’t it?”

Bob leans on his broom. “It really has. I remember you moved pretty abruptly.”

Frank nods. “Yes, I did.” He doesn’t have to justify doing that, he had very nearly fled Bob’s apartment when he had the chance, taking a backpack of his things and abandoning the rest.
“What’re you up to now? Besides stopping in my gas station.”

“Trust me, I would’ve driven past it if I knew it was yours.” Frank spins, grabs the Chex Mix at eye level an turns back, sidestepping Bob with a confidence that’s only a bluff, and heading to get coffee.

Bob follows. “What’re you up to now?”

“Driving.” Frank glances out at the car. Gerard is putting away the nozzle. Hopefully Frank can leave before Bob decides to shove his nose into Frank’s life. Frank doesn’t really have the patience for that.

“What do you do for work?”

“I teach.” Frank snaps.

“They let you near kids?”

“Yes. I can see they don’t let you into public schools, though.”

“You’ve gotten feisty since you left. I missed that.”

Frank makes a face, filling a second coffee and dumping cream into it for Gerard. “Who else are you driving with? You don’t have a boyfriend, do you?” Bob leans over to look at Frank. “You do, don’t you? You’ve got a boyfriend.”

Frank slams the Chex Mix down on the small metal counter next to the coffee machine. “What, you wanna meet him?”

“I think I do. Wanna find out who you replaced me with.”

Frank huffs and stomps over to the door, opening it and making a face at Gerard, then waving him in. Gerard gets out of the car, confused.

Frank calls across the parking lot in Italian. “My lovely college ex-boyfriend is here and he wants to meet you.”

Gerard’s face morphs from confusion to a very inhuman mask. Frank has a second to wonder if he hasn’t underestimated Gerard somewhere and somehow, but then Gerard is pacing closer and coming to the door. He wraps an arm around Frank’s waist, and Frank hisses “Gee, don’t do anything stupid.”

“Oh, I won’t.” Is Gerard’s blithe reply, which does Frank’s nerves no good.

“Uh, Bob, this is Gerard, my boyfriend. Gee, this is Bob.”

Gerard sticks out a hand, still looking mean. “It’s a pleasure.”

Bob shakes it with a nasty smile dawning. “As much as I’m a little bummed Frankie isn’t single, he seems to be in capable hands.”


Bob nods. “Sure thing.” Frank’s tight smile doesn’t even come close to believable, and he doesn’t meet Bob’s eyes the whole time. Gerard is acting strange, and Frank just wants to get out of here before he starts comparing them and bringing up bad memories.
As Frank turns, Gerard picks up a pack of gum and says “I’ll be out in a moment. Go ahead.”

Frank shoots him a questioning look, but Gerard’s face stays blank. Frank goes and gets in the drivers seat, nervously adjusting the wheel and mirrors back while he waits.

Inside, Gerard and Bob watch him hurry out, then turn toward each other. Gerard’s smile drops. “I haven’t heard nice things about you, Bob.”

Bob has the audacity to laugh. “If I’m gonna be really fucking honest with you, I wasn’t nice to him. But he doesn’t like nice. He likes to be fucked up against the wall drunk, and he needed me to take care of the rest of his pathetic little life too. Looks like you’ve got him all under control.”

Gerard shrugs, glances outside and says, “If you so much as say a word to him again, I’ll kill you. Do you understand that?”

Bob laughs. “That’s actually fucking funny.” He rounds the counter, stepping up to Gerard. “You’re not the first he’s had, you won’t be the last. You’re not special. You ain’t shit. And you’re not the kind of guy who I let get away with threats like that.”

Gerard turns back to face him, totally vamp’d out, eyes glowing and fangs bright. “I’m really not, hmm?” His voice is still soft, but the threat is loud. Gerard is a little surprised with himself. Usually it takes a lot to move him to anger like this, but he’d gladly tear out Bob’s throat right here and now if it wouldn’t bring the cops down on him.

Bob jerks back with a gratifying squeak anyway. “What the hell? What are you?”

“I’m not human.”

“Jesus Christ, no shit. I’m sorry. I’m sorry I said that shit to you about him!”

“Are you sorry for what you did?”

“Yes?”

“Sorry for the way you treated him way back when he was in school?”

“I didn’t mistreat him.”

“Yes you did. Don’t lie when we both know the truth.”

“….I’m sorry.”

“Try again and mean it.”

“I’m sorry! He didn’t deserve all of it.”

Gerard raises a threatening finger and points at Bob. “He didn’t deserve any of it.”

“Okay, okay. Please, get the hell out of here.”

Gerard stares him down for a moment. “I won’t forget where to find you.” Then spins and leaves.

Frank peels out almost as soon as Gerard is in the car, tight lipped and tense. They’re five minutes down the road before he speaks. “Did you kill him?”

“No. Did you want me to?”
Frank shakes his head. “No, I really don’t want you to murder people. I just- I didn’t know. You acted different. I don’t know what you’d do anymore.”

“I’m sorry. He assumed I’d be like him, and it was to my advantage to play that up for the moment. I’m sorry I treated you like that and ordered you around.”

“That doesn’t bother me- much. You were just in there a while. I got worried.”

“But it bothers you a little?”

“What?” Frank glances away from the road. “Of course it bothers me that you spun on a dime and pulled a convincing mimicry of Bob out of your ass.”

“That’s how he treated you?” Gerard’s voice is low and furious.

Frank hunches a little. “Yes.”

“Turn around. I ought to bleed him dry.”

“I’m not turning around. I’m sorry, there’s no fucking way.”

“Frank.”

“Gee, please don’t make me do that.”

Something in the plea sounds genuinely scared, and Gerard’s fury melts when he finally registers how Frank must be feeling. Gerard should know better, he survived Grant. He shakes his head at himself and sighs. “I won’t. I’m sorry Frank. I shouldn’t take my anger out on you. I was just upset that anyone would treat you that way.”

“I know. Just please- can we forget this?”

“We can put it behind us, but I’m not forgetting which gas station to skip next time we visit your Mom.”

“That’s okay. We can do that.” Frank falls quiet after that, still tense and caught up in his own head. Gerard makes him pull over at the next gas station to switch and let Gerard drive, and the rest of the way is spent with Frank quietly huddled in the passenger seat, grimly staring at nothing. Gerard knows the feeling and lets him be.

They roll into town late, night coming early in the dead of winter. Frank scoops up mail and lets them both in, still slumped. Gerard follows closely, catching Frank’s hand with his free hand and pulling him into a short kiss.

“How about you unpack our toiletries and I’ll bring the rest of the stuff in, and we can go to bed early? Hunt tomorrow.”

Frank nods. “Okay.” He takes the suitcase from Gerard and heads into the dark apartment, not bothering to hit lights. Gerard heads back outside.

He heaves Frank’s guitar and amp in the living room, and leaves his messenger on the kitchen table, carrying the other suitcase into the bedroom and following Frank to the bathroom.

Frank turns a little when he comes in. “I think I’m gonna shower before bed. You wanna join me?”
“Sure. Let me flip on the hall light so we don’t try to wash our bodies with shampoo.” Frank smiles a little at that and Gerard ducks out to flip the switch and come back. “Are you feeling a little better?”

“I guess. Maybe not. Probably not.”

“That’s okay. I’m sorry for the way I acted.”

“It’s okay. You said it was an act.”

“You don’t have to forgive me for it if you aren’t really ready to. I won’t be upset if you don’t. It wasn’t an act I’m proud of.”

Frank hesitates. “Then I might hold it against you for a little while.”

“Of course. Do you still want to shower?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I think I do. Will you still join me?”

“Yeah. That’d be nice.”

“Okay.” Gerard lets Frank go and starts unbuttoning his shirt, half-watching in the mirror as Frank slips off his layers. They’ve been together long enough that it’s not new to see Frank naked, per say, but Gerard still watches greedily every time Frank strips. Frank tosses his boxers to the corner and leans into the shower to turn the water on, one hand out to test the water temperature.

Gerard unbuttons his pants and shimmies out of them, stepping up to Frank and gently turning his head to distract him with a kiss. Frank smiles and kisses back. He has to break the kiss when the water is warm, taking Gerard’s wrist instead and stepping into the tub and the warm spray.

Gerard crowds him a little, spinning Frank for another gentle kiss. Frank loops his arms around Gerard’s waist, making a soft sound between kisses. Gerard kisses him for a while more, then breaks it to pick up the shampoo. “Step over here, I’ll shampoo you.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, of course. Never been washed in the shower before?”

“Uh, no.”

Gerard squeezes shampoo into his palm. “You’ll probably enjoy this, then. Close your eyes.”

Frank does, and Gerard gently tips his chin down, starting to work the shampoo into Frank’s hair, gently scratching his scalp as well. All the tension melts out of Frank’s body, and he lets out a quiet breath. Gerard smiles to himself.

Frank sways a little into the space where Gerard was when he steps away to get conditioner, he’s so relaxed. Gerard is back quickly, gently rubbing Frank’s head again. Frank practically purrs into Gerard’s chest. Gerard smiles down at him and gently rinses out his hair, kissing him before reaching for the face wash. Frank blinks and smiles at him.

“Thank you.” Frank says it almost too quietly to hear.

“Hmm?”

“This is really nice. Thank you.” Frank musters all his limbs back up and kisses Gerard again. He doesn’t know if he wants to bring up Bob again and admit that he sort of expected this to be a sexier
shared shower, and a way for Frank to get a pulse on how Gerard is feeling after the whole thing. Frank decides on saying nothing.

Gerard washes his face with his fingertips, almost laughing at the faces Frank makes when Gerard scrubs his cheeks gently. It is weirdly intimate to have someone else wash your face for you, and not something most people will do, but right now, Gerard wants to. He wants to show Frank he cares, show Frank he’ll take care of him the best Gerard can no matter what comes up in their path, and will never be like Bob.

Face finished, Gerard moves on to Frank’s body, snorting to himself at the way Frank twitches when Gerard runs the washcloth over his hip. Frank makes a face back.

“Tease.”

“Am I?”

“A little.” Frank reaches for Gerard, and Gerard lets him pull him up into a kiss with a little bit of intent in it.

Gerard pulls back, still holding Frank. “You sure?”

“About this?”

Gerard nods.

“Yes. Though I can wash you and we can get out of the shower if you think we’re gonna run out of hot water.”

“I can wash myself. You get out, I’ll be a second behind.”

“You sure? I don’t mind, you washing my hair was really nice.”

“You can help me dye it tomorrow, then.” Gerard gives him another kiss, reaching for the shampoo and putting some in his hair.

Frank watches for a moment. “If you’re sure.”

“I don’t mind, I promise.”

“Then I’ll meet you in bed.”

“Mhmm. I love you.”

Frank smiles, then pulls the curtain aside and steps out. Gerard finishes showering quickly, not really that worried. He’s going to shower again in the morning anyway.

Frank is on the bed when he gets back, sort of contorted on the bed with two fingers in his ass, lube on the covers next to him. Gerard feels his stomach flood with heat, and he doesn’t wait at all to join Frank on the bed. “Can I?” He’s reaching for the lube as he asks.

Frank nods with a low moan, letting Gerard finish prepping him. They’re at the sweet spot where they know each other well enough to have consistently good sex, but nothing feels familiar and overdone yet. Frank is still quietly thrilled that they’ve stopped using condoms, vampire immunity also including STI’s.

Gerard is also completely normal, which does more for assuaging Frank’s lingering Bob-related
nerves than anything else. He’s not skittish to the point where he couldn’t deal with it if somebody
turned out like Bob, but he’s wary, much faster to draw a line and say ‘no more of this, I’m out’. At
least it doesn’t look like he’s going to have to do that here. Instead, he gets to sprawl into Gerard’s
side of the bed with a sigh while Gerard gets up to grab a washcloth before they really stick to the
sheets.

Gerard comes back and tugs the blanket out from under Frank to get him to move. “You’re on my
side of the bed.”

“Mrgh, you’re mean.”

“Am I?” Gerard bundles the blanket into the hamper and crawls into bed with Frank.

Frank curls close, wrapping his arms around Gerard and nodding. “Evil. You never let me enjoy a
post-coital haze.”

Gerard laughs. “Maybe you should have said yes to sex in the shower, then. Less cleanup.”

“Shit, you’re right. Next time I will.” Frank nuzzles closer and kisses Gerard’s jaw. “Still a bastard,
but I love you.”

“I love you too.”

“G’night.” Frank closes his eyes, happy and settled and warm.

—

The second half of the school year is normal, as normal as normal can be for two vampires. Frank
feels the same at work, really, all is as it has been for the last eight years on that front, but his home
life has changed. And all for the better. Sharing an apartment with Gerard is easy in the way old
married couples sometimes talk about, their schedules and habits largely complementary. Gerard
actually seems to appreciate Frank’s guitar playing because it makes him sit still. Frank ends up being
the lion’s share of the drawings and quick paintings in Gerard’s sketchbook. Frank asks Gerard to
draw a tattoo for him, considering getting a second, and Gerard comes up with a classic
Frankenstein.

Frank makes an appointment to get it over the summer, planning for it to take over his left forearm.
Joe has two full sleeves, he wont care if Frank gets one more tattoo. His reputation as the cool punk
teacher has been slipping over the years as he gets old and wears more cardigans, and Frank tells
Gerard that that’s a motivator to get the ink ASAP, as keeping that reputation is of paramount
importance. Gerard just laughs at him, sipping an iced coffee in a café next to Jamia.

Jamia shakes her head at them both. “You’re crazy. And you and I have been talking about best
friend tattoos for the last decade and we still don’t have any, and you’ve been dating him for a year
and he gets to put his mark on you?” She sighs, mock angry, “I see how it is. Your boyfriend’s dick
is more important than our decade and a half of friendship.”

Frank rolls his eyes at her. “You dick me down as good as he does and we’ll talk.”

She laughs, and Gerard frowns. “I’m not sure I’m into that.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, not so much. I’m bad at sharing, I think.”
Jamia laughs. “That’s fair. I mean, I wouldn’t share either if I was dating him. But as it is, we try to keep our actual sex lives pretty far apart physically, if not otherwise.”

“If not otherwise?” Gerard raises an eyebrow at Frank.

Frank shrugs. “We’re best friends. I told her about you painting me like a french girl.”

“That was pretty funny, actually. But like, sweet too? Very you.”

Gerard turns bright red. “You’re both awful.”

“I haven’t described your dick, if it makes you feel better.”

“That really only makes me feel a tiny bit better, because I think you’ve done everything but.”

“Well, yeah. At least you’re not under any delusions of the content here.”

Gerard downs his coffee. “You two drive me to drink, look.”

They both laugh, and Gerard has to smile as well. He hasn’t been this happy or felt this safe in decades, and it’s refreshing to just feel like he can live.

—

Frank hates to say it, but he’s sort of taken to vampirism like a duck to water. It’s easy, and maybe it’s just because he’s living with another vampire, but it’s not bad at all, and Frank really can’t say he misses his humanity. At least most of the time. Jamia comes back from the beach tan and glowing, and he’s jealous as fuck. She calls him out on it too, and Frank pleads Gerard’s sun sensitivity and trying to be ready to go to Italy at the end of the next school year. He hates lying to her, but he can’t think of a good way to tell her about his vampirism. She accepts the lie with an eye-roll like always, and Frank just pinches her sunburn and watches her yelp. He’ll tell her at some point, and she’ll accept it, he’s sure.

—

By late July, he and Gerard have nailed down Italy plans, and with that, Frank ends up asking a lot of questions about Gerard’s life before Frank. There are some things that Gerard will talk about freely, like his time in Canada, or London, where he met another vampire, a woman named Lindsey, who he’d remained friends with for years before the Seven Years War separated them. He doesn’t like to talk about the mob, even when Frank sets aside his dignity and practically begs. One day, that works, and Gerard sighs down the couch at him.

“I don’t like talking about it because I wasn’t in control of myself, okay?”

“Wait, what do you mean by that?”

“I mean I was addicted to the cocaine they were selling, because they realized I was easier to control like that. And I was Bound to them.” Gerard gives Frank a look, sort of knowing he’s not going to just accept that as an answer.

“Bound? Like bound with a capital b?”

“Yes.”

“What’s that?”

“Slavery? Mind-control? Some of both?” Gerard pauses, trying to describe it. “It’s a way to control a
vampire. It’s a spoken ritual, you need the vampire’s true name to do it, but then… Then they have no more free will. You have your thoughts, but you can’t disobey orders. You can’t not follow orders. You’re bound to them and their will.”

Frank sits back on the couch, eyes wide. “Shit. That seems like an important thing.”

“Almost no one knows how to do it anymore. Or ever did, I suppose.”

“How do you do it? What’s a true name?”

“I’m not teaching you how, it’s the worst thing you could ever do to another vampire. But your true name is the first thing you say when you’re turned. You said yours before you woke up properly. You know it. If you don’t overthink it, you can just say it. I know it as well, because I was there.”

“I know you’ve said that vampires aren’t bound to their sire, or like, that’s not a thing. But is this kind of the workaround for that? Because if you turn somebody, you’d be there when they woke up.”

“I suppose, yeah? I’ve never thought about it being used by anybody except to hurt them, or make them essentially your slave.”

“Well, yeah.” Frank rolls that over in his head. “How do you break it? If it’s done to you?”

“Kill the one who bound you. Or run. Both are nearly impossible, because you’d have to get far enough that the mental connection broke, or somehow not have been ordered not to kill them.”

“Can it be undone?”

“By the person who did it? Yeah, they can just lift it whenever they want. I think- and I don’t know, I’ve only been bound and not ever bound somebody, but I think it takes mental effort to do, especially if they’re fighting you every step of the way.”

“Huh.” Frank leans back. “You’ve only been bound the once, though right? It sounds horrific.”

“Twice. First time was Grant. I ran from that one. It’s why I haven’t been back to Sicily.”

“Oh. The more you talk about Grant, the more he sounds like he abused the shit out of you.”

Gerard grimaces a little. “He did. I guess, looking back on it now when we have the language to describe it, it was an abusive relationship?”

“Did you ever get therapy? It helped me a lot after Bob.”

“Didn’t exist. And now, there’s no way to talk about it without the context of things being 300 years ago, and they’d get suspicious. I’m mostly alright now, I just get nightmares sometimes.”

“I guess that’s fair. I’m glad you’re mostly okay, though. That- I know from experience- it’s hell.”

“It really was. He was there when I killed Mikey, and even now I’ve never been sure if I killed him on accident, or if Grant set me up to fail. I always thought it was the first, but I turned you alright, and now I wonder if he didn’t want me to succeed.”

Frank hears the lump in Gerard’s throat and pulls him close. “I don’t know, but if he did, I’m sorry.”

Gerard wraps his arms around Frank and sniffs a little. “Thank you. For being here and being you and being wonderful.”
“You’re welcome?”

“I love you.”

“I love you too, Gee. Always.”

Gerard takes a deep breath and keeps his head buried in Frank’s shoulder. Frank settles a little closer so they can stay like that for a while. Gerard nearly clings to Frank in his sleep that night.

The more Frank pries, the more he gets the feeling that Gerard has lived a long and lonely life before now, often totally alone and fleeing the ghosts of his past. He’s lived afraid Grant, Mikey, his ex-wife, the mobsters of Frank’s grandfather’s generation and more will catch and smother him. Frank quietly resolves to be the start of a new and happier chapter of Gerard’s life.

___

For the most part, that works. They trade comics, Frank re-teaches himself guitar and alternates punk covers from his youth with making up stupid and ridiculous love songs for Gerard. Gerard draws and then moves to paints over the summer, starting a huge series of murder scenes. It takes Frank living with four huge canvases next to their movie collection for a month and a half to recognize the victims.

“Gee? Are you painting murder scenes from slasher films?”

Gerard has been caught. “Maybe. You inspired them, talking about how cinematography was art. So I just took note of where stuff was in the scene and painted it at a different angle.”

Frank laughs. “I love them. I loved them before, but they were weird, but now they’re awesome. You gotta get these into a gallery, people would eat this shit up.”

“Maybe.”

“Don’t make Jamia and I arrange you one and surprise you with it.”

“You wouldn’t dare. You know I hate crowds and attention.”

“Oh my god, you would be fine.”

Gerard makes a face that says ‘but would I really be?’ and says “If you don’t threaten to spring it on me, I’ll consider a gallery show. Once I’m done.”

“Deal.” Frank sticks out a hand to shake and pulls Gerard in for a kiss after. “I’m an artist’s muse! Incredible.”

“You’re ridiculous. But yes, you are.”

“I love you.”

Gerard just kisses him again.

___

Frank gets the Frankenstein tattoo two weeks later, and Gerard refuses to come, citing a fear of needles. Frank texts him updates of the progress, and Gerard demands pictures, which Frank rolls his eyes at.

—u can see it @ home foreverr—
Frank puts his phone away after that, telling Kat about his crazy boyfriend being afraid of needles but wanting to know everything that was going on anyway. She laughs and tells a story of another client calling a friend and pretty much narrating her every move. Frank unwraps it that night, and Gerard grabs his arm and spends a good ten minutes examining every inch of it. “I love it.”

Frank nods, looking at his arms as well. “Kat is so good. And it’s perfect for me.”

“Yes, it really is. And it looks like it healed well.”

“Wait, it’s already healed, isn’t it?” Frank raises his arm to look at it closer.

Gerard nods. “That’s what you get, being a vampire.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Frank is still grinning. That is a pretty sweet perk.

——

School starts again in August, Frank always surprised and not at all when the first day of school seems to jump up off the horizon. He and Gerard re-settle into their rooms and wait for students to return. They’re not far behind, and it turns out that Frank and Gerard are awful about really hiding a relationship.

It might be because they’re practically married, but about a month in one of Gerard’s juniors tells her friend “Yes, Jessica. They’re dating. He’s been dating Mr. Iero since at least last spring.” With a very loud tone of “Duh!” Gerard is in the storage closet at the back of the room, and if not for his vampire hearing, would never have heard them say it. He turns a little red and is at least glad that the kids seem to be respecting that he and Frank aren’t going to talk about it.

That’s mostly true until fall break, when one of Gerard’s AP art juniors comes into Frank’s Italian 4 Honors class and moans at him “Please make Mr. Way change the due date of the veritas. He’s killing me.”

Frank gives her a pitying smile. “I’m afraid I have no control over his syllabus. When did he say it’s due?”

“When we get back. And are you sure? Can’t you convince him to change it?” Her angle on this is completely transparent.

Frank snorts. “I don’t know what you think I’m going to do for you, here. I have as much sway over what he teaches as I do what your history teacher teaches. All I can offer you is that the only thing
I’m assigning is a grammar worksheet that you should get at least 75% finished before class is over.”

She sits and levels him a look. “You’re really not going to take pity on us and use your personal sway over him?”

Frank laughs. “I have no ‘personal sway’ over him like that.”

“Please?”

“I cannot.” He shakes his head with a smile.

“You’re evil.”

“I’ve been told that.”

“When I die, blame him.”

“I can do that.”

“Good.” She shuffles out her textbook and phone, conversation over.

At home that night, Frank relays the story and Gerard laughs. “You have plenty of personal sway, but using it for that is like.. insider trading.”

Frank nods. “I wouldn’t use my powers over you for evil.”

“Mhmm.” Gerard wraps him up in a hug and kisses the side of his head. “Unlike that time you made me agree to go to that punk show with you in the middle of sex and wouldn’t let me back out of it later.”

“Exactly.” Frank gives him an evil grin.


“Never never.” Frank kisses back.

And that is that. Ms. Miranda makes more noises about getting married, and Frank and Gerard laugh and brush it off, then Gerard asks Frank very seriously about it one of the first real days of winter.

Frank is more surprised than he really ought to be. They’ve been living together for a full year now, maybe they ought to at least mention it. Still, somehow Frank figured Gerard wouldn’t bring it up for another decade or so, and didn’t want to rush him. Gerard, on the other hand, has been alive a frankly terrifyingly long time and knows how quickly you can lose something or someone dear. The thought of losing Frank like that outweighs the enormity of asking him to share his immortal life. It’s a massive commitment to be sure, and Gerard has to wonder if it’s unforgivably selfish to even ask if he knows Frank would probably say yes without considering the vastness of time that that could entail. So he asks without really asking after they get off the phone with Ms. Miranda. “Would you ever consider marrying me?”


“Really? You didn’t think about that at all.”

“Didn’t have to.” Frank shrugs and turns fully so he’s facing Gerard. “I already know I’d marry you.
I figured you were gonna ask in like a decade or so. You’re old, I figured you’d be the type to take things slow.”

“Oh.” Gerard turns red. “You- wait, you’ve considered this? Like, this isn’t asking you to be with me for fifty years, it’s forever.”

“Same deal as regular people getting married. Till death do us part. Maybe that’s longer for us, but same deal.”

Gerard blinks. That’s certainly one way to see it. Even if it sort of blindly ignores all the other factors. “What if you get sick of me?”

“Oh, we break up. Or get divorced. Don’t make this depressing, that’s not a normal thing for people to think about when they’re thinking about getting married.”

“Still. What if you don’t want to spend like, the rest of your life with me?”

“But I do?” Frank looks confused. “If I ever don’t want to, then I suppose if we’re married we’ll have to get divorced, but I’d very much like to marry you and spend the rest of the foreseeable future together.”

Something tense in Gerard’s chest unwinds, warm and hopeful. “Okay. I love you.”

Frank leans in for a kiss. “I love you too. Always have.”

Gerard tips their foreheads together. “I don’t know how I got so lucky with you. I love you so much sometimes it scares me, Frankie.”

Frank doesn’t quite know what to do with a feeling that vast. “Well, I do try not to scare you too much, babe.”

Gerard just smiles and kisses him again.

—

By the end of January, they have a final list of twenty students that they’re taking to Italy. One of the moms has signed on to chaperone, and Frank meets her at a coffeeshop one day to give her a quick primer on Italian, just in case. She picks it up quickly, and they get to gossip about her child, a bright 10th grader in Frank’s Italian 3 6th period. Frank realizes how nice it is to get to talk to a parent outside of conference, and they just chat about the school system for a while, until Gerard calls, having surfaced from his painting and wondering when Frank is due back. Frank answers in Italian, laughing at his concern and assuring him he’s still alive, just chatting. Gerard shrugs off the laugher and lets him know Frank’s mom called a while ago before hanging up again. When he gets off the phone and apologizes to Cathy, she waves him off. “That was the other teacher? Mr. Way? You two are together, right? I though Jessica said you were.”

“Oh. Uh, yes, we live together.” Frank hedges, unsure of her political views.

“Good for you. He seemed like a nice man. My aunt was like that, lived out in Portland with Auntie Maria and I was about twenty when I realized they were partners and not friends.”

“Oh, wow. Twenty?”

“To be fair, I did live across the country from them. I was at Wellesley, at school, and one of my friends referenced my lesbian aunts, and I was floored for a moment.”
Frank laughs. “I can’t imagine how that went, jeeze.”

Cathy shakes her head. “I said something like ‘wait, they’re not. Oh, wait. They are. They are lesbians.’ And that was that. All my friends laughed at me.” She shakes her head fondly. “I assume most of the kids know, even though I get that you’re not very out at work?”

“Mostly it’s just gossip, from them. We don’t really deny it, but they know better than to ask.”

“Good. Then I won’t be the one to out you. I’m sorry I asked.”

“It’s no problem. He was just calling to tell me my Mom called, anyway.”

“Oh, then I should let you go. Sorry, it got pretty late.”

They both stand to go and she says “Salve?”

Frank grins. “Yup! Ci vediamo!”

—one day in March, Gerard calls Ms. Miranda while Frank is out with Jamia. By now, they’re on first name terms, and Gerard doesn’t feel odd saying “Hey Linda.” When she picks up.

“Oh, hello Gerard. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

Gerard takes a deep breath. “I’d like to ask your son to marry me. In two months, while we’re in Italy.”

“Oh, that’ll mean the world to him.”

“And I was calling to ask for your blessing. I should be doing this in person- I know- but. Still. May I ask him to marry me?”

“Of course. You have my blessing, Gerard. With one stipulation.”

“Yes?” Gerard is unreasonably nervous.

“I want to be there when you get married. I don’t care if it’s at the courthouse, that’s your decision, but I want to be there. No eloping.”

All the tension goes out of Gerard. “Yes. Yes, I think Frankie would want to have a real wedding anyway. And we wouldn’t dream of not having you there. Thank you so much.”

“Of course.” She sounds proud. “I’m glad he found you. He loves you with all his heart, and I can tell you love him the same, you’d do anything for him.”

“I would. It scares me how much I love him sometimes.”

“Good.” Linda sniffs quietly, clearly teary. “You’ll treat him right. And I know I raised him to be good to you too.”

“You raised a wonderful man.”

“Oh, you flatter me. I did what I could, but he has a good heart.”

“That he does. Thank you, Linda.”
“No, thank you, Gerard. For calling me, and for everything.”

“You’re welcome? I’ll make him call you sometime soon, okay?”

“Good. I’ll talk to you soon. Get him a diamond. He’s secretly a hopeless romantic.”

Gerard laughs. “I’ll try to find a suitably masculine one.”

Linda laughs as well and ends the call.

Chapter End Notes

Does anyone have sneaking suspicions/theories on where this is going? I've been immersed in this plot so long every peak and lull feels inevitable to me, so I'd like to know what you guys think. Will Frank and Gerard have to face another Bert-like trial together? Will they get married? Will they stay together? Does any of this plot feel plausible?
Off to Italy we go!! Hang on to your seats, this is a much wilder ride than advertised by that nice school trips dude.

-- also, does anyone know how to not have literally every single return vanish when I go to upload the chapter? I've been posting it as rich text instead of html, but with rich text i get some huge ass spaces--

As the day to leave for Italy gets closer, Frank gets a little more neurotic about the schedule, what he’s packing, and practically obsessive about checking the weather for every place they’ll go. Gerard is equally wired, but for a totally different reason. The ring in the pocket of his duffle is quietly burning a hole there, and Gerard can’t stop sneaking it out to look at it. He did find a diamond, a tiny .75 carat one, mine cut and sparkling, set flush into a band. It’s masculine enough to not draw undue attention, but unique and sparkling enough to accentuate Frank’s more flamboyant moments. Gerard smiles to himself, remembering the time Frank watched Queer Eye reruns while nursing a beer and yelling at the TV. It had been a pretty spectacularly flamboyant departure from his usual demeanor, Frank’s voice pitching up and into an almost whiny tone Gerard has only ever heard at the few gay bars he’s been dragged into. Gerard is keeping that memory close for blackmail someday.

Cathy and Jessica come over one day to run over the final itinerary, Jessica clearly tagging along out of curiosity. Cathy gives them an “I’m so sorry about my offspring” look, but Frank just shows her how to get a movie started and says “Don’t put on any R rated horror films and make your Mom pull you out of my class.”

Cathy laughs. “Lost cause on the R rated movie front.”

Frank shrugs. “Well, if you’re okay with that…” He pulls out a DVD of some foreign film. “This is sort of gratuitous on the blood and ‘nudes from the back’ scales, but it’s an Italian language film about a mobster and his wife. It’s just.. just gratuitous enough I’d have to send waivers home and I’m lazy.”

Gerard looks up. “God, that movie was awful. But yeah, Jessica, it’s subtitled if you want to get a feel for real speech.”

She shrugs. “Sure?” Cathy nods at her, and she slides it in and plops down. “This is not where I pictured you guys living, by the way. This is weird, like this is my teacher’s house.”
“It’s not that unbelievable, there’s a stack of my late grading on the counter.” Frank points to it and sits down.

“Still weird. You like, you live here.”

“Yes. We do live here? Is it weird we’re also people with lives outside of school?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. Well, can’t help that.” Frank sits down and turns back to their meeting. It’s all stuff they know, mostly making sure everyone is on the same page and that all the right documents are in triplicate. Cathy is lovely and very responsible, and both Gerard and Frank are quite happy she’s the parent coming with.

—

Some of the kids on the trip start a ‘days until Italy’ countdown on Frank’s blackboard, and he keeps it up, updating the numbers for them until four days before, when students are gone for the summer and he’s packing up his room. He grins to himself as he washes the board one more time, finally erasing it. In four days he’s going to Italy. It had always been an abstract life goal, and now it’s real. He has the plane ticket by his passport.

He and Gerard feed the night before they leave, which ought to get them through the next two weeks of the trip just fine. Getting twenty students through the airport tests that a little, and Frank really really wants a cigarette, because it turns out Gerard is a nervous flier, and nearly breaks Frank’s hand on takeoff. He consoles himself. Only eleven hours to go, then they’ll be in Milan. Milan!

—

On the ground in Italy, Frank and Gerard do a demonstrably awful job of not being a couple. They hold hands in chapels and galleries, and all together act like a couple with twenty children. At least the kids eat it up, and Cathy quietly lets them know the class group chat that is teacher-free is pretty much all sniped photos of the two of them looking couple-y, in a race to see who can snap a kiss at a cafe and crown the two of them as the school’s best couple. Gerard turns the reddest Frank has ever seen him at that.
The tour is half-guided, and Frank feels a swell of pride in his chest every single time a kid looks at him with wide eyes, soaking up history and art like a sponge. Every time they attempt to order food in Italian, even if Frank or Gerard ends up helping translate, is a victory. Every time one of them gasps on seeing a painting or sculpture in real life is a victory. Frank can’t even be mad when one of the boys successfully buys a replica roman sword, because no-one in that shop on a Roman side street spoke English.

Gerard takes the kids on a painting trip up into the hills, and Frank finds a shady spot on the edge of a cemetery and tells ghost stories in Italian to the kids who are art challenged, admitting half way through that they’re all Jersey stories from his childhood. They make up for it two days later on a real ghost tour in Amalfi. That’s their last stop on the mainland, getting one day of ‘freedom’ to wander the town, then heading to Palermo. Frank and Gerard stay at the hotel to act as a central point that day, both excited for Sicily. It’s home in totally different ways, and they’re taking a bus tour to Castelbuono and driving through the Parco delle Madione on the second day there to give the kids a taste of the countryside. There may be a little ulterior motive present in that move, as it will take Gerard nearly all the way home. He tells Frank his parents are buried on their old property on the edge of the town, up in the hills. Frank just double checks their hotel door is closed and wriggles over to kiss him. “I love you, and you’re taking me home.”

“I do. I love you, and I’m taking you home.” And asking you to marry me, but Gerard can’t say that part out loud yet. Three days.

—

He makes it two days, then three students corner him. “Why are you like, wigging out? We asked Mr. Iero, but he didn’t know.”

“I didn’t know I was visibly wigging out.”

“You are, you’re like, totally jumpy and wired. Something is up.”

“Well,” Gerard might as well tell them, it’s burning out of him. “You know I told you my family is from Castelbuono, yes?”

“Yeah. Are you gonna meet them?”
“No, my parents are dead and buried, but they’re there. No, and I need you to keep this secret, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Yeah.”

The last mimes zipping her mouth shut and throwing away the key. Good enough for Gerard.

“I’m going to ask Mr. Iero to marry me.”

“Holy shit!” They exchange looks of pure glee. “He’s gonna say yes.”

“I hope he will.”

“Oh my god, you’re actually asking him!”

Gerard breaks into a smile. “I am. We’re going to leave you to Cathy’s care for a moment, and walk up to my parent’s old land so I can introduce him to them and then ask.”

“Aww. Holy shit, that’s so sweet.”

“Do you have a ring? Can we see it?”

“Of course I have a ring. And hopefully you’ll see it later tomorrow.”

“Okay. Holy shit, good luck!! I mean, he’s gonna say yes, it’s apparent to like, aliens how much he likes you, but yeah. Good luck!”

“Thanks.” Sometimes Gerard is incredibly grateful to high schoolers for their views and simple belief in other people. Gerard can think of a thousand reasons Frank could say no, and they can’t think of a
Frank pokes him in the chest that night as they get in bed. “You’re excited to be going home, huh?”

Gerard catches Frank’s hand and squeezes it. “I am. Very excited.” Not even the memory of Grant’s house across the ridge can dampen that.

The two-hour bus ride the next morning is mostly spent with Frank going over phrases, standing braced at the front of the moving bus. They can’t really expect anyone to speak English out here, so they force the kids into a buddy system based on fluency. At least one person in every group is at a high enough level they ought to be able to get out of any scrapes. And if not, well, the adults don’t have international SIM cards for nothing.

Gerard catches Frank’s hip as they go around a tight turn in the hills, and Frank shoots a bright smile at him mid-sentence, and Gerard has a small epiphany. No future planning of his has ever felt like this before, but Gerard knows—knows deep down in his bones—he will see that smile again. Gerard will marry that man, and see that smile for years to come. For a lifetime and more.

They finally pile out of the van, Frank double checking left and right that they all have their bags and everything out of the bus and with them, then herds them toward the fountain for a quick meeting. “Okay, this is the fountain Venere Ciprea, this is our meeting spot! Be back here by 4:30, we’re going to dinner together. Capice?” He gets a round of nods, Gerard gets a few special grins, and groups split off, some hungry and heading for a cafe awning a block away, some wandering more aimlessly.

Gerard takes Frank’s hand. “Shall we?”

Frank nods, and they head down the main street and up. They end up hitching a ride from a farmer that lives up in the hills, and who is more than happy to chat with Gerard about the land and the town. He drops them at the head of the road Gerard swears hasn’t changed a whit, except for the pavement, and refuses a tip, waving goodbye as he drives off again.

They walk hand in hand down the road, Gerard looking down the road for landmarks he knows. Almost nothing else is familiar, but suddenly he goes “Oh. Oh, there it is” and nearly drags Frank off his feet, crashing down the hill. Frank stumbles after him, and they hop a fence to wind up at a
tumbling-down stone wall with a few lumps of stone in them.

Gerard stops, stepping through the wall with a quiet sigh and reaching out for the first of the seven stones. Frank stands back for a second, giving Gerard space inside the small cemetery. One looks like it was once a cross, but they’re all so weathered it’s impossible to tell. Gerard carefully brushes each of them, remembering which stones are his grandfather and the stillborn sister he never had. The third- if he remembers correctly, is the boy who made it a year, the one born before Mikey. The next must be his little brother, and Gerard drops to his knees. “Oh, Mikes. Mikey, I’m so sorry. I’m still- I’m so sorry.” Gerard has to wipe his face roughly before he can even look at the next two.

He knows they’re his parents. He’d come by as he fled Grant’s, looking for them, and met a councilman here, seen their graves and wept and kept running. Now he can’t remember if it’s his father or his mother on the right or the left. Gerard has fallen out of the habit of prayer, really, but he prays again here, hoping against hope they’re in heaven and well, and that they can forgive him for never returning. It takes another minute for him to get up, caught kneeling between the headstones with an impossible weight in his chest, but he does.

Frank is standing a few paces back, half-turned and looking out over the valley and the town, giving Gerard privacy. Gerard dusts his knees off. “Frankie?”

Frank turns back with a quiet “Hm?”

Gerard inclines his head. “Come meet my family?”

“Of course.” Frank takes his hand as he steps past the wall, and quietly listens to Gerard tell his family history, describing each person as best as he remembers. When he’s done, Frank says quietly “I’m honored to meet them, Gee. I hope they would have liked me.”

“I’m sure- if they could understand- they would have liked you.”

“I hope.”

Gerard shoves his hands in his pockets. “Well. I hope they would have given me their blessing.” If his heart beat, it would be in his throat. It’s now or never. Gerard pulls out the ring box, stepping back so he can go to one knee. Frank’s jaw drops.
“Frank Iero, will you marry me?”

Frank can only nod for a second, struck dumb. Gerard is on one knee in front of him, with a ring box, with a ring, and he’s seriously asking. “I- yes, yes I’ll marry you. Holy shit, Gee.”

Gerard stands, taking Frank’s hand and slipping the ring onto his finger. Frank looks like he’s about to cry with joy, looking at Gerard with huge eyes. Gerard pulls him into a kiss that morphs into a tight hug when Frank actually starts sobbing, damp shocked hitches that interrupt his “Love you”’s. Gerard would worry about that sobbing if Frank wasn’t clinging to him with everything he’s worth and telling him how happy he is.

When Frank is mostly under control he wipes his face and looks at the ring with a sigh. “Oh, Gee. This is spectacular. I love it. I- shit, I gotta call my Mom.”

“Yeah, you should. I told her when I was planning to do this, she’s probably expecting you to call.”

Frank socks him in the shoulder. “You told! Thank you- that would have meant a lot to her.”

“I know. She was thrilled. Now call her.”

Frank does, putting it on speaker between them.

“Mom?”

“Frankie?” There’s something expectant in her tone.

“Gee asked. I said yes.”

“Oh thank God! I’m so happy for you, honey. I’ve been waiting for this call.”

“He told me he told you.”
“He asked for my blessing like a proper boy should.”

Frank squeezes Gerard’s hand and beams at him.

Gerard beams back and tells Ms. Miranda “He cried. We’ll take a picture in a minute and send it to you.”

“Please do. Oh, I’m so happy for you both. Congratulations!”

“Thanks Mom. I love you.”

“I love you too. Both of you, dears.”

Frank hangs up and stares at his hand. “I still, this doesn’t feel real yet.”

“Hopefully it starts to.” Gerard sounds nervous, so Frank kisses him again.

“I’m sure it will. But holy shit, I get to marry you!”

“Yes. Well, I get to marry you.”

“We get to marry each other!”

“Yes. That.” Gerard takes his hand and they begin the walk back down into town. By the time they reach it again, it’s starting to sink in. They have about forty-five minutes until everyone is due back, and Gerard is itching to check out a bookstore, so they head in. Frank loses Gerard among the stacks, but finds a group of their students. He ends up leaving a little early with them, trusting that Gerard will make it to the fountain on time. They meet up with another few halfway back, and one of the girls asks “Wasn’t David with you?”

“Oh yeah, he was talking to this dude at a shop. He’ll catch up.”
Frank sighs. “Didn’t I put the buddy system in place for a reason? What shop, I’m gonna go get him.”

“The pharmacy thing down that-“ Alex spins to point “street. Like, half a block?”

“Okay. The rest of you- stick together please?” Frank heads off to collect David and make sure he’s not getting too aggressively propositioned by some Italian man. It had happened to Sophia a week ago and taken Gerard’s intervention for him to back off. It helped that Gerard had the vocabulary for a much firmer no, as well.

Frank sees David as soon as he walks into the shop. He’s doing a fairly fluent job of chatting to a tall, bald man by the back of the store. “David!”

David turns and waves. “Hey Mr. Iero! Am I late?”

Frank comes up to him, offering the bald man a quick smile. “You’re not late, but your group left you, so I came back to get you.”

“Oh, sorry.”

The bald man smoothly interrupts in English. “I’m sorry I kept him, I didn’t mean to separate the school group.”

“Oh, it’s not a big deal, they just shouldn’t have left.” Frank waves a hand and David’s jaw drops.

“Mr. Iero, is that a ring?”

Frank fights down a blush. “Yes, David. It is.”

“Did Mr. Way really finally propose to you?”

Now Frank is really red. “Yes, he did.”
The bald man looks curiously at Frank. “I used to know a young man with the same last name. What’s your Mr. Way’s first name?”

“Gerard?”

“Gerard Way. Well. That’s a coincidence.” The man smiles, just a little too sharply, and holds out a hand. “My name is Grant Morrison.” Frank takes the hand, trying to remember if Gerard has mentioned friends being here. “I knew Gerard when he was very young, I’m sure he’s mentioned me.”

That statement brings the right memory up. This is the Grant from Sicily that turned Gerard, that bound Gerard, and who Gerard ran from. “Oh. Yes, you’re Grant from Sicily. Sorry, took me a moment.” Frank drops his hand. “Well, it was good to meet you, we’ve gotta head back to meet the group.”

“Do you mind if I walk with you? I’d love to see Gerard again.” Frank inclines his head. There’s really no polite way to say no to that, so he allows it, walking between Grant and David, just in case.

Gerard almost visibly blanches when he sees the three of them walk up, and Frank gently pushes David to join the group properly. Gerard hurries their way, and Frank and Grant hang back to have a semblance of privacy to meet him.

“Grant.”

“Gerard.” Grant’s smile is cold as ice. “So good to see you again, and with your own little pet, too.” Frank makes a face, can’t help it. “What, you don’t think you are? Did he not turn you?”

“He did, but that doesn’t make me his pet, thanks.”

Grant just smiles at him, visibly indulging him in the idea. “Of course not. Well, Gerard, we’re well overdue to have a little chat. How about you leave your boy with me as insurance and come over tonight, hmm? Say midnight at the church of St. Francis?”

“I’m not leaving him.”
“Then how do I know you’ll come?”

“I’ll give you my word. I know you have enough power here to not let me leave if I break it.”


“No threats to go with that?”

“Do I need to make them?” Grant puts a hand on Frank’s shoulder. Frank has to fight to not shrug it off, but Gerard stares like the hand might bite.

Gerard’s jaw twitches. “No.”

Grant smiles again. “Good.” He drops his hand, and Frank steps back quickly.

Gerard makes an equally hasty not-escape, and they both school their faces into something else to herd the kids to dinner. Cathy shoots them a suspicious look, but Frank just shakes his head at her and she doesn’t ask.

Nearly everyone is distracted by the new ring on Frank’s finger, and he lets himself bask for a while in a happy glow that lasts until they’re back at the hotel, door closed and midnight only two hours away.

“I hope you don’t think you’re going alone.”

“I am. I can’t trust him with you.”

“Gerard.”

“Please. Give me an hour and a half, then you can come.”
Frank tries not to slump. He's worried, more worried than he probably should be, but it's Gerard. "An hour. And I'm calling you as I leave. You calling me before that hours up wont change anything."

"Fine. If that's what makes you happy. Or happier."

"Yeah. I wont be thrilled till I know what the hell he thinks he's getting from us, but I'll take it." Midnight on the dot, Gerard gives Frank a kiss and slips out, heading down darkened streets.

Frank watches him go like it's the last time he'll see him, while trying to convince himself it can't be, that Gerard will come back in one piece.

Grant is lounging in one of the pews alone when Gerard slips in. "Alone and late, hmm?"

"Yes. Sorry to disappoint." Gerard stands a couple feet away.

Grant stands to match him. "No matter. He can be fetched. Would you care to walk with me?"

"Why don't you just tell me what you want from me. Make this simple, for once."

"I want to catch up. I haven't seen you in nearly 300 years and you fly back home with a group of schoolchildren and your own little pet. You've grown up and I want to hear all about it."

Gerard stops in his tracks. "Do you have any idea how sick this is? You ripped me out of my life, and now you're here trying to talk to me like you're my- my parent, or something."

The elder vampire stops three strides further. "Your parents are long dead. Your brother is longer dead. Where else are children meant to turn? I'd even say I did a fair enough job raising you. You came out all sharp edged and pretty."

"Anything good I am now is no thanks to you."

Grant fixes him with a piercing stare "You're on your last chance, love. Tell me how you ended up with that feisty young thing and I won't drag him down here to tell me himself."

"We teach at the same school. Long story short, we got attacked, I got staked, the only way I was going to survive was by draining him. So he let me do it, and in exchange, I turned him."

"Ah, you were exposed. Stupid." he turns and keeps strolling down the alley. "And he's just a friend, who asked to be killed to save your miserable hide, hmm?" Grant decides to hold onto the knowledge of the engagement and pretend he doesn't know.

"He knew before that. I had to tell him, it was a stupid accident. The guy that attacked us, he knew, but he was crazy. And no, that's not exactly what he is."

"You were exposed, you were attacked. It's all a wash." Grant waves a flippant hand. "What exactly is he, then?" Gerard can't see his face as he asks, but he knows Morrison’s smile isn't kind.

Gerard takes a breath, knowing he's just entangling himself further. "He's my finance."
“Ah. Tell me more about him. I want to know everything.”

“What is there to know?”

"Of course he must be your partner. I saw the way he looked at you, same way you used to look at me. So tell me about him. What makes him special?"

"I never looked at you like that. Anything we had was fucking Stockholm syndrome. But he's good to me, and he's smart, and he's funny, and I love him. Good enough?"

"Ah now, that's how he looks at you. Don't take my word for it, watch him. And no. That's not everything. I can still ask him, you know.” Grant pulls out a chair on a closed patio restaurant and sits.

Gerard goes cold. Is that really how Frank looks at him? Like he's trapped, and Gerard's the only thing he knows? "What else is there to know?"

"What is he like when he's happy? When he's scared? Do you scare him?"

"I don't- I don't think I scare him.” For the first time, Gerard's having doubts. "When he's happy, it just lights up his whole face, it's the prettiest thing. And when he's really content, he looks younger, lighter somehow. I don't think I scare him, he took me to meet his mother, for god's sake.”

Grant smiles, soft and glittering. "Does she know?"

"Yeah, she knows. She wasn't happy about it, but she's over it."

"She's really over it? You killed her son and she's alright with it? You've found some wunderkind, unless he's asked her to only pretend to be alright with you.”

"Someone in their family knew me. She was used to the idea of vampires, so that helped. And if she's pretending, she's doing a pretty spectacular job,"

"That's sweet. On a slight change of topic, how was he?"

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

"How did he taste, Gerard?"

"Fine. Good. But that doesn't mean I liked killing him.” Gerard stops, angry with this whole thing. "Why is there always something else you want from me? It's always like this. Anything I say isn't good enough."

"I only want you to care. I want you to reach deep deep down inside yourself and pull out what you are. Reach past your still, worthless heart and tell me what moves you. There must yet be something keeping you alive."

"I do care. It's just not the kind of caring you want me to do."

"Explain to me what you do care about then. We'll share, because from here, you look hollowed out
and empty. You look like a ghost ship waiting to be sunk, Gerard. You look like an empty house."

Gerard hadn't felt hollow before, but he does now. Hollow and see-through, straight down to the core. "I care about Frank. And his mom, she's been good to me. And art. And my students." So why does that suddenly all sound so empty?

Grant cocks an eyebrow. "What about you?"

"I haven't cared about me in a couple hundred years. Why should I? I'm going to keep existing whether I want to or not."

"Then why bother saving yourself? Why bother turning that boy and keeping him thinking you've something like life to give him? Why bother stopping him from coming here when it's the truth he needs to hear. I'm sure you could do worse but hopefully he could do better than you." Grant stands and stares down at Gerard, cold and merciless and angry. "You're worthless."

"Tell me something I don't know." Gerard stands, turning to leave.

"Something you don't know? I'm going to tell your boy what you're really like and I'm going to give him a choice. You or me. You know what I'll offer him." Grant vanishes like an extinguished candle, off after Frank.

"Yeah, yeah." Gerard slips into the darkness as well, picking up on the faintest trail of his footsteps.

Grant knows Gerard will try to follow, and quickly outpaces him, heading a block north of the church to intercept where Frank is slipping from shadow to shadow, heading south to the church.

Gerard can sense Frank sooner than he sees him, and risks moving out of the shadows to make a run for it.

Frank's head whips sideways at the sudden pound of footsteps, and he sees Gerard pelt out of a side street. "The hell? Are you being chased?"

"Run." He grabs Frank's hand and pulls him along until he finds his feet, down alleys that are not as familiar as they once were.

Frank keeps up, listening for anything behind him. "Someone's behind us."

"I know, I know, just run."

Frank shakes his head and keeps running. He hopes to hell that Gerard's not hurt, and not outrunning being hurt.

Gerard can hear Grant gaining on them, and he realizes he has no choice left. "Frank, split off. Go back."

"Back hotel or back church? You're meeting me there."

"Hotel. Go."
"Meet me." Frank squeezes his hand lets go, ducking down the next street north. He thanks god as he runs that he paid attention to the streets, because otherwise he'd be lost.

Instead, Gerard turns back, pinpointing Grant in the shadows and lunging for him.

Grant snarls and twists sideways, flinging Gerard into the wall. "Running away is a little obvious, don't you think?"

Gerard's back on his feet in a second, shoving Grant back. "He's away from you. I don't care about anything else."

Grant laughs. "These are my streets, you really think I'm the only one out?"

Frank skids to a halt halfway between two house, preparing to backtrack quickly. He's half a block from the main road, and there's someone else in the narrow alley. Arms lock around his torso from behind before he gets four steps back.

Five blocks away, Gerard is begging "Please, God, just leave him alone. You can have me. You know how to bind me, you can take me back and keep me. Just let him go."

Grant cups his cheek. "I had you. I don't want you back." Another vampire appears at the end of the street, holding Frank's arms tightly. "Sir? The other one ran into me."

Gerard feels like he's falling, falling, because this can't be happening. It can't. So he takes one last chance, pushing Grant away. "Frank, I'm sorry, please forgive me." He takes a breath. "I name you, Duskwalker. I name your body and soul, from the beginning of time to the end. With this name I bind you." Then one word, the word Frank spoke before he awoke the first time, the word that even he cannot taste.

Frank makes a tiny painful noise and crumples in the arms of Grant's henchman. Grant laughs completely without humor. "Oh, Gerard, and you told me you were nothing like me."

Gerard ignores him, speaking to Frank. "I'm sorry. Run. Get out of here any way you can, and run until you're safe. If they get in your way, fight them."

Frank claws his way up, limbs obeying without any input from him. "What did you just do to me?"

"I- I bound you. I'm sorry. But now they can't. Just get out and run."

Frank goes cold. There's a net- a root system- something foreign in his mind that hurts in a way Frank doesn't have the nerves or comprehension to really handle and it pushes at him, pushing Gerard’s will onto Frank, over Frank. He melts into the shadows, sprinting out of the alley. Grant listens to him go and quietly remarks "Interesting way of defending him. Interesting how he'll never quite trust you again."
"It's worth it. He's alive. You don't have him." Gerard feels like he's being torn apart at a molecular level, every shred of his being ripped away. "I'd rather have him hate me then let him live like I did."

"That's kind of rude to me, don't you think? You better hope he runs quickly, before I really get mad and send my boys after him. Or you could just call him back."

"Okay. Okay." So Gerard calls for him, dreading what will happen when he comes.

Three streets away Frank finds his feet too heavy, dragging him down, and some unbearable need to go back. His stomach turns with the cold realization that this is what binding is, exactly how compelling and dehumanizing it is. Scared of what he'll find, Frank retraces his steps, dread mounting with every cobblestone he passes.

Gerard makes a break for Frank when he's in sight. Grant's men simply grab him. When Frank comes into view, Gerard's barely fighting back tears. "God, Frank, I'm so sorry. I release you." Then the name again.

Frank stumbles a little then gathers himself and steps up to Gerard, standing close and trying to ignore the two men holding Gerard limp. "You didn't want to, Gerard, why? What does he want?"

"He wants you," Gerard chokes out. "And I didn't want him to control you."

Grant smiles. "So he controlled you. Somehow that doesn't quite seem fair, does it?"

Frank hisses "Is this just some kind of fucked-up game to you then?"

Grant moves over to him, curling an arm around his waist. "I'm almost a thousand, darling, I have to have fun somehow."

Frank takes a sharp step back, jerking away from his touch. "You've had your fun then, let us go."

"Oh, the fun's not over yet. The fun will happen when I tell you the truth about the boy you allowed to kill you."

"Spit it out then." Frank grits out. He doesn't intend to actually listen, but he can't fully squash the trickle of curiosity and worry. Behind them, the clock strikes away one in the morning.

"He's worthless. A shell. He's only using you so he can feel something, because he doesn't know how to feel anymore. You saw how easily he controlled you, is that the action of someone who loves you?"

Frank glances at Gerard. "Then explain why he's defended his kids so completely, respected and cherished them, and actually ask how we got together. The binding is what it is, and was undone, if we're keeping score without forgiveness or understanding, as I assume you are."

"You still think like a human, Frank. Someone as old as me, or even young Gerard here can afford to think long-term. You're an investment to him. He can afford to spend months keeping you happy so you grow to trust him, it's just a split second in the grand scheme of things. He told you he didn't use you. He probably also told you he'd never use you. But that's not quite true, either." Gerard hisses, kicking out at one of his captors. One of them strikes him a quick blow and he slumps sideways,
barely conscious.

Frank wants to tear into the two vampires holding Gerard, but he knows he can't fight both of them, wouldn't be able to get Gerard out unless they're allowed to go. "He never promised he wasn't using me. He's never said he's not using me now. There's no promise here to break. And that doesn't mean it's unhealthy use either."

"Did the feeling of him bending your will to his own feel healthy?"

"No. But I kinda figured, based on how things look now, and because it was contradictory, it wasn't something he freely asked, was it? You made him call me."

“He wanted you back to say goodbye. I’m trying to convince you not to miss him.”

“What? You can’t- you can’t just take him!"

“He was mine first, I think it’s more of a return to his place than anything else.” Grant is entirely unsympathetic.

Frank is shocked with fear, not for the first time tonight. “No, please? What if you could have me, just tonight? Tomorrow night too, I’ll come back. And when we leave, we can both leave.” It’s a desperate, last-chance bargain, but Frank can't get on a plane knowing that Gerard's trapped with this monster.

"That's so short-term, it really does nothing to solve my problem. So I'm sorry, but I'll have to decline."

“I need you to make a deal with me."

“You need me to? I'm not sure you're in a position to be making any sort of demand from me." Grant’s lips curl in an indulgent smile.

“I’ll stay with him. With you. On the condition none of you or anyone like you even looks twice at our kids, or the other chaperone."

"See, here's the problem. It's not nearly as easy to make someone disappear as it used to be. There'll be a lookout for you, especially because you still have living family members. I like living here, and I don't particularly want the police on my doorstep. Care to solve that for me, somehow?"

"You want me to fake a suicide or something?"

"No, no, that would still create an investigation. It'll be better if you just go. I’d love to have you, dear, but it’s too much work."

“I have vacation days from work. I can take those. Then I’ll have an excuse to stay. At least for a while. Then I’d leave with him?"
Gerard shakes himself back to consciousness at that. "Frank, don't you fucking dare."

Grant considers him for a moment. "How long?"

"Two weeks. Starting when the rest of the kids go home."

"Fine. I'll let you enjoy the rest of your little vacation. Don't let anyone say I don't have my good side."

They leave fast after that, and Frank gets them inside carefully, laying Gerard out on the hotel bed. "You can get about six hours of rest to heal. Hopefully that's enough. I'll be here in case you get nightmares."

"Living my fucking nightmares." Gerard rolls over, planting his face in the pillow.

"I'm sorry." Frank lays a careful hand on Gerard's back, wondering just what's in store.

"Next time, just stay out of things, okay?"

"And just let you vanish out from under my fingers? Would you have made it back here if I hadn't come? Seriously, because if you don't want me I'll find him and ask to just keep me and let you go."

Gerard rolls over so quickly he nearly falls off the bed. "Don't you dare. I want you safe, and I want you as far away from him as possible. That's why I tried to get you away."

Frank looks slightly startled. "It's two weeks. We'll live. If we're really ballsy, we don't change our travel plans and make a run for it."

"He'll find us. We won't make it halfway to the airport."

"Then I guess we're staying. I'm not letting him keep you longer than me though. I'm not leaving without you."

"If he gives you the chance to leave, take it. Please. The longer you're with him, the more he'll get to you. He'll make you hate me, and it's selfish as hell, but I couldn't stand that."

"He doesn't know shit about us though. And I don't know if you were really listening, but he tried. And he didn't get anywhere."

"It was an hour. You let him near you 24 hours a day, he breaks you down. Trust me."

Frank slumps. He knows how that can go. "We'll have each other. Moot point now. Get some rest, Gee. We'll talk in the morning."

"We've literally just agreed to go into slavery for two weeks, and on top of that we're probably going
to lose our jobs for being entirely irresponsible."

"That's what savings are for, and it was that or one of us looses our job and possibly their boyfriend with it."

"I don't want to lose my job, I want to be fucking dead so I don't have to deal with him anymore. He's been haunting me for 360 fucking years."

"Well then I'm fucking sorry I let you kill me and keep me." Frank snaps, turning away on the bed.

"Christ." Gerard sits up, head spinning. "I'm sorry, okay. I'm sorry, but I'm fucking terrified of what he's going to do to you. And me. And he knows- he knows he can use us as leverage against each other, now that he knows we're together. You should have cut your losses and left me.”

“You just proposed to me! No way in hell!”

“Oh, Frankie.” Gerard seems to crumble at the set of Frank’s jaw, and he leans forward and hugs Frank tightly. “I’m sorry. Just, whatever he does to you... just remember that I loved you enough to marry you and spend the rest of my life with you. Remember that that's the truth.”

Frank nods. “I already know that.”

“But remember, okay?”

“I will.”
The Prodigal Son, Returned

Chapter Notes

This is the chapter where I’m really starting to mean that M warning and those Graphic Violence and Rape tags. Please be kind to yourself and practice reader discretion.

Some scenes may read as dub-con, but I am Taking A Stance and tagging it as non-con, because, honestly, unless you’re describing erotic fantasy, dub-con should just be called non-con.

With the serious notes over, let’s throw these boys into hell and start cranking up the heat >:

The last two days of the trip ought to be fun, and for the kids it still is, but Frank and Gerard are on edge. They call the school and tell them they’re staying, collect congratulations from Joe, and let everyone on the trip chalk their distance up to the impending post-engagement vacation.

As soon as they’re back at the hotel in Palermo, Frank asks Gerard how they’re getting back to Castelbuono after they take everyone to the airport. Almost as soon as he asks, the hotel phone rings. Concierge tells Gerard there is a man on behalf of Mr. Morrison who would like to come up to see them. Gerard grudgingly allows it.

The man who shows up is one of the three from the night with Grant, the tallest and thinnest of the bunch. He gives them a slightly old-fashioned bow as greeting, and doesn’t ask to come in.

“My name is Matteo, I’ll be driving you back to Mr. Morrison’s as per your arrangement with him. What time is the flight your students are on?”

Frank answers, standing in the doorway with Gerard. “7:30 tomorrow night. We’re dropping them off at 5:30.”

“Then I’ll pick you up here at 6:30pm, if that is acceptable to you.”

Gerard snorts. “Yeah, the logistics are fine.”

Matteo pauses, looking at Gerard with something finally stirring behind the professional mask of his dark eyes. “The logistics are all I have control over, Mr. Way.” Frank wonders if this man is bound to Grant the way Gerard once was. “Goodnight, then, gentlemen.”

“Goodnight, Mr…?” Frank trails off, wanting to be equally polite.

“Ricci. My name is Matteo Ricci.”

“Goodnight, then, Mr. Ricci. We’ll see you tomorrow.” Frank gently closes the door and listens to Mr. Ricci’s barely-audible footsteps retreat. Gerard slumps, looking defeated. Frank sighs. “Well. Two weeks. And he seemed nice enough.”

“I have no doubt he’s bound to Grant, he’s only as nice as Grant thinks he should be.”
“Well. We wont give Grant a reason to be mean.”

Gerard levels Frank a look that says that isn’t even an option, then sits down. “Well. It’s done. No use panicking about it now.”

Frank sits as well. “Well, shit, should I not wear my ring? I don’t want him to take it. I mean, he probably knows, but I don’t want to have to tell him.”

“That might be best. That way he can’t hold it over us.”

Frank nods, twists the ring on his finger, and gently slips it off, nestling it back in it’s box and then tucking it into his suitcase. “You better be putting this back on me in two weeks.”

Gerard gives him a tired smile. “I’ll try to.”

Matteo picks them up in a dark car the next day, and drives quietly, radio on low to a satellite station broadcasting from Nigeria. The windows are more severely tinted than Frank or Gerard's cars at home, and the passing streets turn into a murky blur. After two hours of winding down to Castelbuono and then out again, up into the hills and over the ridge, they pull up to what's more or less a mansion, and Gerard's unworking heart drops. It's not quite the same place as last time, but something about it feels the same. And for the first time, he's terrified.

Frank sees how afraid he looks and reaches over to take his hand. They get out of the car together, and Matteo pulls off behind them, driving around to a garage.

Grant steps between them, gently but firmly breaking their hand hold. “Now, my pets don't play with each other.”

"I'm not your pet," Gerard snarls. "Never again. Being your pet in one lifetime was enough."

"You are now. Drop his hand."

"Make me."

"I'll bind you both to me and you won’t fly home. Sorry, love, but you freedom depends on you playing along.” Grant possess the slightly enviable ability to make even quiet words sound like threats, and neither of them want to see him act on one.

"We had a fucking deal," Gerard mutters, but he squeezes Frank's hand once and lets go. Frank tries not to look at Grant, and grits his teeth as Grant needles at Gerard. It's going to be a long two weeks.

Gerard motions to another of his underlings, standing by the door. "Will you please show Frank to his room? I'd like a moment to have a word with young Mr. Way." Frank shoots Gerard a panicked look, but walks off silently. Grant waits to hear a door close as they leave, then turns to Gerard.

"Well. Welcome home."

"It's not home. But please, just tell me what you're planning. Don't hurt him."

"It's home for now. Walk with me, I need to take you to your room." As he sets off, he keeps talking. "You think you know me. What would you pass this lovely time doing?"
Gerard follows just behind. "You're angry at me for leaving. Your only interest in me anymore is to get to Frank. You used me to get him here, but now you don't need me. So I don't know what you're going to do with me, but you're gonna turn him against me."

"I am angry at you. I put work into you and you ran off and tried to undo everything I taught you. So yes, I don't need you. Which leaves you open to so much pain while I teach your pet everything you were too soft and stupid to understand."

Gerard stops in his tracks. "Don't you dare act like you were some angel to me. You led me straight into killing my own little brother. That's why I ran, not because I was 'soft.'"

"Would you like to feel like that again? I could talk him into killing you in a week, never mind two."

"Do you think I want him living with the guilt I've dealt with for centuries? I don't care about me. Do what you want to me, I've lived long enough. But you said you wouldn't hurt him, and that would."

"I don't think what you want matters, to be honest with you, love. Or what you think." Grant stops outside a heavy wood door. "This is yours. Leave your shoes out here."

"I'm just telling you that that would hurt him. And why am I leaving my shoes, exactly?"

"Good. And you're leaving your shoes because I don't think you should have them. Take them off."

"They're literally just my shoes, what am I going to do? Escape out the window with shoelaces?"

"And I said to take them off." Grant's voice is quiet, but he's not joking, and Gerard can tell he'll be punished if he pushes it more. Gerard pulls them off, movements jerky with anger. Grant shoves him through the doorway and shuts him in with no further ceremony before going to see how the younger vampire is settling in.

He's had Frank put in a room nearly as nice as his own, king-sized bed and a window with protective sun-shades to create the effect of natural light without the hazard. Frank heard the lock on the door click as soon as his escort left, and he's sitting perched on the edge of the armchair, one foot nervously jiggling. For some reason, he hadn't considered that Grant would separate them.

Grant steps into the room, pausing inside the door. "Frank, darling, how are you settling in? Anything you need?"

Frank looks taken aback at the hospitality. He stares for a moment, then carefully answers, "From the room, no."

"You want Gerard back, don't you?" Grant crosses the room and strokes Frank's hair back from his face. "I'm afraid I can't do that, love. He's a bad influence on you."

It takes effort to not dislodge Grant's hand, but Frank manages to stop himself with only a slight twitch of his shoulders. He doesn't want to upset the man.

"I did my best for him. That's all I can do. But you... he's poisoning you. He changed you, and then taught you that what he made you was something to be ashamed of. But I don't want you to be weak. Not like he is."
Frank sighs, sitting back a little bit in the chair. "Is weakness still being human? Because I'm thirty-one, I still feel fucking human."

"But you're not. You're more than that. And he's done you wrong by trying to keep you that way, when you could be so much more."

"Look, I want to stay like this. I'm happy feeling human, and like it or not, I'm happy with Gerard. 'Weak' or not."

Grant clicks his tongue. "He's done quite the number on you." He stands. "When was the last time you ate?"

"Night before we flew out. I'm fine."

"That was, what, a week ago? More than that? You shouldn't be going so long without food."

"That's not that long. And as I said, I'm fine."

"That's because Gerard's content with barely surviving, so that's what he's taught you. Even he ought to eat every week or so. I'm a thousand years old, I can go months. One so young as you should be eating every few days, if not every night."

"Please, believe me, I feel fine. I know what hunger feels like, and I'm nowhere near it. Don't let it worry you." Frank offers Grant a tight smile.

Grant doesn't return it. "You don't feel fine, because you don't know fine. You've never been at the peak of your strength, the peak of your senses." He squeezes Frank's shoulder and steps out to the hallway for a second, motioning to one of his vampires. "Bring him a fresh meal."

Frank doesn't agree, but putting up a fuss this early won't be worth it. A little bit of feeding won't hurt Frank. And knowing how many times Gerard has waited until he's on the brink of going a little crazy does prove Grant's point. The vampire comes back a couple minutes later with a man, gagged and half-struggling. Grant comes in behind them. "My first present to you. Let's get you up to full strength, love."

Frank makes eye contact with the man that's meant to become food and nearly blanches. This feels wrong. Wrong and dirty and evil in a way that picking up a boy in the club doesn't, that taunting a homophobe doesn't, that giving a mugger a quick nip doesn't. "No, I can't just-" Frank waves a hand at the man.

Grant raises an eyebrow, expression clear, and Frank's empty stomach turns over. "I'm not killing him." Grant half-shrugs in return. Out of other options to delay, he tilts the man's neck and sinks his fangs in, carefully holding him up.

Grant watches approvingly until Frank finishes drinking. "Very good, Frank. How do you feel?"

Frank takes a deep breath and lays the man down. "Fine. It feels brighter, but it always does."

"You should eat again tomorrow, you've practically been starving, love. Because this is how you should feel all the time, not slow and dull. It's a waste."
"It's not dull, it feels like I'm sober. Which isn't a bad thing. And I don't lose anything, by it, I'm pretty sure. Thanks though."

"You're living a half-life. A vampire at his peak doesn't need to sleep, that's a human behavior. He doesn't get tired, or worn out, or any of that, all human sensations. You are not human, Frank. Let go of the idea that you are."

"I'm 31. I'm human."

"Not at all. You ceased to be human the moment you came back from death. Humans are so fragile, Frank. I can't see why you'd want to stay one of them."

Frank sits back down in the armchair, a little more sprawled out, loose from the blood. "Yeah, thanks, I remember dying. And because human life is everything I know."

"But do you remember the first time you fed? How much stronger you felt, how much better?"

Frank nods, staring at his hands. "I felt dangerous."

"But it didn't feel bad, did it? It felt like you were supposed to be that way, should have always been that way." Grant sits down on the arm of the chair, hand on Frank’s shoulder and creeping into his hair, gentle and insisting on contact.

Frank shakes his head, shaking Grant’s fingers off. "No. There was no always. I was a fucking vegetarian when I got turned. I went from that to standing behind a club realizing how easy it would be to kill somebody. It wasn't exhilarating, it was terrifying."

Grant gently places his fingers under Frank's chin, making him look up. Apparently contact with Grant is something Frank is just going to have to live with. "But some part of you liked that power, didn't it? It's okay. You don't have to be ashamed."

Frank makes eye contact for a second, then looks away. "Who doesn't want power?"

"But not everyone has it. You do."

Frank looks at Grant again. "I shouldn't. I just do. I didn't ask for any power, I don't deserve it, I don't have any use for it. It just is."

"But you do deserve it. It suits you so well. It never suited Gerard, he was a poor choice from the start."

"What do you mean 'suits me'?"

"You could learn to use it. To use it and not be afraid. Some people can't do that."

Frank has a feeling that Grant’s definition of “afraid” is closer to Frank’s definition of “not a psychopath”, but he asks the stupid question anyway. "Use my power for what? To kill people? And who wouldn't be afraid of that?"
"You don't need to kill, if you don't want to. I won't make you kill. But if you're willing to hunt, you
could live forever."

"I am willing to hunt. I do hunt. So I don't know what you mean by 'if I was willing to'."

"Willing to do more than barely survive, I mean. It's really not the same thing."

Frank looks down again. "I can't promise that. Survival sounds pretty good."

"In time, maybe, you'll come around to see how unfulfilling your survival has been." Grant stands.
"I'm going to go see how Gerard is settling in. If you want, you can get to know the place, Lorenzo
here can show you around." He motions one of the other vampires over.

"I think I might stay here. Unless I can come with you to see Gerard?"

"Sorry, pet. I can't let him poison you any more than he already has. But maybe in a few days?"
Grant starts to leave, before pausing in the doorway. "And you don't need to hide your fangs, Frank.
They'll feel better when you leave them out."

For the moment, Frank lets them stay carefully tucked into his gums. He glances at Lorenzo and
says. "I think I'm going to sleep. You should wait outside."

Grant takes the next hour to do some of his work, then pulls a heavy old walking stick from a bin by
the front door and strides down to Gerard's room. Gerard jolts awake as soon as he hears a knock at
the door. He's scared, but he's more rested than he was, which he figures has to be an improvement.
The door swings open before Gerard can answer, and Grant steps in quietly, gently closing the door
behind him.

Softly, without looking at Gerard he says "He was starving. The look in his eyes when I put a meal
in front of him, Gerard." Grant shakes his head and looks up. "You were starving the poor boy." He
slams the side of the walking stick into Gerard's side, then again, slamming it into his torso.

Gerard bites down hard on his lip, refusing to give Grant the satisfaction of crying out, even when he
hears a rib crack, thinking to himself 'it'll heal. You'll be okay.'

Grant swings again and again, then pauses between strokes. "Think of this pain, right now, clawing
at you. This is how he felt, underfed and weak. You did this to him. You starved him. He told me.
He only hunts when you tell him he can?" The walking stick flashes down again. "Does he sleep?
Or does he pass out, lightheaded from starvation? Tell me, Gerard, tell me."

Gerard curls onto his side on the floor, struggling to draw breath to speak. "He eats as often as I do.
We eat when we're hungry. I don't want him to go overboard and do something he'd regret. I'm
trying to watch out for him. Unlike you."

"Gerard." Grant purrs, tapping one end of the stick on the floor and crouching over Gerard. "You're
older than he is. You don't need to eat as much as he does. He's never been as strong as he could be,
and that's a waste. You don't care about him, or you'd help him be the best he can be. But no, you're
starving him," Grant sets the end of the stick on Gerard's sternum. "He's worth more than half-dead."
"I did what I thought was right," Gerard chokes out. "Frank knows that. He knows I wouldn't hurt him on purpose."

Grant presses down. "But you aren't right. And my pet's hurting because of you. Because you fucked him up for me." With that, he’s gone, with one last hard slam of the walking stick into Gerard’s already broken ribs.

Gerard rolls to his back, wincing but with a glimmer of hope. His phone was in his pocket when they left the hotel, fully charged. Grant, in his thousand-year wisdom, apparently hadn't remembered that technology existed. The screen is cracked, but it's working, and he figures he'll have 2 or 3 minutes until Grant gets back to Frank. He types out

—I love you—

hits send, and shuts it off, hoping the battery will survive at least a few more days.

Frank feels his phone buzz in his pocket, and quickly glancing to the closed door shows no one coming in. He rolls over to hide himself and peers at it, half-charged and displaying a new text from Gerard with only three words. Frank replies with

—< 3 u 2 sve ur batry—

Grant shows up at Frank's room a moment after Frank's tucked his phone away. Frank sits up from the bed quickly.

"Hello, love? Did you go explore, or would you like to do that now?"

"I haven’t, no. Is there any point to doing it?"

"You're going to be here for, what, two weeks? You might as well get to know the place a little."

"Unfortunately, that would require embracing you, and that's not something Gerard or I is really interested in." Frank gets up. "Goodnight."

"Gerard doesn't matter, Frank. Not anymore. He was hurting you, and I've made him stop. Forget him."

Frank thinks about the ring they left in their hotel room in Palermo, just in case, and the text he just read and thinks ‘Wrong. you're wrong.’ almost viciously. To Grant, he shrugs. "You can take him out of my life for two weeks, sure, but I'm not gonna forget him. Or stop loving him."

"We'll see about that. One day you'll realize how many wrongs he's done you."

"That wont be in the next two weeks." Frank can hold out past that.

"I'm not so sure about that. Goodnight Frankie, darling. Maybe tomorrow you'll be feeling a little more welcoming. I just want what's best for you."

"Sure you do." Frank waits for the door to close, this time with a click of its lock, before he curls up in the too-large bed to rest for a few hours.
Gerard loses track of time in the dark room. It's easy to hate the sunlight when it's there, but now that it's not, he finds himself missing it. He drifts in and out of sleep, every once in a while checking to see if his ribs are intact yet. Grant lets in a sliver of light when he steps inside some time later. He looks positively gleeful as he kicks Gerard awake. "Day two, pet. Day two. I want to see my new pet just a little scared. Why don't you tell me more about that? We already talked about how he curls into himself, looking so young and so human. So tell me about what he fears."

"Don't scare him. Please don't. He won't trust you, isn't that what you want?"

"No, love, think bigger. Tell me, what scares him? I'd rather you tell me, or I'm going to start guessing and he could really get hurt. But it's up to you."

Gerard cracks. "Spiders. Losing people. Not being good enough, he always seems to have to confirm whether he's doing a good job teaching his kids. He always is."

Grant smiles. "Not being good enough, hmm? That sheds some light on why he was turned, doesn't it? Well." He stands up to leave, not telling Gerard it's barely midnight. Hopefully he'll try to count days, and break when he hits 14 with 4 calendar days left.

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

Grant doesn't answer, just turns and leaves the room, trapping Gerard back in the murky dark.

Gerard fights the urge to turn his phone back on and check the time. Surely Grant will be back at least once more before the day's over, giving him time to text Frank and get his bearings back.

Grant paces his house for a while, planning what to do to Frank. He needs to break down his barriers, let him hit rock bottom so he can be built back up. His fears of losing people and being good enough should be plenty, if he can find those cracks and press.

A while later, Gerard chances a text to Frank.

—U ok? Love u.—

He prays that he's right in thinking Frank's room is above him, based on the timing of Grant's footsteps. Because if he's right, Frank's alone at the moment. Frank's phone is loud in the silence of the room, and he swears quietly as he digs it out, hoping the room isn't bugged. He smiles at his phone, and is about to text back when the door swings open. Frank shoves his phone under the pillow, hoping that nothing seems unusual.

"Was there something buzzing in here?" Grant asks as he enters. "I do hope you're not hiding anything from me."

Frank just shrugs. "Could be something outside? I honestly didn't hear anything, so I have no clue."

Grant still looks suspicious, but he lets it go. "Care to take the tour today?"

"Still no reason to."

"You're disappointing me, Frank. I'm trying to do what's best for you. I just want a little time with you in exchange."
"I'm not giving up on what I know and taking your route. I don't give up on people."

"The boy who starved you? Who only let you eat when you were on the brink of death? Why bother being loyal to him?" Grant is close again, hand on Frank's waist again, gentle, but with their height difference, it's a command to stop fighting. Frank tries to relax his shoulders.

"He didn't 'let me eat,' we went together. And he never stopped me when I wanted to go, he'd come with me. And I'll be loyal to him because I want to be, and because he does the same for me."

"Blind loyalty can be so dangerous, Frank. He's made you dependent on him. What happens if he's not there anymore? Who are you?" Grant pulls Frank into his arms fully.

Frank lets Grant wrap his arms around him, not resisting, but not really accepting it either. "Depends on why he's not there. If he leaves, I'll get over it, keep moving and working and living my life. If he gets killed or hurt, I'll get revenge."

Grant sighs. "Alright, pet. You're his, I understand. But just for now, would you try to be nice, Frankie? You're a nice boy, I know you are. I want to see your good side, I want to see what you are when he's not forcing you to be something."

"That's all?" Grant will have to excuse Frank's obvious disbelief.

"You make it sound like I want to own you. That's not at all what I want. I want you to be yourself. At least try and trust me. Try and become what I know you can be. Start by leaving your fangs out. Like I said, you don't need to hide them."

Frank slides his fangs out, rolling his eyes in his head. He can fake trust for two weeks. The obvious moves Grant is putting on Frank are going to make this a bitch of a two weeks, but they should get out fine. "Okay?"

"You could also take that walk with me. Surely that's not too large a price?"

Frank shakes his head, stepping towards the door, quietly preparing for the worst today and going forward. They'll be fine.

Grant leads him around the house and the grounds, arm around Frank the whole time, brushing off the room Gerard's being kept as "only a closet." Gerard actually wakes long enough to hear them going by. His heart jumps at Frank's voice, and with pride for the fact that he still seems to be giving Grant hell. Frank tries to stay pretty quiet, learning and looking for ways out, but he can't resist a few comments about the old-fashioned-ness of the house and it's size.

"I think it's lovely, don't you?" Grant gestures to a particularly ornate side room as they walk. "Real character."

"I think it's dated and ostentatious." Frank sneers at needing so many extra rooms and closets and things.

"You young ones don't appreciate art. Look at this chandelier and tell me it isn't gorgeous."

"It's a glittery light." Like this, Frank is almost relaxed, leaned into Grant's side and smiling at the
room. “You can't even work at the table underneath it, because of all the little shadows. Music, that's art I can get behind. A good guitar?”

"Guitar, hmmm? I can get one brought here, if you want. I'd love to hear you play."

Frank shakes his head. "No. Don't bother. This isn't home, I'm only here for two weeks, and trying to make it out like some parody of my actual home is just cruel."

"That's not at all what I'm trying to do. You're going to be here because Gerard dragged you into this. I'm just trying to make it a little more comfortable."

"I don't recall Gerard shaking your hand and saying he'd stay to make sure we could keep each other safe, but sure."

"Ah, but none of this would've happened if he hadn't wanted to bring you home. I was his home while he was here, Frank. How do you know this wasn't always his plan?"

"I don't. But he doesn't want you back. He wanted to be gone. You even said it, what, four nights ago? Didn't he run?"

"All little kids run away at some point. And then they come home. They never stay away long."

"It's been 300 years, hasn't it? Why would he want to come back?"

"He misses home. And what better way to return home than with a new boyfriend to show off? You understand that, don't you?"

"He misses you so much he has nightmares?" Frank doesn’t quite admit to himself that he’s guilty of doing exactly what Grant just described. He also delayed going home until he could show Gerard off. Gerard is just returning the favor, it seems. "Does he ever really tell you what his nightmare are about? Or is it always some vague half-story, an I'll tell you later?"

"He always tells me." It's a flat-out lie, but to admit Gerard wont sounds like admitting defeat.

"Really? Because that doesn't sound like him at all. Don't lie to protect him, Frank. He wouldn't do the same for you."

"He would." Frank has no other answer for Grant, except faith in Gerard.

"He hasn't so far. He's told me all about you. How you look when you're happy or sad, your worst fears, everything. And so far, it's all been correct. He doesn't care about you, Frank. Just himself."

Frank stops walking. "He-what? Why would he tell you all that?" Gerard knows him, and he could give Grant the tools to break him. Frank stares at Grant in shock.

"I just asked. And he told me. Simple as that."

"Did you bind him, or threaten him?" There has to be some reason for Gerard spilling his secrets like this.
"None of that. I don't need to bind people to get them to do things for me, not like he does. I just ask."

"He didn't need to bind me. Stop using that against him, it wasn't meant to hurt me."

"Binding hurts by its very nature. He knew that."

Frank makes a noncommittal noise, shrugging against Grant's side. The physical shock of binding
had been nothing like the way he'd felt when Gerard had said, "I bound you"

"It was the betrayal more than anything, though, wasn't it? You trusted him. You trusted that he'd
never do that to you. But he did."

"I trust that he won't, and he wouldn't use me like that. He has no reason to bind me to hurt me."

"He did it once, darling. It's like hitting someone. You do it once, it's easier to do again."

Frank grimaces. “People like that don’t hide that long.”

"And I’ve lived with him longer. I know who he is, Frank. Even if you don't. You're not the first
person he's done this to, you know? Changed them, made them dependent on him. He abandoned
the others. How long until he does the same to you?"

"That sounds like complete bullshit." Frank's practically shaking, he's so angry. There's no reason for
Gerard to do that, and the sheer effort required to even try to pull it off sounds ridiculous. But the
more time Frank listens to Grant, the more he makes it sound like fact. He needs to get away from
Grant and his bullshit, text Gerard, and get his head on straight.

"You're 31, Frank. There are 350 years of his life you know nothing about, except for what he tells
you. But tell me, doesn't it seem a little odd that you'd be the only one he'd turn in 400 years?

Frank shakes his head. "After what I heard about his brother, no. It seems like trying to be safe."

Grant laughs. "Oh, his brother. That was a terrible accident. He was so young, he never should have
tried it. I warned him against it, but he didn't listen. He thought his brother should be one of us, but
instead of having me do it, he went off on his own."

"That's not quite what happened. He told me the whole story when he turned me.” Gerard didn’t,
that's not true, but Frank thinks of Gerard crying into his shoulder, wondering aloud if Grant had
made him fail the turning, and steels his resolve.

"What version did he tell you? That it was entirely an accident, he never meant to drain him at all?"

"Yes. And that would be the truth. As well as the fact he tried to bring him back, because he was
guilty. Because Mikey didn't deserve to die like that."

"Poor boy,” Grant says without a hint of pity. “I think he's told himself that so many times he
believed it. He's told you about his brother, hasn't he? How he was the most precious thing in the
world to Gerard? He couldn't fathom hundreds of years without Mikey, so he tried to turn him."

"Yeah, they were close. That's why Mikey offered to be a blood donor, like I did. Then Gerard got
in trouble and couldn't eat, and he forgot to stop. He got caught up and Mikey died. Then he tried to bring him back, because he fucked up."

"Really? You still believe that? You think Gerard would have wanted to live forever without his darling little brother? The one he protected from loud noises and angry neighbors? The one he still tells stories about?"

"Yes. Thats what sounds right to me. Thats how it should be." Frank wants to rip himself away from Grant and get the hell out of here, or at least end this conversation, but neither is looking likely.

"I can't say I blame him," Grant says softly. "He didn't want to outlive his baby brother. Who does? But the way he went about it..." He trails off and clicks his tongue.

"Stop." Frank says quietly. "That's his grief, not ours. It has nothing to do with us."

"But it does. I was there. I tried to stop him."

"That still has nothing to do with me."

"You brought it up. I just felt you should know the real story."

"I brought it up to prove to you he's not trying to hurt me, not to listen to you slander him."

"Slander implies that anything I've said is not the truth. Maybe I'll let you ask him yourself, see the confusion in his eyes as he struggles to remember which is the real version, and which is the one he's convinced himself is true." Grant leads Frank to a couch and sits them down, still close.

"If an ounce of what you've said is the truth, he's a completely different person than the one I know." Grant shrugs. "It's possible he's changed. It's been many years. But I don't think anyone ever truly changes their nature. And his nature is a willingness to risk other people if it'll get him what he wants."

Frank snorts. "Sure. Is this tour of your home over?"

"You're so willing to protect him. It's touching, really it is." Grant starts walking back in the direction of Frank's room. "I'm sorry he's lied to you. You deserve better."

"Glad we can entertain you. Is it too much to ask you to leave me the hell alone for the next 12 days?" Frank's upset, saying reckless things he shouldn't. "You'd just love it if I actually listened to you too, wouldn't you? Actually let myself care when you're lying to my face."

"But I'm not lying. You'll see in time." Grant opens the door to Frank's room. "If you want anything, just ask one of the men in the hallway."

Frank doesn't say another word to him as Grant turns to talk to one of his men. He needs to text Gerard and get his head on right. This is too much like Bob, like Grant’s trying to make him see a different reality. A few minutes later, Grant heads downstairs for another conversation with Gerard.
Grant just walks in and sits down. "It's a waiting game now pet. Turn on your phone for me."

"Don't have it."

"Then why was your boy hiding his under the pillow, open to text from you, I’m sure? Don't lie to me, I'll rip your nails off."

"Even if I give it to you, you can't get into it. It has a passcode. The chances of you getting in before it wipes itself are kinda slim."

“I’ll get in, Gerard. My boys left his phone. He's going to text you, and we're going to read it."

"And the point of this whole exercise is..."

"Telling him the truth. He thinks I've been lying to him. So you're going to confirm that that's the truth, and he's going to really get to know you. Turn on your phone. Set it down between us."

Gerard starts to reach into his pocket. "He already knows me. He knows the things that matter. What lies are you trying to get me to feed him?"

Grant waits for him to set the phone down before answering. "Only the truth about your brother. And the other boys you've picked up and turned and abandoned."

"I haven't done any of that." In his mind, Gerard's playing a game of consequences. He's faster than Grant, just by a hair. If he can get it away, just for half a second...

Grant catches his eye and calmly scoops up the phone, turning it in his hand. “Of course you have. It's in your nature to want someone to walk through your personal hell with you."

Gerard takes the chance. He swats it away from Grant, diving for it as it bounces off the floor. He pauses half a second before throwing it as hard as he can at the floor. The screen cracks more, glass spiderwebbing. Grant shoves Gerard up to the wall with hands wrapped around this throat. “Oh love, you've done it for yourself now. What's the password to that phone?” He's furious with Gerard, seriously considering breaking his fangs and blinding him. Without blood soon, he'd never properly heal.

Gerard kicks out, pushing Grant back an inch. "Not telling."

Grant slams a fist into his face, using his whole body to hold Gerard in place. "Do you want me to take this out on Frank? Because he's at fault here too. Would you rather him join you down here, where I can give you both my full and constant attention, or tell me four little numbers?"

"Five." Gerard chokes out. "Don't bother guessing my birth year."

"Is it Frank's name or Mikey's?"

"Neither. Think I'm that dumb?"

“You're that sentimental. But I don't like waiting Gerard, tell me the passcode." Grant presses a hand
into the fractures on Gerard's ribs. Gerard cries out and kicks again, pushing back as hard as he can.

Grant doesn't budge. "The passcode, Gerard." Grant feels a rib shift.

"Like- fucking- hell." Frank's name becomes the only thing running through Gerard's mind, the only thing that matters.

Grant cracks the rib again and shifts his grip to press Gerard's fingers the wrong way. "You'd miss drawing more, I think. Tell me the code Gerard." his voice is icy cold and furious.

"People are- gonna wonder- what happened- you know. If I come back- like this."

Grant shrugs. "And maybe if you don't tell me, you wont come back." Gerard's fingers are bent a little more than they can be safely. Much more pressure and the joints will snap.

"You made- a deal." Gerard bites his lip and does his best to brace himself.

"You’re still hanging onto the desperate belief I’d let you walk? And let that pretty thing upstairs leave me?” The phone buzzes on the ground behind Grant.

"You said- two weeks." Gerard tries to look around Grant, see if the screen even works anymore.

Grant chuckles. Gerard's ring finger snaps and Gerard makes a sick, choking sound. "Would you like to type in the password, after you tell me? Will that make you feel better? If you type it yourself?" Gerard’s finger stays bent back, not shifting to heal. "Oh, poor boy, all out of energy because he doesn't eat enough. Tell me the passcode quickly now, before you get really permanently hurt. And if you find you can't tell me, I guess I'll just have to beat it out of Frankie until one of you cracks."

"You won't- won't hurt him. I hear you talking- to him."

"Oh Gerard, don't test me. I made him no promises. What's your passcode?"

"Just tell me- what you're gonna do. Please."

"Last chance, love."

"Don- don't hurt him. You can't."

Fed up, Grant snarls, "You'll hear him screaming tonight if the next thing out of your mouth isn't your passcode."

So Gerard does the only thing he can think of. He yells out the five numbers, hoping Frank's close enough to hear him, hoping he'll put together the pieces.

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Unfortunately for him, Frank isn’t listening, only hears a dull noise from where he's locked himself in the bathroom down the hall, phone in hand, desperately hoping Gerard will reply to his text.

—uve told me th truth evry time, rght? abt mikey & shit? i’m sorry he’s saying some shit"

Grant lets Gerard fall to the floor, where he makes one last desperate scramble for the phone, hoping he can at least break the thing. Grant's almost casual when he kicks Gerard's hand away. He picks up the phone and sneers at the cracked screen as he reads the text out loud. "Oh love. You've told him the truth that would keep him safe, haven't you?"

Gerard curls into himself as Grant's foot contacts his broken fingers. "I told him- the truth."

"You told him the truth that you thought would keep him safe. I hope that doesn't come back to haunt you." He types the response out, hits send, and leaves with a parting shot of "If you'll excuse me, I think my pet is going to need me." He pockets Gerard's phone.

Frank reads the text as Gerard screams one last time, and only hears the rush in his ears as everything feels like it’s falling apart. If Gerard hasn’t told him the truth, then he'll have to accept Grant's version, now that Gerard’s admitted to lying. He turns his phone off and pockets it, heading back to the bedroom assigned to him, too aware of his still heart.

Grant arrives a minute or so later, taking in the look on Frank's face like it wasn't exactly what he expected. "Frank, love, what's wrong? You look like you've just gotten horrible news."

"Yeah, I mean, you're not good news, so it might be that." Frank's fangs slip out as he talks, eyes looking brighter for Grant. He grits his teeth as he does it and thinks about Gerard's proposal, and all the times, all the quiet in between moments Gerard had told him he loved him. They’re all soured now, angry and hurt and full of lies. It wouldn’t be the first time.

Grant sits across from him, asking softly, "You're starting to realize I'm telling the truth, aren't you?"

Frank shakes his head. "It's only one version of the truth. Not mine." He's trying to convince himself, and it probably sounds like it too.

“Oh pet, he's not the same person you thought you knew.” Grant reaches out for Frank’s hands, folding them into his own. Frank won’t meet his eyes.

"Shut up." Frank jerks his hands back. Grant is too much, he's pushing Frank too far, and Frank knows himself well enough to know that he needs to run before he breaks.

Grant takes them right back, smoothing out Frank’s shaking fingers. “No need to lash out at me, love. I’m telling you what I know to be true. I won’t lie to you, Frankie.” He pulls Frank into his side when Frank doesn’t respond, placing a gentle hand around Frank's waist. "I know. I know it's hard to accept. It's okay."

"Please don't.” Frank flinches away from his touch, but doesn’t remove himself from Grant’s side.

Grant’s hands stay gentle, as though calming an animal. "I’m not here to hurt you, love. I know how hard it is when someone you care about lies to you."

"Please don't do this. You've hurt Gerard enough. You don't need to use me to hurt him." Frank's
voice is low, horrified, and he hates how much he wants to let himself be comforted. "You don’t need to hurt me by telling me this."

"I’m just trying to undo the hurt he’s already done. He turned you and lied to you, you know that. Better you know the truth before you do something stupid, like promise to stay with him forever."

Frank can feel a tiny twitch in Grant’s fingers, and he shakes his head, thinking to himself ‘No, no, he wouldn’t hold that against us.’

"You haven’t done anything like that, have you Frankie? Forever is a very long time, you know."

"No. No." Frank chokes out. For a split second he's glad that he's not wearing any ring, glad that he could still run, then he curses himself for wanting to run, for letting three days change nearly two years of feelings.

"Good. I’d hate to think you’d rushed into anything, I knew you were smarter than that." The praise drips off Grant’s tongue like honey, a little too thick and dangerous. Frank’s given him the answer he wants. Frank just nods. He can’t picture the hell he’d be in if Grant knew for sure. "That's the kind of thing I could see Gerard doing to you, hurrying you into promises. I'm glad you didn't let him do that."

Oh, had they hurried. They’d been together a year. "I didn’t, no. We made each other no promises."

“Good.” Grant settles Frank in closer to him on the couch. They’re nearly cuddling, if Frank wasn’t so clearly tense.

"I want to trust him. He’s been good to me, I had no reason to believe he was anything other than what I thought until you started telling me this shit." Frank doesn’t know exactly why he’s saying this, only that it’s stopping up his throat if he doesn’t.

"He's a better liar than you think, then. He's got that open, 'I can't lie' face, but those people are often the best at getting away with one big lie. You deserve the truth. Why do you want to believe him, when even now you know he's not what he seemed?"

"I thought I loved him. I do love him. I thought he loves me."

"But you're not quite sure anymore, are you, love?"

"No. I'm not. Thanks for that."

Grant chuckles. “It's better this way. Better to know now."

“What am I supposed to do about that? Leave him for you?” The bitter sarcasm masks the shake in his voice pretty well, Frank thinks.

“I don’t think I could find a complaint about that.” Grant tilts Frank’s chin up, directing a warm and just so slightly hungry smile at him. “I just want you to recognize that he's bad for you.”

Frank shakes his chin out of Grant’s grasp and brings a hand up to wipe at his sudden tears. “I fucking finally made it, finally had somebody who gave a shit, and now? You’re gonna fuck all this over.”
Grant rubs his shoulder gently. "Frank, darling, don't cry. I know it's hard now. I know. But you'll get over him, and you'll wonder why you ever bothered with him."

"I'm not-" Frank reaches for words. "What am I supposed to do?"

"You'll be alright. I'll get you something to eat, you'll feel better."

Frank nods, then remembers he can text Gerard, now that Grant has left on quiet feet.

— I stil lov u. ?—

Down the hall, Grant deliberates a moment which way to respond, before deciding on

—of course I love you too, y?—

Frank smiles to himself, wiping his eyes.

—thnk grant's makin up shit abt u & ur life. cant think & process when he's sitting on me—

Grant directs one of his vampires to bring in another meal, then texts Frank back

—what shit?—

—evrything, 2 long 2 type, thnk hes comin bck. had 2 say we werent engdgd lol probly gud we left the mg. fredked me out, thought u said smth—

Frank sits down on the far side of the bed, giving himself an extra second to hide his phone when Grant comes back in.

So they were engaged. Grant remembers the child asking Frank if he was, and was honestly surprised by the weak attempt to hide it when they returned to him. Either way, Grant tucks away finding out that information for his next interrogation of Gerard. Julian and Lorenzo return twenty minutes later with prey. Frank never gets a reply, sadly tucking his phone away. He can hear movement outside in the hall, and he thinks it's probably some poor human dragged into this hell for food.

Grant accompanies the captive in himself, the man bound and gagged the same way as the last.

"Frank, love, for you."

Frank hates doing this, hates how wrong it feels and how quickly the blood rush makes him lose sight of that. He steps over to the guy and sinks his fangs in. It feels like a punch to the stomach, a rush of nearly too hot and too much. Frank pulls away quickly, wiping his mouth.

"Don't be afraid, love. I know it feels like a lot at first, but it's only because you were starving before."

"Yeah, it is. I'm good for now, probably for a while. Thanks."

Grant wipes a trickle of blood away from the corner of Frank's mouth. "I want you to finish this one."
"I've had enough, I think." Frank pulls a step back from Grant, wary.

"You could have more." Grant takes a step forward, reaching out for Frank again.

"I shouldn't. I'd hurt him, wouldn't I?"

"Frank, this is what you were meant to do."

"I wasn't meant to kill." Frank looks up to meet his eyes, unconsciously sucking traces of blood off his lower lip.

"You were meant to be full." Grant tips his chin down, face serious. Frank makes a face back, but he doesn't have much to argue with anymore, just eyeing the body behind Grant with something like fear. "You can do it, love." Frank shakes his head a little and steps past Grant, knowing he's not being asked anymore, he's being told, and carefully propping the body back upright.

Grant watches him intently. "It must hurt to be lied to like you have been. This will make it better." Frank can't help the way his shoulders hunch in at that. Feeding even this much feels like a buzz, and the words needle at him more than they should. Frank closes his eyes and bites, drinking until there's nothing left. When he pulls away from the cold neck of the corpse, the whole room is bright and humming. Grant leans down next to him, wiping Frank's mouth clean with a gentle thumb. "How do you feel?"

Frank blinks, willing the room to be still again and Grant to stop looming. "Drunk."

"Give it a few minutes." Grant leads him over to a chair. Frank sinks into the chair and waits, trying to keep his breathing even. Grant picks up on that, resting a hand on his shoulder. "Remember, love, you don't need to breathe."

Frank tips into the weight of Grant's hand and forcibly stops himself breathing. "I don't like this." he whispers. He's definitely drunk.

"You're not used to it. Gerard never let you drink as much as you needed, so it feels strange now."

Frank nods, staring at the floor and Grant's feet.

"Just give it time." Grant runs a hand through Frank's hair. Frank sighs a little and lets his eyes drift closed. If he zones out for a second he relaxes into Grant's touch. "I'm sorry about how all of this worked out, love. You don't deserve any of it."

"Why'd he not want me to eat?" Frank is slipping more and more sideways toward where Grant is perched on the arm of the chair.

"I don’t know love. It seems absurd." Frank nods with an inhale that's edging on a sob. Grant slips off the arm of the chair to sit and draws Frank in closer. "Oh, love, don’t cry."

Frank leans into his arms and dry sobs again. He hates being drunk, he lets things get to him and he can't control the outcome. And he's just killed somebody. Grant rubs his arm, holding Frank close. "It’s okay. You’ll get used to feeling like this."

"I don’t like it." Frank whines immediately, shaking his head a little.

"You’re not used to it yet. You haven’t been allowed to drink enough before."

"Can I just go to bed?"
“If that’ll make you feel better.”

Frank nods, and gently pulls himself out of Grant's arms to stand. He's marginally less wobbly than when he last stood, and his eyes are almost clear when he looks at Grant. "Thanks?"

Grant chooses to ignore the question. “You’re welcome, love.”

Frank ducks his head a little and crosses the room to the bed. Grant follows, and Frank freezes with his shirt halfway off. “Don’t look so scared, pet.” Frank balls up his shirt in his hands, needing something to do. Grant pulls it out of his hands and lays it over a chair. “What’s worrying you now?”

“What are you doing?”

“Getting you situated for the night.”

“I think I can manage on my own.”

Grant fully ignores him. “You don’t need to look at me as though I’m plotting against you.”

“Sorry?” Frank drops his eyes and turns to fiddle with the pillows.

“Have everything you need then, love?”

“Think so. Won’t need an alarm clock, will I?”

“Can’t imagine you would.” Grant hasn’t moved, and it’s getting strange and tense. The moment drags on a second longer, then Grant steps in and tips Frank’s face up to kiss him. Frank tenses for a second, then his survival instinct kicks in and he carefully kisses back. Grant smiles when he pulls away. “Sleep well, love.”

Frank stands shock still after the door closes, then finishes undressing and curls up in bed. So this is how it’s going to be. At least that clears up what Grant wants from Frank. Frank weighs the moral argument of his loyalty to Gerard, the truth of what being engaged is, with the sure knowledge that letting Grant touch him would make the next two weeks much easier. And maybe it’d be easier for Frank to ignore all the traps and pitfalls Grant sets up with his words if Grant was just fucking him. Frank can’t sleep, and turns over both options in his head. None are good. Any choice will probably put him back in therapy.

Near dawn, he comes to a working solution he can probably live with. Its not perfect, but as long as Grant seems to be peddling truth in what he says about Gerard, Frank will wholesale resist him and his advances. If he can shut up about Gerard and be transparent about his desire, Frank can let him get on with it and grit his teeth and get the hell out as soon as he can. Frank rolls over and stares at the ceiling. ‘If you survived Bob, you can survive Grant. Better pain than trauma.’ It’s the mantra he repeats for himself, awful as it is.
Grant leaves Gerard alone until nearly midnight, then swings the door open, humming a wedding song. "You didn't tell me you proposed to him."

Gerard wakes from his half-sleep, the hope that rest would heal his broken bones dashed. "What?"

"When did you propose? And why didn't you mention that the happy couple I welcomed here was engaged?"

Gerard opts to remain silent, pulling himself into a sitting position.

Grant sits down next to him, with a smile just a shade too nasty to be genuine. "I'd be careful with him, he's feisty. Might not want to stay engaged to you." Gerard remains silent, doing his best to pretend that Grant's not 6 inches away. "If you're going to ignore me, I can just text your fiancé. He's better company, you know, even when I push him to kill, he turns and asks for more. You've really done a number on him."

Gerard's voice is quiet, barely audible. "Who did he kill?"

Grant shrugs. "Street boy. It doesn't matter. Frank is what matters."

"He killed a boy? You made him kill a boy?"

"A boy, a man, he was in those between years. Not a child, if that's your concern. And I didn't force him, don't use such brutal language."

"Still. Frank teaches kids that age. He's always respected them. And now he's killing them. Jesus."

"Gerard, do I hear a thread of disgust? You wanted him so badly, you must've known his nature." Grant gets up and makes himself comfortable on the one chair in the room, still smiling at Grant.

"It's not his- it's not his nature." Gerard's shaking now, the full horror of what must have happened setting in. "You made him that way."
Grant leans forward a little bit to watch. "Gerard, why are you shaking? I didn't even tell him to kill. I offered the option."

"It's been - what, four days? What have you done to him? The Frank from before- I mean, he wasn't a saint, but he wouldn't have killed anyone."

"And yet, he has." Grant pauses and leans back, "Love, I wish you could see him right now. The way he looks, he looks like he's a flame, caught in between death and life." Grant shakes his head. "It'd change your mind. He could convince a saint, without even opening his mouth. I never want to see him come down again."

Gerard's voice cracks when he speaks. "Leave him alone."

"What would it take for you to kill?"

Gerard's answer is quiet. "If I had no other choice. That's it."

"How much longer will you sit here and starve before then? I want to see you kill. You used to be so gorgeous at it."

"You saw me kill once. And I cried for about 4 hours. Not sure where the gorgeous part comes in."

"And you were beautiful when he fell out of your hands. You're a pretty boy, Gerard, no question about that. Frankie is too. He's beautiful when he kills too."

"He's beautiful when he doesn't, too. What's your point?"

"My point is that you will. I'll bring you someone, soon. You're hungry. I expect you to drain them."

"Yeah, well, as you're so fond of reminding me, I always seem to fall short of your expectations."

"If you want to starve, you can starve. I'll break your fangs down to little stumps."

"That seems a little..." Gerard waves a hand. "Lacking in finesse?"

"So?" Grant shrugs, keeping it conversational. "You don't deserve or benefit from finesse. You've proved that again these last few days."

"Direct brutality isn't really your style. I'm almost disappointed, to be honest."

"You bring out the best in me, I'm sure. But still, up to you." Grant stands up. "I'll be back in a few days. Two or three, probably. Don't expect me."

Gerard kicks at the door a couple times. It's fairly solid, but given a couple days he could probably get through it. It's the only shot he has.

Still outside, Grant can hear him kicking at it. He motions Matteo over. "If or when he gets through that door, he's going to be crazed with hunger. Throw him across the hall into the other room like this one, and tell me. I'll come down and we'll bring him food."

Grant walks upstairs slowly. He has plenty of time before he goes to get Frank, early in the morning.
He has time to plan and gather how he's going to finishing bringing Frank around to trusting him.

Several hours later, he pauses outside Frank's room, taking a moment to look through the pictures on Gerard's phone. There's a fair number of Frank with his guitar, and he zooms in on it, showing it to Antonio. "Find me one of these. This model. Take Julian."

As they leave he adds, "And a charger for this phone." They're back with a large box and a small bag just as the sun is getting dangerously high.

Grant knocks on Frank's door with the box in tow. "Frank? I have something for you." Frank rolls out of bed quickly, never really asleep after he got up again in the middle of the night. His shirt is wrinkled, jeans stiff and hair messy when he opens the door a crack.

"What?"

Grant takes in Frank's appearance. "Oh, pet, you look a mess. There are clothes in the closet that should be your size, and if not I can get some for you."

Frank's mouth twists down as he answers "Sorry, I can change. What do you want?"

"I brought you a present. Not food this time, don't make that face. Get changed up and I'll give it to you."

Frank stares at him, assessing, for a long moment before closing the door again. Grant hears the shower start less than a minute later. Frank scrubs down quickly, and checks his phone when he gets out, noting the low battery warning. He's dressed and opening the door within ten minutes.

Grant look him over and nods. "Much better."

Frank nods back and scratches his stubble. Grant or someone had laid out a straight razor, but Frank was born into a post-Gillette world. "Ah, there, love, but you need to shave." Grant takes in Frank's appearance approvingly. "You should really dress nicer, Frankie, you look so pretty like that."

Frank's out of the t-shirt and old jeans he came in, hair dripping onto the collar of a button down tucked into dark wash jeans. "I do dress like this. At work. Where I care about the people that see me. And I don’t know how to use a straight razor." He looks completely human, fangs tucked away and eyes dull.

"No need to be rude, Frankie. I've been nothing but nice to you. And let me see those fangs, you look so much prettier when you're not pretending to be human." Grant pauses and smiles slightly as Frank obeys the second part of that. "I can shave you. Gift after, go on." He shoos Frank back to the bathroom, close behind him. Frank stands and watches him pick up and arrange his tools as he wants. "Up on the counter, pet."

Frank pulls himself up onto it and lets Grant step between his legs with the shaving brush. Grant finds the shaving cream under the sink, coating Frank’s face with it. Like this, silent in the bathroom, it’s intimate, and its not a comfortable way. Frank has to remind himself to relax so he doesn’t get his throat slit. Grant tips his chin up and reaches for the razor. “Stay still.” Grant chuckles. “It’s safe, I assure you. I’ve been doing this quite a long time.” Frank nods, still tensing up at the first pass of the razor. Grant cups Frank’s face, resting the cleaner hand on his shoulder. “It’s okay, love. It won’t hurt you.
“I know.”

“Then relax.”

“I’m trying. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. Just close your eyes if you need to.” Frank stares at him for another second and finally closes his eyes. “Good. Let me take care of you.” Frank lets Grant’s voice wash over him as Grant picks back up shaving. “You’re doing well, love.” He’s precise and efficient after so many years, and before long he’s cleaning the extra shaving cream off. Frank opens his eyes. Shaving down his neck had been terrifying. “There. Much better.”

“Done?”

“Yes.”

“Thanks.” Frank hops down and rinses his face in the sink, meeting Grant’s eyes again in the mirror. He’s keeping his hands mostly to himself today, at least.

“Feel better?

“Than yesterday? Yeah.”

“I’m glad. Show me those pretty fangs, then?” With some reluctance, Frank lets his fangs slide out again.

“I still don’t like having them down. It feels like I’m trying to be special or something.”

"We'll just have to get you over that, now won't we? You're too special to be human." Grant strides to the hallway and holds the door open to gesture to the guitar box. "For you."

Frank raises his eyebrows and half-reaches for the box before realizing what it is. “You shouldn’t have.”

"But I wanted to. I thought it might make this place feel less... well, hellish, as you described it."

Frank shakes his head. "No. I can't take it. I don’t think I can play here."

"I don't need you to make music for me. If you want, I'll go to the other end of the house. Just make music for you."

Frank just shakes his head. A guitar is an expensive gift, and it's obvious that Grant is just trying to buy his trust. "No. You should return it. You shouldn't have gotten it."

"I'll leave it here. You can have it if you want it." Grant sets the box down and says softly, "Why won't you just let yourself be happy?"

"I tried to. It's not working right now."

"What would make you happy? I don't want to see you so miserable."

"I want to get Gerard and fly home. And go back to my life.”
"I meant besides that, love. The happiness you had with him wasn't real. So what would make you happy now?"

"It felt real. Beyond getting that back, I don't know."

"A feeling isn't enough to agree to marry him, Frank."

Frank looks up. "What?"

"He told me everything, love. How you said yes, but wouldn't wear the ring because you were scared. What kind of engagement is it, if I'm enough to scare you off?"

Frank sets his jaw. "That's not true. We agreed that it would be safest if you didn't know, and I was probably right to suggest it, considering how much you want to push us apart. I couldn't let you take the ring, take that from me. Now I wish I had worn the ring, so you'd see that I'm not fucking scared of marrying him, I'm scared of what you'll do to him now that you know there's no fucking chance of you getting me."

"Oh, Frankie. You were just telling me yesterday you weren't sure if he even loved you. You were miserable because he lied to you. He doesn't deserve your heart, not forever."

Frank shrugs. "I made a goddamn promise, and I gotta at least talk to him first. I owe him that."

"You don't owe anyone anything. Least of all him."

Frank shrugs. "I still promised it."

"And he made a lot of promises that he broke. What's one more broken promise between people who are breaking away anyway?"

"The tipping point I don't want to reach." Frank turns back for his door. "Take the guitar with you."

"It's yours now. I'm not taking it back. I just ask that you use it at least once."

"Your loss then. I don't want it." Frank closes the door behind him. He can't lock it, but he pulls out his phone anyway.

—g? r u ok? he keeps tellin m thngs abt us tht u told him. how is he makin u talk? r u gona b ok?—

Grant pulls out Gerard's phone. —im ok. and sorry. but he needed 2 kno—

—y tf did he need 2 kno? hes mad abt it—

—bc he asked. didnt think he'd be mad @ u—

—was he mad @ u??unless u completely actually hve been lyin 2 me abt eveythin i m sorry but i dont get y u told him—

—he wasnt happy but i thought it was better if he knew—

Frank snorts at the message and mutters "Fuck you, then," under his breath. Gerard’s texts piss Frank
off more than he expected them to, but it’s not a normal argument. The stakes are higher here. If Gerard isn’t committed to even trying to defend Frank, then Frank is going to protect his own ass. And if that means making up a third option and kissing up to Grant the rest of the damn two weeks? Well, Frank can manage that. It might even keep Grant sweet.

A moment later he shakes his head to himself and ducks into the hall to grab the guitar box. Might as well.

Grant reads the text a moment before hearing Frank's footsteps and smiles to himself. All too simple a breaking point, really.

When Frank opens the door, Grant is standing outside, as though just passing. He stops for a minute then says "Is there anything you want from me? Anything I can do?"

Frank sighs. "I want to actually do something. I don't care what, I just want something to do. A distraction."

"I'm afraid I can't let you outside, not just yet. I can't be sure you won't run. But we can find something for you to do indoors, I'm sure."

Frank nods assent and steps fully into the hall. "I just can't think about him and sitting alone isn't helping."

"I know, love, I know. I know you're hurting. We can play cards or something, if you don't want to be alone."

"Sure."

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Grant spends the next week entertaining. He chips at Frank’s trust of Gerard, insinuates himself closer and closer to Frank, and keeps Frank nearly drunk on blood, killing twice more. After the second, Grant is there, taking Frank’s shoulders and steadying him. “How do you feel, love?” Frank shakes his head and sways into Grant’s arms.

“Hot. Drunk. Same ‘s always.”

“No better?”

“It gets better?”

“You’ll come to like it.”

“I like it fine. I’m good.” Frank staggers back and hedges his answer, still a little wary of Grant’s tendency to want to always be touching Frank. Frank knows he should allow it, but he’d really rather not.

“Good. Come upstairs with me, I have some work to do, and I’d like to keep an eye on you.” Frank nods and follows him upstairs, a little surprised by the unmade bed and messy desk. So this is where
Grant lives. “Take my bed. I’ll be done soon.” He pushes Frank toward it, fingers lingering on his lower back.

Frank steps out of the contact and curls up under the heavy duvet. He overheats fast, and wriggles out of his shirt and pants, kicking them off the far side of the bed and finally huffing and shifting so he can put one leg out into the cooler air. Grant watches him with a small smile. “Too warm?”

“I’m sweating.”

“There are lighter blankets in the closet.”

Frank gets up, grabs a few and goes back to the bed, still restless and tossing and turning, eventually settling on watching Grant, eyes half-closed and brain running on auto, still reeling from the sheer amount of blood he has in his system. Grant is tall, and Frank knows this from the last week of his nearly-constant touch, strong and unafraid to show it. He could easily force Frank, and that alone ought to have him running, not watching with shallow breath. Frank curses his contrary libido for the thousandth time.

Grant looks up at him and comes over. “You look feverish, pet.” He smooths Frank’s hair back and Frank sighs, relaxing. Grant smiles. “You like that, yes?”

“Hmm?”

“You like it when I touch you. You always lean into it.”

“Yeah?” Frank can’t really deny that. He’s been trying to keep Grant sweet.

Grant’s hand wanders into his hair, stroking and petting, scratching a little at Frank’s scalp. Frank nearly purrs involuntarily. “What else do you like?”

“In men, or in what?”

“If that’s what you’ll tell me about, yes.”

It’s really not. “I dunno. I like men.” Frank squints up at Grant, trying to figure out what angle he can get out of this with. “Bigger men? Manly men? Gee’s kinda less burly than a guy I’d pick up at a club, but he’s way nicer.”

“Or so you thought.”

“Treated me like it. Gently?” Frank waves a vague hand.

“And you like that?”

“Sure? I mean I like other stuff too, but, yeah.” Frank smiles at the memories.

“What do you mean?”

Frank’s grin snaps shut. “Just, when he was good, you know?”

“I understand.” Grant shifts off the edge of the bed and kisses Frank. “You don’t like to be in control all the time.”

“Yeah, that. Sure.” Frank doesn’t kiss back.

“I see.” Grant kisses him again, a little harder. “What else do you like?”
Frank eyes him “’s about it.” All mental pep-talks about what Frank can take, and is prepared to have to do, are falling aside in the wake of the real thing. If Frank can keep Grant off him, he will.

“I have to say, love, I’m almost disappointed.” Grant leans in again, kissing with intent, trying to find Frank’s cracks to exploit. His fangs catch and tug at Frank’s lip for a second and Frank gasps. Grant pulls back with a smile. “You like that too, hmm?”

Frank shrugs. Lying will get him nowhere. Grant takes advantage and kisses Frank hard, fangs evident and harsh. Frank moans. Grant shifts closer, away from the edge of the bed and leaning over Frank. “Nothing else?”

“Few things?” Frank shifts a little, blanket sliding a little. Grant’s raised eyebrow asks enough of the question. “I don’t- why do you want to know?” Grant hums and presses Frank into the mattress a little. Frank takes a harsh breath and stills, staring wide-eyed at Grant.

Grant presses in for another kiss. “I think I actually want to see for myself what you like. So far, you’ve been fascinating.”

When he pulls away Frank blurts, “I can’t. I’m engaged.”

Grant smiles, patronizing. “You really want to stay with a man that’s done nothing but lie to you?”

Frank shakes his head. “But I promised him. I have to- to break it off. Tell him.”

“You can tell him after. I can tell him.”

“I can,” Frank says before catching himself.

“You can?”

“I-I mean, later.” Frank’s phone is nearly dead. About enough for one last text.

“Hmm, alright. You know it’s not cheating, love. You’re not engaged to him. Put that aside.” Frank is helpless to do anything but nod. Grant shifts his weight back into holding Frank down. “I think I can manage to help put that out of your mind.”

Frank loses all the air in his lungs, caught up in Grant’s bright, hungry look. He moans into the next hard kiss. “Can’t say I don’t like that sound.” Frank flushes, all the way down his chest, both uncomfortably turned on and terrified by Grant’s attention. Grant pulls the covers off him to follow the blush. “And you’re turning all sorts of pretty colors.”

With the way Grant is fully dressed, Frank feels whorish, nearly naked under him. Grant lets his gaze drift back up to Frank’s face. “Something the matter, love?” Frank shakes his head and squirms. “Don’t be shy, now.”

“Mm, not. It’s not that.”

Grant leans down and kisses him again. Frank makes a soft sound and melts into him, giving up to the inevitable from here. “What else do you like, love?” Grant leans in, stopping just short of another kiss.

Frank pulls in an unsteady breath. In for a penny in for a pound. Keep him sweet and get it over with. “When it hurts a little and I just take it?”

“Oh, I’m sure we can make that work.” Frank nods up at him. Grant leans back with a wicked smile
and pulls off his shirt.

Frank reaches up for Grant, wide-eyed. Grant kisses him, trailing down his jaw.

Frank makes a soft sound and Grant smiles. “Now that’s a lovely sound.”

Frank’s cheeks are bright red, and Grant smirks at that before kissing him again. He’s waiting for Frank to give up. Grant ducks a little to suck at Frank’s neck, and Frank tilts his head back and groans “Grant-please?” Grant gloats a little, very quietly. Gerard will love to hear this.

“What, love?”

“Are you-please, com’on Grant.”

Grant smiles, kissing him again. “I can give you more.”

“Yes?”

“Yes.” Grant repositions Frank, tells him to stay, then finishes stripping them both down.

“Ready, love?”

Frank takes a deep breath and leans up for a kiss. “Yes?”

Grant pushes forward, taking care to prep Frank well, then crowding over him to push into Frank’s ass, starting slow and careful. That’s fine, and Frank tries to relax, not really looking at Grant’s face, and eventually succeeding. Grant had seemed to like him responsive. Grant does, a smile curling up his face and prompting him to pick up the pace. That rapidly becomes overwhelming for Frank, and he clings on to Grant and gasps, eyes sliding shut, never really focused in the first place. When they’ve finished, Frank is nearly sober, buzz from feeding faded and leaving him exhausted. Grant pulls a blanket up over them, wrapping an arm around Frank and pulling him into Grant.

Frank hums quietly, body relaxed and a little sore, even if he’s still on edge. Grant smiles. “Happy?”

“Content?” Frank offers. Happy is a reach. He’s through this, at least.

“Content is good.” Grant holds Frank until he falls asleep in his arms, exhausted by the week before. Grant slips out of bed and wakes Matteo and Lorenzo with a simple order. “Fetch another.”

Matteo and Lorenzo on their way back with some human, he heads down stairs to Gerard, slipping the door open. “Has it been a good night, pet?”

Gerard looks up slowly, instinctively curling into himself before realizing Grant doesn’t have the walking stick. Grant’s smile doesn’t budge at his reaction. “Just me tonight. You know your little saint? Your ex-fiancé?”

“What did you do to him?” Gerard is imagining all kinds of horrible possibilities, too distracted to even notice Grant had called Frank his ex-fiancé.

“I did nothing, don’t shout at me.” Grant sits, looking all too happy. “We talked about him killing already. I’m here to wonder why you got so lucky with a saint, and a whore in bed to boot? How many men like him walk the earth?”

Gerard goes cold. “You didn’t.”
“He begged for me.”

Gerard slumps, biting his lip and trying to hold back tears. Grant adds in a whisper, “Curls up under my sheets and says he likes being made to take it, begs me to fuck him when I bite him.” Grant shakes his head in mostly mock wonder. “But don’t worry, he’s too loyal to cheat. You know he’s gone? Left a liar behind?”

“I’m not a liar!”

Grant slides off the chair and runs a hand through Gerard’s hair. “You lied to him about your history, about what you wanted him for, about how much you would hurt him. Of course he ran. He wasn’t safe.”

“I didn’t lie! You’re the one that’s lied to him.”

“When two of three have the same story, it’s the truth. Give up, Gerard. I have everything.”

Gerard looks away. “I don’t understand. Why are you doing this? You stole one life from me, why do you need to ruin this one?”

“I wanted that boy. And you needed to be punished for running, all those centuries ago. You can’t even take care of yourself. You can’t leave me this time. You’ve even left your fangs down, and I’m quite sure you didn’t mean to.”

Gerard runs his tongue over his fangs, only now realizing that they’ve been out. His silence is enough for Grant.

"I don't think your meal will leave alive, at this rate." Grant opens the door.

"I'm older than Frank. I know how not to kill, something I doubt you taught him.”

Grant just smiles and stands to go. “Not yet. He’s too beautiful reckless.”

This time, it’s a young girl. Grant smiles at her as she struggles and yells through the gag. Without a word, he takes her arm and drags her down to Gerard’s cell, throwing her in before he enters.

Gerard's head snaps up. "No. You promised. No. I'm not doing this."

Grant reaches for her and pulls the gag off. "How old are you?"

"18.” She’s terrified of either Grant or Gerard, looking between them quickly, not sure which one is a threat.

Gerard crosses the room, speaking directly to Grant. "I don't care how old she is. You're a fucking psycho, and I don't know why you've survived this long without someone taking you down."

Grant shrugs. "Well. If this takes too long I'm not letting you see my pet.”

Gerard paces the room. "Can I talk to her for two minutes before- before I do it?"

"By the time I come back inside this room, you should be done. Three minutes.” Grant steps out.

Immediately the girl whispers "Are you gonna hurt me?"
"I have to. I'm so sorry. But there's a chance-" he drops his voice even lower, hushed and urgent. "There's a chance I can bring you back. But you won't be human. You'll be like me. Do you want me to try?"

"What are you? And why is he making you hurt me? I can't say yes until I understand that." She looks terrified, but almost determined.

"I'm a vampire. And if I don't do this, he's going to keep hurting someone- someone very important to me. But you need to decide or we'll be out of time."

"I'll still be trapped here. I can't do that. I don't care. Is it worth it, to get your person back?"

"Even if I don't do it, he won't let you leave. He'll just have someone else kill you. Permanently. Make your choice."

"Who are you trying to get back? I'd just like to know who I'm dying for."

"He's- I was going to marry him. And Grant changed him, made him hate me. And that's not worth your life, but I don't know what else to do."

"Get him back then." She takes a step forward and sets her jaw.

"You never answered me for sure, though. Do you want to come back or not?"

"Christ no. I'm fucking terrified to die once, don't make me die twice."

"If you're sure. Please, though. What's your name?"

"Christina. Can you tell my mother, Maria Vespolina, that I didn't commit suicide? She lost my sister that way."

Gerard shakes his head. "Jesus. I can't do this. I can't."

"Is he gonna kill me then? Is he gonna kill you?" She sits down carefully in the chair and checks her watch. "He's going to come back in a minute and that's ...not good."

"He's not gonna let you go. He doesn't let people go. Maybe... maybe I do it and bring you back. If you play dead, they'll take you out, and you can escape."

"And what? I don't know how to be whatever you are. Can you please do something before he comes back? Please?"

"Hide out for a week. I'll come help you. Ready?"

"Alright." They can't tell inside, but Grant is watching his watch, and the last thirty seconds are slipping by quickly.

"Thank you, Christina. And I'm sorry." Gerard bites. She's smaller, it's easier than draining Frank was, but his brain still rebels, sending shudders through his body. When he's nearly done, he opens a cut on his arm with his fangs, starting the flow of blood.
Grant swings the door open as he does and gives a soft tsk. "Well, Gerard, I had hoped for better. Why do I keep finding you like this?" In three steps, he's kicking Gerard away from Christina's body, standing between them to look down at Gerard.

"She's not- not drained yet. I didn't finish drinking."

Grant barely glances at her. "She's not going to live. You did kill her, even if I stopped you early. But now, I can't let you finish, what with that cut in your arm. Did you really think that wouldn't have gotten you both killed?" Grant pauses for a second, weighing a few choices, as the body is carried out by Lorenzo. "Well. Gerard, I'm not inclined to let you see Frankie, now that you've tried to undermine my goals."

"Please. Please just let me save her. It doesn't mean anything to you either way. She's just a girl."

"No. What it means is that you're irresponsible and obstinate, again. The bottom line was a death, you showing me he was really worth it to you. You would bring her back, knowing you can't provide or keep her safe and you would do it to just to prove to me you're not whatever you're afraid of being. Worthless decision."

"It had nothing to do with you. Her mother already lost one kid. I didn't want her to lose another. She was innocent and I didn't want her to die."

"Too late Gerard. She's human and she died. I do know Frankie's smarter than you, because he doesn't let this bother him."

"There's not any intelligence required to kill." Gerard slumps into the chair. "Just let me see him. I killed. I kept my end." Gerard's yelling now, seconds away from snapping completely. "What else is there left to take?"

Grant turns toward the door and stops with one hand on the handle. "Gerard, there is so much more I could take from you. Do not forget I could bind you, and break you and force you to survive it so I could break you again. I would gladly make you tell him everything I want him to believe. I would glad send you to kill his dear mother. I would gladly let him kill you." Grant turns with a smile. "That'd be poetic, wouldn't it? He kills you, he becomes mine.” The smile gets wider. “I doubt I’d even have to bind either of you to make it happen.”

Gerard staggers back into the wall, every word like a physical blow. “You can’t.”

“Who’s to stop me?” Grant turns the handle and steps out of the room, ending the conversation. Its given him an idea or two.

Frank is broken, well on his way to becoming Grant’s. Gerard has nearly been adequately punished, but Grant has always wanted the finality of having his one failure dead. What better way to do it than have his newest pet do it?

Grant heads upstairs, Frank still asleep in his room, and gets back in bed. He pushes Frank’s hair off his forehead, gently carding through it. The details of Grant’s plot neatly fall into place, and he slips up again to write them down, lest he forget. There’s the matter of fully breaking Frank’s trust of Gerard, by letting him question Gerard himself and planting a seed of anger in Frank at Gerard’s apparent betrayal, then letting that seed fester and grow until it’s ready to bloom. Frank isn’t ready for cold killing yet, so he’ll need to be fed, but fresh on blood, he’ll be easy to convince.
Grant looks up and smiles at Frank’s sleeping form. What a perfect ending for them.

Frank wakes up in Grant’s bed a little before dawn and goes rabbit-still for a second, getting his bearings. Grant looks up. “Good morning, love.”

“Good morning.” Is Frank’s cautious reply. He still doesn’t move. Too much skin this early is an invitation, and Frank is all too aware he’s still nude under the sheets. He knows, from the way he feels, that Grant had sex with him last night. But Frank doesn’t recall much of how it was. It’s one hell of a coping mechanism, at least.

Grant just smiles fondly at him, and Frank wonders what else happened to make Grant so happy. Grant stands up and slinks over to his bed to run his fingers though Frank’s hair. Frank reluctantly sits up, keeping his lap covered. Grant pulls him into a kiss.

“How did you sleep?”

“Fine.”

“I’m surprised you still sleep, even now that I’m feeding you properly.”

Frank shrugs. “Habit.”

“And a strong one, I suppose.” He pats Frank’s cheek. “Nothing wrong with that, love. Fangs down for me?”

Frank clicks them down, eyes flaring as well. Grant smiles, gently tilting Frank’s face up to look at him. “I have a bit of business to attend to this morning, so why don’t you go shower and such and then get your guitar and keep yourself occupied until I’m done?”

“Can I read? In the library?”

“You remember where it is?”

“Mhmm.”

“I’ll send Lorenzo to keep you company, anyway. Go on.” He gestures toward the bathroom door on the far wall. “I’ll fetch you some clothes before I go.”

Frank reluctantly gets up, putting Grant at his back as soon as possible. “Is your business with Gerard?”

“No, Frankie.”

“Ok.” Frank closes the door behind him and takes a deep breath, leaning against the door. God really has it out for him, huh? This is pretty much a perfectly designed hell for Frank. And much as he doesn’t want to think of Gerard… Frank tries to imagine being stuck back at Bob’s apartment and nearly physically recoils. As much as this is Frank’s hell, it’s new and it must be worse for Gerard.

Gerard doesn’t even have the blissful unknowing of sleep anymore, not after killing Christina. He paces the tiny room, broods on the single chair, tries to sleep against the wall, fails at that and sobs until he has no more tears in him, straining to hear sounds of life from around the house.
The curse of a house of vampires is that it's too quiet. Seven of them in ten thousand square feet, and its silent until someone speaks. There is no life, no heartbeats, no cars passing by, no dogs barking on their morning walks- it's as far from the life Gerard had carved out for himself in Rhode Island as possible- and his ears ring from straining to hear in the silence.

Grant leaves them both alone for a morning that should be blessed, but instead sits with the weight of his non-presence even heavier. Gerard stews uselessly, hopelessly aware of every moment passing but also slowly becoming aware he’s shutting down. He doesn’t remember how many times Grant has come by to see him, to talk to him. He doesn’t remember what he’s said about Frank, what he hasn’t. It’s like he’s trapped here living every second, but then fading as soon as the moment is over. It doesn’t feel real. Nothing does, anymore.

Grant bursts this bubble late in the afternoon, when Gerard is sitting back against the wall, crying again, but not quite sure why. Grant takes him in. “I want you to see Frank.”

“What?”

“He’s going to want the closure, and I’m going to let him convince me.”

“To see me?”

“Yes.”

“He wants to?”

“Yes.” Grant’s lips curl into a smirk. “Though I must admit you’re a sorry sight.”

Gerard sighs, collapsing in on himself. “Don’t- please don’t hit him. Be good to him.”

“I am always good to my lovely pets, Gerard. No punishment unless it’s richly deserved. You must know that well.”

“I don’t- I know. I know you don’t, but the push- he won’t like that.”

“He folds before he snaps. Unlike you. Unlike some others I’ve had. He’s smart like that.”

Gerard sobs quietly, a fresh wave of tears over everything he’s lost. “I love him.”

“I know. He doesn’t love you.”

“I know. He deserves better than me. And you.”

Grant clucks and stands. “He deserves better than you, that much is true. You’ll tell him as much when you meet him, I assume?”

Gerard nods mutely. Grant sweeps out again, and the tide in Gerard’s mind sweeps in again, sweeping away the fresh tracks in the sand under washes of dark water. He sits, and cries alone, and wonders how many weeks he’s been here.

Frank spends the morning in a long shower, wondering when he’s going to run out of hot water and trying to sort himself out. He’s wracking his mind for the coping mechanisms from therapy, trying to figure out how to survive this. But Bob had been a different strain of the same virus. Bob would raise
a hand and Frank would give him hell, and Frank knows how to cope with that, how to objectively sort out the aches and pains in his body and categorize the injury, and move on. He doesn’t know how to do the same when there aren’t bruises. There’s nothing to mark this as trauma, except that Frank knows in his gut that this is f*cked up, and that it’s f*cking him up. Last night- and every time he’s killed- has turned into a fog, and Grant’s hands on Frank are all blurry memories.

It’s almost worse. Frank doesn’t know how to cope with something he can’t remember. Hopefully the memory will stay buried, and it’ll be like every time is the first. Maybe. If he’s lucky, in a particularly f*cked-up sense of the word.

Grant sweeps back in as Frank is getting dressed, sweeping his hair back away from his face for a moment. He drops his hands when Grant appears in the mirror behind him, suited and untouchable as always.

“Good morning, love.”

“Good morning.” Frank flips his fangs down, trying to be what Grant likes to see.

Grant’s smile as he gently turns Frank and leans down to kiss him says he notices. Frank lets himself be lead out of the room and back down into the house proper, nodding to the other men in the house as they pass. Is it just him, or do their looks seem like pity, now?

Frank’s head swivels to meet Antonio’s gaze, and Grant follows his gaze, looking at Antonio over Frank’s head. Antonio looks away. Frank turns back just in time to see Grant looking at him.

“What?”

“What are you asking, love?”

“He looked away when you looked at him. Why?”

“I didn’t appreciate the look he was giving you.”

Frank plays ignorant. “What was it? I just glanced at him, I didn’t think he was giving me the stink-eye.”

“He’s jealous of you, love. He—” Grant sighs, and Frank almost falls for it—“used to occupy the space you do now. But he and I, we didn’t agree on some things. He’s not that much older than you, though, only 35, so I moved him into gainful employment here so I could still take care of him.”

“You used to fuck him too?”

“Frankie, love, language, please.”

“Sorry, you two, what? Dated? Were lovers?”

“Probably more the second.”

“Oh.” Frank parses that. He doesn’t really doubt that Grant is lying, but Antonio’s look had been pity, not jealousy. So perhaps the details are off. “Well, I won’t get in his face and rub it in, then.”

“Good plan, love. I’ll keep him away from you. You know Lorenzo, I’ll assign him to you.”

“Do I get a babysitter now that we’re.. whatever we are?”

“Oh.” Frank feels sick, suddenly. At least it’s already been nine days. Or. Frank pauses. How many days has it been? Eight? Eleven? How long until he has to expect to be released from this?

“Grant?”

“Hm?”

“What’s today’s date?”

“Why, love?”

Frank’s brain spins and grabs the first excuse it can. “I just realized, I’ve been sort of, I guess realizing I’m gonna have to face Gerard again. And I lost count of the days.” And Grant hadn’t helped with that, had he? Keeping Frank up overnights and at all times and upsetting his internal clock.

“It’s been ten, love. But you don’t have to leave with him.”

“I can’t just stay here, can I?”

“You could, of course.”

Frank frowns. “My visa would expire. I have to leave.”

“The embassy can arrange that.”

“Oh. You’d let me out of the house?”

Grant laughs. “I wouldn’t keep you locked up here. Soon you’ll be accustomed to feeding and I can trust you go hunt with Lorenzo and my other boys.”

“Still. I need to face Gerard. At some point. Even if it’s here. Can I talk to him, actually?”

“Right now?”

“Soon?”

“Perhaps tomorrow. He’s been unstable.”

Frank snorts. “Wonder why.”

Grant’s response is honey-smooth and allows for no argument. “Perhaps because a plan he’s undoubtably spent years laying has fallen apart?”

Frank heeds the warning and just shrugs, leaning into Grant a little. Grant holds him close and Frank manages to at least drop a little bit of tension out of his shoulders, every single second viciously aware of how close Grant seems to violence.

Two hours later, Frank’s act pays off. Grant flips a folder closed, looking over at Frank, who is leaning against him with a novel. “Frankie.”

Frank closes the book and looks over his shoulder at Grant. “What?”

Grant shifts, just enough to indicate Frank should turn, as this won’t be a singular comment. Frank does, taking his legs off the couch and setting down the book on the table.
“You really want to see Gerard?”

Oh, Frank is going to have to tread carefully. “Yes?”

“I suppose I should let you. Get whatever closure you need.”

Frank nods, not wanting to step on a verbal landmine.

“Tomorrow, then. Tomorrow morning.”

“Thank you.” Frank takes a deep breath.

Grant smiles at him. “You’re very welcome, love. You’ve been so good so far, I don’t see why you should be denied this.”

Frank almost twitches, but holds it back. Something about the ‘been very good so far’ is setting off warnings in Frank’s head, and stretching out every second that he and Grant look at each other. Frank feels like he’s watching himself from outside his body when he leans forward and kisses Grant, half-climbing into his lap. He can’t process weighing every word before he says “You’ve been really good to me, thank you.” But he says it, that’s certainly his voice. And Grant is responding, wrapping his arms around Frank with a quietly triumphant smile.
Dead Ringer

Chapter Notes

Hey yall, sorry for the late update, I spent the weekend wining and dining with the parents and got behind on the update schedule. My bad, should be back to normal next weekend with a Friday or Saturday post! Enjoy!

Grant doesn’t even give Frank the illusion of choosing where he’s sleeping tonight, one of the other men having already moved Frank’s meager suitcase and the guitar Grant bought upstairs into Grant’s room. Frank feels like he’s following his own body again as he strips for bed with Grant’s hands following every new inch of exposed skin.

Frank wakes up the next morning early, sore again but memory even blanker. He blinks and thinks, “That’s a hell of a coping mechanism,” and Grant is awake, kissing the back of his neck. Frank rolls over. “Good morning.”

“Good morning, love.”

Frank gets dressed, not at all happy that the shirt Grant left him is a size too small and clingy even if it wasn’t too tight, and is a little happy he didn’t ask to see Gerard right off the bat. It’s probably better to appease Grant before trying that, and at least now Frank is under no illusions of what Grant wants from him. Frank hasn’t really ever denied Grant yet, afraid to find out what he would do. He’ll try putting it off, first. Tomorrow. Then he’ll know if he can test the waters on leaving. That’s not looking super likely, though, given Grant’s comment from yesterday.

Frank’s cooperation must be putting Grant in a good mood, though, because when Frank does finally ask after Gerard, he just sighs and says, “Give me ten minutes to be sure he’s up, alright, love?”

“Sure.”

“Then you can.” Grant kisses Frank and sweeps out.

Frank tries not to fidget, taking out his phone for the first time in a week and jamming the home button. All he gets is the low battery warning screen, same as he has for the last four days. As he looks, the screen blinks off, battery totally exhausted. Frank sighs and shoves the dead phone back into his suitcase.

Downstairs, Grant shakes Gerard awake and says “My boy wants to see you. Aren’t you lucky?”

Gerard doesn’t feel lucky. He feels horrified. “What-“ he has to clear his throat to speak, voice raspy from disuse- “What does he expect to see?”

“To see you exactly as you are, as a liar. Come now, we’re not meeting in this room.”

Matteo and Lorenzo step into the room and flank Gerard as he’s forced to follow Grant to a Rococo
sitting room. “Wait here.”

Grant sweeps off again. Looking bored, Matteo and Lorenzo retreat to the doors, loitering and somehow managing to not look like guards. Gerard slumps onto the couch. Matteo looks up a moment later and slips out, coming back with Gerard’s shoes and socks. “Grant would like you to put these on, please.”

It’s not Matteo’s fault, and Gerard knows there’s no use fighting him. He pulls on his shoes and socks, still feeling like he’s not all present.

Matteo and Lorenzo straighten up a little when two steps of footsteps come downstairs, matched stride for stride until they’re in the doorframe and Frank’s steps jerk to a cautious halt, looking at Gerard for the first time in a while. Gerard manages a flicker of a smile, well aware he looks like hell. Gerard has never been given to facial hair, but a week without a razor has him looking quite scruffy, hair a mess as well. Frank takes him all in, taking a slow step across the threshold, body language tense and wary.

It gives Gerard time to look Frank over, and he can’t help the twist of hate at what he sees. He’s used to the rest of Grant’s men’s sleekly well-fed looks, their bright eyes, and the resigned sort of tension they carry around Grant. On Frank, all those are foreign and horrifying. Frank is clean-shaven, eyes bright, hair trimmed, and is wearing a pair of perfectly fit jeans that Gerard would guess is at least a hundred dollars more than Frank could ever pay for jeans himself. Frank looks like Grant’s.

Gerard is too empty to cry. He doesn’t realize he hasn’t even moved since Frank caught sight of him until Frank takes another step forward away from Grant and says, “Gee? You still alive?”

“Yeah. You came.” There’s too much to unpack in his tone, hope too fragile to even voice, resignation that this will be the last time.

"Yeah." Frank half-glances at Grant and steps closer to Gerard again. "Why'd you sell me out? You knew about Matt, and you fucking went and did the same fucking thing." Frank's almost surprised by how close he sounds to crying.

"I- I didn't. I didn't do anything like that. I wouldn't."

"You told him about when you proposed! You said that, that I was scared to say yes and I said it anyway but I didn't want the ring and that was fucking lie!"

"But- but he already knew when he came to me. I thought you said something."

"No, and you knew I'd had to lie about it, I texted you!" Frank’s angry, the brittle sort of bitter that feels like splinters in his ribs.

Gerard closes his eyes, hit by the realization and hoping for a way out. "He took my phone, Frank. He's been reading your texts."

Frank whips around to look at Grant, then whips back, a thread of fear forcing his voice down. "But- Gerard, you replied. You replied and fucking said you'd told him." There's a new horror dawning on Frank. If he'd only been texting Grant...

Grant shakes his head. "He's lying. I don't have his phone. It's probably hidden in his room, if not on his person."
Gerard shakes his head. "I don't have it. He took it, two days in."

Frank turns back to Gerard and hisses, "He'd have me break it off with you now. Said there's too many lies between us, said, he's said everything. I want to believe you, I want to keep loving you, can you give me one thing to hold onto, any little proof he can't twist that you do?"

"I don't know how to prove it, Frank. I love you more than anything. I do. I just don't know how to prove that."

Grant rolls his eyes. "Enough of this. Gerard, pull your phone out of your pocket. Prove to Frank that you're a liar."

Frank just looks at Gerard. "I know you think you loved me. Don’t bother telling me you don't have your phone, just tell me what the last text I should have from your phone says."

Gerard's close to tears now. "I don't know. It was almost a week ago. I don't know."

Grant sweeps around Frank, reaching to pull something out of Gerard's pocket. He offers it to Frank. "I assume you know his passcode?"

Gerard goes cold. He knows he hadn't had the phone on him yesterday. But it would've been so easy for Grant to plant it, slip it into Gerard's pocket while he was barely conscious. And he knows that any chance he had left is gone.

Frank clicks it on and types in the code, lips pressed together. He nods at the screen, then leans down to press a quick kiss to Gerard's lips. There's a long enough pause that Grant is about to hurry their breakup along when Frank speaks up. "Funny how it's half charged when mine stopped showing anything other than a low battery warning four days ago. And I kept it off. Grant, did you charge the phone you didn't have?"

Gerard presses a hand over his mouth. There are a thousand things he wants to say to Frank, a thousand ways to thank him for not letting Grant fool him, but the words don't come. Just tears.

Grant is less than impressed. "Is that your choice? Would you give up everything you've gained here with me?"

Frank wraps an arm around Gerard’s shoulder and stares down Grant. "Yeah. We have a lot of shit to talk about, Gerard and I. But you and I had nothing but a couple desperate deals and bad memories."

Gerard buries his face in Frank's stomach. "I love you so much." He knows it'll be rough for a while, sorting out the truth from the lies, but this is so much better than what he's had in this hell.

"Yeah." Frank nods. "And nobody is ever gonna make me feel guilty for loving you again, either. You told me what he was gonna do and I fucking fell for it anyway. He lied to me." Frank glares at Grant. "His phone. That's a bald-faced lie. What else was lies?"

"I think you'll have to determine that for yourself. I'm certainly not going to be helping you anymore. But I can tell you that the things you least want to be true are the ones that are."

Frank smiles. "I figured. And I'm glad we're done with making deals, I have no inclination to do anything for you again."
A grin spreads across Grant's face, slow and menacing. "Oh, we're most definitely not making any more deals. Because as of now, you’ve stopped being entertaining, and I have a very low tolerance for things that annoy me.”

Frank cocks an eyebrow. "Regretting not keeping the receipt for that guitar?"

"The guitar doesn’t matter, it was a token gift. I'm just very displeased with how you turned out, Frank. Clearly, Gerard's done a lot more damage to you than I anticipated."

"Told you to return it. I jumped through your hoops while I thought it would help. Obviously, it's not going to do anyone any good. Two way street, Grant."

Grant moves faster than he should ever possibly be able to, grabbing Frank's collar and hauling him away from Gerard. "You're not on my good side anymore, Frankie. I suggest you keep the snarky comments to a minimum.” Grant starts pulling Frank out of the room. "I'll have to find somewhere to put you until I figure out what I'm doing with you."

Frank snarls, quite literally, eyes flashing and fangs dropping down. "You think you're gonna do shit to me?" Frank drops deadweight into his feet, the way he learned in the high school hallways, twisting Grant's hand out of his shirt.

"Ah, we have a fight on." Grant doesn’t even move, and Matteo and Lorenzo appear at Frank’s sides, each quite firmly taking an arm and pinning Frank. Frank very strongly suspects they’re all bound to Grant.

Frank lets himself be held. "Oh, we fight fair don't we? Gee, I need you to bind me again. I won't be his." Gerard is still behind him, is still safe.

"You know there's a simple solution to that?" Grant raises one eyebrow. "I kill him, and then you're mine anyway."

"You kill him, I find a way to kill you, bound or not. You've done enough."

"Ah, but he'll still be dead. You killing me won't change that."

"Yeah. Isn't that why people do revenge killings? They're mad you killed somebody first?"

"I rather thought you'd prefer him alive, but if that's not the case, go ahead and let him bind you."

Frank shakes his head. "Of course I would prefer him alive. I put up with you for him. Willingly. And now I'm pretty mad, because you got me fucked up and now the more I think about it, it's pretty fucking transparent, how much you lied.” That's kind of a lie, Frank still has gaping canyons of doubt, but anger and adrenaline lend themselves to broad statements.

"You did a very good job of faking belief, then." Grant turns to the two men holding him. "Take him into the other room, I'll deal with him later."

"And you played poker with me and lost. Funny, that.” Frank just hopes that Gerard won't take the brunt of punishment. His accommodations have clearly been less than five-star.
As Frank is dragged off, Grant calls after him, "Oh, Frankie? I've been around since before poker was invented. I very much let you win." He closes the door to the sitting room Gerard is still sitting in as the other three leave, standing directly across from Gerard. Gerard stares at him, meeting his eyes for the first time today.

"Well. That was almost cute. All those tears made you seem like you cared." There is nothing human left in Grant, only monster.

Gerard speaks for the first time in several minutes, voice still rough. "Funnily enough, not all of us live a lie all the time. Sometimes we do things that are true."

"Sounds like a quick way to get hurt. Well darling, for once, you were smarter. Frankie’s mouth is going to get him into some real trouble. It's a nice mouth, otherwise. What a shame." His tone is even, no real emotion coloring it.

"Whatever you're gonna do to him, do it to me instead. You've been mad at me for 300 years, might as well take it out."

"I broke you. I watched you shatter this afternoon, and you're not going to heal knowing I still have my naughty pet for another week and more. I want you to listen. You might hear him from here."

"It's my fault he turned on you. Well, technically it's your own fault for the phone thing, that was pretty stupid, but other than that it was my fault." Gerard's needling at him, trying to get him to expend some of his anger now.

Grant just looks at him. "You want me to martyr you? No. You're going to hear him scream and wish it was you, but it won't be."

"Please don't. He's young, and he's small. You'll kill him."

"You're beginning to understand." Grant turns and leaves.

Gerard rushes the door again, trying to reach through before it closes.

Grant fills the inch left open. "Are you trying to run? Do you want him to die tonight? His only chance at living long enough to be worth making something useful out of is the two of you cooperating. I don't know if he'll learn that soon enough, but you should know it." He slams the door.

Gerard barely pulls his fingers out of the gap in time, retreating back to the chair. He couldn't hurt Frank. He couldn't. It wasn't fair.

As Frank is pulled across the hall, he looks at Matteo and whispers, "Weak comeback, letting me win."

Matteo cracks a smile, chancing an amused glance at Frank.
Deposited in a sparse office two doors down, Frank shrugs himself out of their grip and turns to face them. "Go pretend to be good minions, I'll survive."

They close the door, locking Frank in. A few minutes later, Grant stalks in, fury in full force. Frank just sits back quietly. Grant can show his hand first.

"I did all I could for you, Frankie." Grant seems almost disappointed in him. "I wish you could've seen the truth. But as of now, your goodwill with me has vanished."

Frank keeps his fangs out and eyes bright. "My partners have always been shitty. You wanna hear about Matt?"

"Might as well tell me, before I start by breaking your pretty little jaw."

"He tried that too." Frank sits forward, settling in to tell Grant the story. "Well, back in my schooldays, days I'm sure you remember, being out was distinctly not cool and getting dates even harder. And I had this boyfriend named Matt. He was kind of a pushy bastard, made me suck him off once. Didn't know it at the time, but he took a few photos. Printed them out, showed them to people I didn't want to know... It was bad, Grant. I had a reputation. I ended up moving schools later, but before I had a chance to, before we even considered it, he asked me to go out with him again. He got angry when I didn't want to fuck with him anymore. Matt thought it would be a neat plan to come smash me up, and that got old real fast, so I started hitting back. Last time I saw him, I left him bleeding and passed out behind a gas station."

"You said that was Gerard's doing. But it doesn't matter. Either way, trying to make yourself look tough isn't really going to work."

"Oh, no, sorry, that was misleading. Gerard nearly killed Bob. He's never met Matt. My point was that I'm not taking any of your shit anymore. If you want to talk at me I welcome it, but something says you don't want to do that."

"Oh, no. There'll be no more talking." Grant smiles again. "The good thing about how recently you've eaten is how quick you'll heal. Then we can start the fun all over again."

Frank stands. "I'm sure."

Grant's fist comes out of seemingly nowhere, slamming into the side of Frank's jaw. There's a nasty crack when he makes contact.

Frank rolls with the hit, not letting the force carry through. He's learned a few things growing up scrappy and into punk music. He reaches up to poke the other side and nods appraisingly as he grinds it back into place. Grant doesn't expect the kick to the side of his knee that comes with it.

Grant staggers for only a second or two before regaining his balance. "Would you prefer to be fully restrained? Or there's another option where I do to Gerard whatever you do to me."

"Or there's the option of the two of us keeping this in here. I give back what you gave to me."

"Oh, no. It won't be nearly that simple. It'll take more than that for me to let you go."
"You gonna keep hitting me until you feel better?"

"Don't be so unimaginative, Frank." Grant looks him up and down. "Maybe we can start the same way we did with Gerard. Four or five broken ribs should shut you up for a while."

"You broke his ribs? What for?" Frank just stands where he is, just off center in the mostly empty room.

"You don't need to know. He healed. Although it took long enough for him to eat that I'm not sure he healed right."

"If you really hurt him, you'll hear from me. Did you ever offer food, before?"

"You'll hear from me," Grant muses. "I'm not sure you're in a position to make that statement."

"I'm making it anyway." Frank shrugs, tilting his chin up a little. "And I'm going to take your silence as a no on offering food?"

"I did. It's not my fault he wouldn't take it."

"Alright. We're not going to get anywhere on that conversation. You figure out how you're going to fix your fuck-up yet?"

"There will be no fixing of anything, although I'm tempted to fix you so you can't open your mouth anymore."

Frank smiles. "Well, I'm sure we could get our tickets home moved up, if you're quite done."

"Oh, most certainly not. You've betrayed my trust, Frankie. You're not waltzing away." Grant reaches out and pins Frank to the wall, hitting him four times across the face in rapid succession with the other hand.

Frank curls away from most of the blows, face turned away. "We made a deal, Grant."

"And if you learn to keep your mouth shut in the next few days you'll live long enough to find I don't care." Grant strikes once more across Frank's jaw, fast enough that Frank doesn't have time to move.

Frank groans at the crack and shift he feels and for once, stands silent.

Grant smiles. "That's better. And don't worry about permanent damage. You'll heal, which actually makes this a lot more fun for me." He punches again, this time hitting Frank's nose.

Frank feels his nose crack and swears quietly. He shoves at Grant, hard, slurring out, "Now this is just unnecessary."

"Unnecessary was you turning on me, after I did everything I could for you. Don't talk to me about unnecessary." Grant shoves him back, harder, bouncing Frank's head off the wall. "Maybe tomorrow you'll be feeling a little more cooperative. But rest assured, until you come back in line, your life will not be pleasant."
"Sounds like a fun week for both of us then." His jaw clicks when smiles, "Because I spent high school just like this, and it made me an asshole."

Grant smiles back at him. "Maybe I won't take everything out on you, then. Maybe Gerard can take some of your punishment."

"Oh, sorry I was under the impression he'd been doing that for a week and it was my turn? Now that you're accusing me of betraying your trust."

"I'm not playing turns. I can hit Gerard just as freely as I can you, but at the rate he's going it will kill him. It's your choice."

Frank's response is pretty much immediate. "You should stay here."

"Now you're all ready to protect him, I see. Clearly you've forgotten how many of the things I told you were true." Grant considers Frank for a moment. "I wonder how many places I could break your spine in before you stopped being able to heal."

Frank shoots back with "I don't know how many of those things are true, because I didn't get a chance to talk to him. The chance I was promised, actually."

"You'll get your chance. At least, I'm assuming you were baptized." Grant’s smile is unkind.

"You don’t think we’re all going to hell?" Frank's bluffing, acting unfazed by the way Grant is looming into his space, but the ease with which he snapped bone was worrying.

"Oh, I suppose so." He slides his hand down Frank's arm, ending at his hand. "I could give the happy couple matching broken fingers."

Frank closes his hand into a fist. "I'd like to be able to put my ring back on when we leave."

"Oh, I'm sure you would say that. Unfortunately, you're not."

Frank glares and ignores the entire line of threats. He’ll get out. “Gerard better be able to too. I'm pretty sure I'm gonna be putting a ring on him soon, despite your best efforts."

"He didn't eat soon enough. Have you seen it? It's healing crooked. Sorry, darling."

"Fuck you." Frank can't take this just standing here anymore, he wants to lay into Grant for hurting Gerard, for hurting him and very nearly breaking him. Frank knows they’d have both broken if this had gone on another week.

"You already did that, love. Or have you forgotten so soon?" Grant is still smiling, mocking him.

Frank snaps and throws a hard right hook, right into Grant's ear. "You're a fucking bastard, you know that?" His voice shakes a little, anger and shame boiling up.

"Frank, if it comes to a fight, you won't win. I know you've been making friends with my men, but in the end they're all bound to me. That makes five of us. Against just one."
"I don't wanna fight my way out of here, I want you to stop talking shit to me!"

"You're not in a good position to make that happen. And it seems like words are far more successful with you than broken bones."

"Yeah? I can keep hitting you back, that shuts you up for a second."

"I could break your wrists, I suppose. That'd keep you from hitting back for a while."

"You wanna try?" Frank sneers.

"Yes." In one swift motion, Grant grabs for his arm, still holding the same hand. He turns it sharply and there's a loud crack.

Frank lets out a short cry, body jack-knifing off the wall to curl around the injured limb, but doesn't try to yank his arm free. "Having fun?" he grits out.

"Starting to. Do you want me to continue?" A couple rooms away, Gerard hears Frank's yell and curls tighter into himself, pressing his hands over his ears.

Frank takes a deep breath, and his voice is level when he says, "No, I'm not particularly invested it you continuing." He rotates the wrist still in Grant's grip carefully, hoping it heals right.

"Ah, so I'll have the guards bring you in to watch Gerard's turn?"

"No, no that’s fine." Frank shakes his head, preparing for a long and painful night.

"Hmm, what next? I think a finger would seem anticlimactic by comparison. I could break your fangs, but it would be a shame to destroy the prettiest part of you."

Frank slides his fangs up anyway. Better not to tempt Grant.

Grant sweeps Frank's feet out from under him, dropping him to the ground. "Perhaps an ankle? It would be so easy." He puts one foot on the side of Frank's and begins to push.

Frank catches an elbow under him and starts to try to move his ankle out from under Grant, twisting desperately. Survival instinct is hard to tamp down, and Frank feels caged.

Grant kicks him back. "Should I bring one of the others in to hold you down?"

Frank goes still for half a second before twisting away again, pulling his foot free.

Grant calls out, "Lorenzo. In. Now." Lorenzo appears, and is promptly ordered to hold Frank's arms behind his back, wrenching him into a sitting position with his feet out straight in front of him. "Not so easy to get away now, sorry darling."

Frank presses back, trying to tuck his feet up under him, breathing hard and quietly whispering "No, no, no, please, fuck, no, no."

Grant pauses with his foot lightly on Frank's. "It's your choice. You or Gerard?"
Frank goes totally still, holding his breath. It's gonna hurt like hell, but he can't let Grant do it to Gerard, knowing he should've taken the punishment.

"You've made your choice? Alright." He motions to Lorenzo, who twists Frank sideways, and Grant steps down. Frank's eyes screw shut, and he can't hold back a scream as his ankle snaps and is twisted out of line. Instinctively, he curls in, whimpering quietly as his foot drags.

In his room, Gerard’s out of the chair in an instant, pounding on his door. "Frank? Frank, Frank, no! Please!"

Grant hears him down the hall and excuses himself with a terrifying smile. He opens Gerard's door and raises an eyebrow. "Would you like to watch?"

"Don't hurt him. Please don't, I'll do anything you want."

Grant crosses past Gerard to pick up the walking stick he'd left there at the beginning of the week. "You're welcome to come watch, then. Reach for him and I'll shut you up in here so injured you'll never heal, but you can watch." Gerard follows him back out into the hall dully. If the only thing he can do is watch and let Frank know that he's there, that's what he'll do.

Grant doesn't waste any time, gesturing Matteo to make sure Gerard stays back and smashing the stick into Frank's knee in the same moment. "Open your eyes, love, we have a guest." Frank screams again as his kneecap cracks, but pries his eyes open.

"Frank? Frank, it's okay. I'm sorry. I'm sorry." Gerard reaches out for him, tears in his eyes.

Frank nods weakly at him, then looks at Grant. "You said you wouldn't hurt him, because I'd take the hits, please, keep that, I can stay here."

"No, please. I'll take whatever you want to do to me. Just don't hurt him."

Frank struggles against the Lorenzo's hold, trying to keep Grant’s attention. “Gerard, shut up!”

Grant raises an eyebrow, looking between the two of them. "I won't. Unless he puts up a fight."

Frank shakes his head at Gerard, begging him to stay where he is. Grant moves to stroke Gerard's cheek. "And you won't, will you love?" Gerard snaps at his hand, fangs out.

Grant slaps him across the face and steps back to Frank. "You're a bad influence, I see." He brings the walking stick down, whistling past Frank's ear to smash into his shoulder. Frank grunts at the pain.

Gerard struggles against the man holding him, dropping to his knees to try and loosen their grip.

Frank flinches under Grant's next few blows, before he sees Gerard on his knees. Grant spins, following Frank’s gaze and flips the walking stick to push Gerard's chin up to look at him. "What did I tell you the stipulation for being allowed to watch was? You're dangerously close to breaking our little deal, darling."

Gerard shrinks into himself, quiet for now. He hates himself for not fighting, hates every moment of
inaction, but he's scared. He's terrified. On the other side of the room, Frank's trying not to start crying from the pain. His wrist is almost fine, but feels a little bit off-center, something he supposes will be permanent, and his ankle and knee both feel tender, his entire leg stretched out in front of him, useless. The new blows on his shoulder feel like a dull soreness, but on top of everything else, it hurts.

Gerard can barely see him around Grant, but he calls out, "Frank? You're okay, Frankie. I love you. I'm sorry."

"Yeah, I'm gonna be good, don't be sorry." Frank's voice feels rough, probably from biting his tongue to keep quiet for so long.

Grant points the walking stick at Gerard. "Quiet." Gerard bites his lip before speaking again. "You never said we couldn't talk."

"I am now. You don't speak, you don't make a sound, you just watch. Or you and I go back to your room."

"If it'll stop you hurting him." Gerard flinches back even as he says it.

Grant laughs. "You think I've forgotten how badly you'd want to think yourself a martyr? I'll punish him until I consider him punished, audience or not. You brought him to me, you wanted to watch this. You get what you get. Last warning." Grant steps back toward Frank. Gerard falls silent, literally clamping his hand over his mouth. "That's better." Grant cracks the walking stick across Frank's ribs.

Frank makes a tiny noise, trying to hold the worst back for Gerard's sake. He doubles over as much as he can, sitting on the floor with his arms held behind his back.

Gerard's silence lasts as Grant continues to beat Frank bloody until Grant aims for Frank's head. He struggles away from the man holding him. "Stop! Just stop, you're gonna kill him."

Grant pauses for half a second, walking stick raised, before rolling his eyes and spinning his blow into the side of Gerard's head. Gerard goes crashing sideways, vision blurring and curls into himself, hands over his head as though making himself smaller will keep Grant from hitting him.

Grant lands two more punishing blows on Gerard's back and shoulders, before pausing. Gerard stays quiet and Grant turns back to Frank, slow anger keeping his movements graceful and deadly, tilting Frank's head up with the stick. He’s not breathing, tear tracks drying on his face and eyes half-closed as he struggles to stay conscious.

Gerard does the best he can to push himself up, still dizzy but concerned about the sudden lull in action. "Frank?"

Frank can't articulate anything other than a quiet moan of pain, eyes flickering shut again, unable to look at Grant.

Gerard's heart shatters again. "I love you. I'm sorry."

Frank's lips pull up into a small smile, and he blinks swimming vision away to look past Grant at Gerard.
Gerard slowly pulls himself to his feet, vision still not quite back to normal. "Don't hit him again. Please."

Grant glances over. "We had a deal. You've comprehensively broken it." He moves the stick from under Frank's chin, and the vampire holding him stands, stepping back. In the absence of his support, Frank slumps sideways where he half curls over and gasps "Gerard, no. He'll hit you again, I can't, I can't let that happen. I'll be fine in two hours, or if I eat, it's alright, just let it be."

Gerard sets his jaw. "Frank, I love you, okay? Whatever happens."

"No, don't you dare fucking say that like you're not coming back." Frank forces himself upright and tests his leg. It buckles a bit and he tips before catching himself.

Grant casually switches what end of the stick he's holding and raises an eyebrow. "He might not be coming back. I told him he could come if he would be quiet, but he's been quite loud."

Gerard steels himself. "Better me than you, Frank. I'm sorry."

Grant smiles and slams the bronze knob at the top of the walking stick into Gerard's temple. He crumples to the floor. Frank yells out again, dropping to his knees and falling forward toward Gerard. Grant kneels down between them and grabs Frank's chin. "I'm not done with you. In a while, I'm going to send a meal for you. I expect it finished."

Frank nods hopelessly, tears slipping down his cheeks. "Please don't kill him." Grant just stands and his men carry Gerard out after him, locking the door behind them. Grant leaves Gerard back in the room he's spent the week in room and waits for him to wake up, sending his bound vampires out for Frank's meal.

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Gerard struggles back to consciousness wondering if it's even worth it. The first thing he sees when he blinks awake are Grant's shoes, and it's enough to make him wish he hadn't woken at all.

Grant sighs. "You really push me, don't you? Makes me wonder how much you really love Frankie, because you certainly don't mind dying and leaving him to my whims."

"You'd tell me I didn't love him if I let you keep hitting him anyway. It doesn't matter what I do. You're gonna turn it back on me." Gerard's voice is dull, eyes staring at the floor somewhere past Grant.

"Do you want to die?" Grant's sitting in the chair, Gerard sprawled out at his feet, all twisted limbs and messy hair, looking disheveled and hopelessly young.

Gerard doesn't move, just continues in the same dead voice. "No. But if I have to, better me than him."

"You're already dead." Grant intends to uncover something new here, some spark like the one Gerard had 300 years before. He'd glimpsed it in the last week, and surely somewhere in the body under him was something interesting.
"Yeah, yeah. I know." Almost 400 years, and this is the first time Gerard really feels that.

"Then go walk off a pier. The door isn't locked."

Gerard just blinks. "That won't kill me."

"It'd do close enough. Go out and find a stake then."

Gerard rolls, slowly pushing himself up. "I'm not gonna do it for you."

"You haven't done it for yourself either."

"No? I'm obviously still here. Is that your plan for me?"

"No, I'm just wondering at how much you want to die. Because you'll ally yourself to a suicidal deal with a sick gusto, but you haven't killed yourself." Grant leans back in his chair, idly tilting the walking stick back and forth.

"I don't know. But I know it matters less if I come home than if he does,"

"Is that true for him or just for you?"

"It's in general. He still has a family. People other than me care if he keeps on existing."

"Hmm. It's an interesting self-sacrifice."

"How so? What makes one self-sacrifice more interesting than another?"

"He's offered a lot to get back to you, but never his life. He seems to think he can get both of you out of my house. You've given up on both of you."

"I haven't given up on him. But I know you better than he does."

Grant chuckles. "I made you, Gerard. And you've given me hell ever since, but I still made you. It'd be a such a shame to kill my own child." That's a lie, Grant has put down vampires he’s made before, but perhaps Gerard will fall for it.

"You didn't make me. You just changed me. It's not the same thing. I existed before you."

"Not like this. This existence I created. And you created Frank in turn. You're less a parental figure to him, but you're responsible for him, aren't you? Is that it? You made him and that's why you owe him this protection?"

"That's part of it, I guess. The other part is more important, though."

"Your love for him?"

"You're gonna twist this too, aren't you? But yes. From before I turned him and now."

"And that's the weakness that will kill you." Grant stands slowly. "I'm having him brought another
meal. He's going to kill again. If I hear you from the hall or anywhere, I will move you, and it will be far less pleasant. Do consider those around you." Grant leaves again, taking the stick with him. Outside, when the door closes, he turns to his man. "No-one enters that room. That door does not exist." Matteo blinks assent, eyes sliding over the door like he truly cannot see it in the wall.

Gerard now confined to a solitary prison, Grant is almost sure he'll either self-destruct or come out stripped down to the little spark that must be keeping him going. The meal has been delivered to Frank's room, but he's apparently passed out, so Grant’s men had left the boy and locked the door again.

The boy’s scrabbling at the door with his bound hands is what eventually wakes Frank. Grant enters a few minutes later, kicking him away from the door without a second thought.

Frank blinks heavily at him, still laying on the floor. "Don't get mad, I passed out."

"I won't be mad if you do what I told you to do. You're awake now. So eat."

Frank titles his head to look at the boy and switches back to Italian. "Kid, come're. My leg is all fucked, I can't stand." Frank would swear they're getting younger, but there's still a chance that Gerard is alive and he needs to heal.

The boy shrinks farther against the wall, terrified. Grant says nothing, just waits to see how Frank proceeds.

Frank's fangs are still clicked up and he sighs. "What, you think I'm gonna eat you? He's not gonna come at you either, I just need your help standing up."

Slowly, the boy stands, making his way over to Frank. He's gagged, and his eyes are still wide and terrified, but he does his best to help Frank up.

With his good leg gathered under him, and arms steady on his shoulders, Frank speaks up again. "I may have lied a little bit." His fangs click down.

The boy stumbles, nearly falling over himself in an attempt to get away, but Frank’s grip on his shoulders is sure, and he keeps his hold, this time wasting no time in sinking his teeth in. He stops after a minute, grimacing at his ankle before resetting it. "You really want me to kill him?"

Grant nods. "Of course. Finish."

Frank sighs but bites deeply again, listening to the kid’s heartbeat stutter away.

"Very good." Grant nods before calling someone to take the body away. "You're wasted with Gerard, you really are. You kill so well."

Frank hands the body off to one of Grant’s now-familiar men and sits back against the far wall. He can feel his aches fading even as Grant talks, but the body being carried out ruins the image. "What about that kid's parents? His classmates? He could've lived."

"He was a nobody, just some street kid." Grant waves a hand dismissively. "At least you didn't try to cheat me when I gave you a present."
Frank shrugs, not quite willing to stand up to be hit again. “Somebody’s best friend. And if that was a dig at me, I missed it.”

"No, no. There are plenty of things I could insult you for, but that was an insult to your darling fiancé."

"You know he doesn't kill. And I shouldn't. Really shouldn't, when they look like they could be my kids and not homophobes with beer guts."

"So he's never even had you hunt for real, has he? Never pitted you against people who are willing to struggle?"

"That sounds kind of terrible. We go for walks, the people who swing broken bottles like us wake up in alleys behind trashcans. Muggers are also fun to show that you're the wrong person to go for." Frank shrugs. "Charades, but with consequences."

"I see. So people that would have no problem killing you, and he never let you kill one of them. What a waste."

"None of them have actually tried to kill us."

"I said they wouldn't have a problem killing you. And they wouldn't. They don't think you deserve to exist."

"I don't actually have that much desire to go out killing people. It's not quite like Gerard's holding me back from murder left and right. And maybe if somebody tries, turnabout will be fair play." Frank shrugs, staring at Grant’s shoulder.

"You say you don't have a desire to kill, and yet you don't put up a fight."

"I'd be fighting you, not them. You’ve beaten the shit out of me already, and would force me to kill after hurting me worse again. I don't enjoy it. I really kind of want to throw up right now, actually."

"Good to see you still have some degree of self-preservation left, then. You're stronger than Gerard. You would've been a good pet."

Frank snorts. "Have I finally escaped being your pet? That was past conditional."

"I'm sorry you consider it escaping. Somehow I don't think broken bones are much better than living in comfort."

"Well, you've mostly stopped fucking with my emotions and grip on reality, so yes."

"Still, Frank. Pretending, even, and you would be upstairs, healed and happy. Not your smartest decision, giving that up."

"Another week upstairs with you, getting me to do whatever the fuck you wanted me to at the moment? This is better. At least I know where I stand."

"Maybe you're not as smart as you thought. I gave you choice and freedom. Here, I’ll do whatever I want."
"You made me sleep with you. That's not something I would've done in any kind of my right mind."

"I didn't make you. You offered yourself." Grant smirks.

Frank laughs. "You put your hands all up under my clothes and made me sleep in your bed. If you call my response enthusiastic consent, you're fucking delusional."

"You still had a choice. And I'd advise you to watch your mouth, before I have to break your jaw again."

"Sure, leaving you fuck me, try not to hate myself, and get to see the person I'm going through hell for, or say no and always wonder why I wasn't stronger. Lovely choices. And breaking my jaw again might impede this lovely conversation."

"Don't you wonder why it was so easy for me to make you hate him? You started distrusting him less than a day in. If you really loved him enough to accept his proposal, maybe you should reevaluate why it was so easy."

"It was easy because I didn't know anything to counter you with. But I know him, and I know more about how you work now. If he'd been sitting up in a room like mine, drawing and trying to tell me he cared, it would be different. But you had to hurt him to get me from him. That says a lot."

"You were always so sure you knew him, and yet you started questioning him within hours. Do you know that you know him now?"

"I know he loves me. At the moment, that's enough. After this week, we talk. There's some things he hasn't wanted to tell me, old personal shit that you've dragged up. Some of that we need to talk about. Some of it we don't. How many details do I need to know about him to love him?"

"The ones that matter. And unfortunately, those seem to be the ones you don't know."

"Then lets all three of us sit down and talk about it. Unless you know yours are inflated lies?"

"They aren't. But as far as I'm concerned, Gerard doesn't exist at the moment."

"At the end of the week then. I've already heard it all from you."

Grant smiles, and Frank goes a little bit tense. "What makes you think your situation will be changing in a week, love?"

Frank nearly gapes. "We made a deal, Grant!"

Grant just tsks quietly and smiles coldly. "Shame, I don't remember us making one."

"Grant!" Frank scrambles up, real terror in his eyes. Grant turns and slips out of the room, saying nothing else and leaving Frank to pace back and forth, suddenly horrified.
Frank eventually exhausts himself pacing and sits in the armchair in the corner, settling in for the light doze he can manage this soon after feeding. Rest is a better way to pass the time than worry, and he'll still have plenty of time for that.

Grant returns sometime later, long enough that Frank yawns when startled out of his doze. “Well, love, on what tone shall we start today with?”

“Coffee. I take mine black.” Frank fixes Grant with an unimpressed stare.

Grant laughs. "You're trying. You're trying so hard, Frankie. What will it take to break you?"

"Can't say I have a concrete answer for that. Can't said I'd tell you if I did."

"Rhetorical question, love. But believe me, I'll do my best to find your breaking point."

"I'd wish you luck, but that's just asking for it."

"You'll be a lot more fun to break than some of the others I've had." Grant steps closer to Frank. "I think we'll start small today, maybe a finger?"

"You want me to just hold out a hand so you can break one of my fingers, are you really serious?"

"Oh, I never assumed it'd be that simple." Grant reaches forward and locks his iron grip around Frank’s left wrist, pulling it out between them. Frank tries to jerk backward, but Grant’s grip is strong. “What finger shall I break?"

“None!”

Grant levels him with a look. “You need to be brought back in line, love. Do not shout at me.” He picks a finger and reaches forward, snapping Frank’s pinky out of the joint and bracing a thumb against the base of the bone so it doesn’t heal quickly.

Frank gasps, face white with pain and staring in horror at his hand.

"It'll heal, no need to yell about it. We haven't gotten to the things worth yelling about, yet."

Frank whimpers very quietly. Grant lets his hand go, and Frank pulls his hand in, gritting his teeth and popping his pinky back into the joint.

“Give me back your arm.” Grant holds a hand out.

Frank twists away, if anything. “Why?”

“Your punishment isn’t over. Unless you’d like me to chain you to the wall and whip you bloody.”

“What are you going to do with my arm?”

Grant backhands Frank across the face and watches him stumble sideways with a dispassionate stare. Frank regains his footing and looks up in time to see Grant descend on him, twisting Frank’s right arm up behind his back and slamming him into the wall. Frank grunts, trying to keep his shoulder relaxed so Grant doesn’t dislocate it.
Grant uses his free hand to grab Frank’s jaw, pinning his face to the wall. “I will not tolerate this kind of rudeness from you Frank. I am trying to teach you a lesson. If you fail to learn it, I will break your jaw and we will try again tomorrow.”

Frank nods as much as he can, ears ringing. It’s like the sharpness of his vision has been turned up, every second crystal clear and sharp. Grant is on the cusp of violence, and Frank doesn’t know him well enough to do damage control. His instincts from Bob are well-honed, though, so Frank just quietly asks. “What’s the lesson?”

Grant wrenches Frank’s arm up, and his shoulder gives. Frank screams, the pain somehow unexpected. Grant leans in close, pinning Frank to the wall and crowding him in. “The lesson, love, is that I have absolute power here.” He twists Frank’s arm up again, and Frank chokes on another pained sound. Distantly, Grant hears a banging and Gerard screaming for his blood behind his locked door. Grant drops Frank, who staggers, still in a haze of pain and terror, and looks toward the door before looking back at Frank, who is watching him warily, holding his shoulder with his good hand.

“Do you understand my lesson, love?”

Frank nods rapidly, quiet for once. Satisfied, Grant heads for the door. “I’ll be back. Don’t forget what you’ve learned.” He lets the door slam behind him, and Frank jumps. This sudden-onset violence is unbalancing. Frank is currently rational enough to know that he’s falling right back into Bob-Management behavior patterns, but isn’t rational enough to work on devising new ones, currently only powered by pain and the iron-clad knowledge that if Frank wants to live, Grant has to die. There are no escape chances like the ones Frank lived for with Bob. Frank has three things on his to-do list now. 1) Survive. 2) Kill Grant. 3) Get out.
Thrones, Overthrown

Chapter Summary

I'm getting the vague feeling (and tell me if I'm wrong..) that you guys aren't really the angst lovers Claire and I are.. We enjoyed writing Grant, seeing how far we could push Frank and Gerard to their respective breaking points. If you're worried, don't worry, you've made it to the end!!! This will be the last "Grant" chapter.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Grant stops outside Gerard's room and Antonio brings him a blindfold. It's too easy to throw the door open and blindfold Gerard before he can defend himself. Gerard is only half-awake as they push him out into the hallway. "Thought you were ignoring me?"

Grant shakes his head and they stay quiet, half-dragging him up the stairs. There's an old, lockable pantry with extra sheets in it, out of earshot of the downstairs rooms. It's also smaller, darker, and less trafficked than the old room. It's perfect.

"Oh, lovely. Out of a mostly-closet to a full closet. What's next?"

Grant doesn't answer. Sudden surge of defiance or not, solitary will be a silent hell for Gerard. The door slams and clicks.

Gerard almost misses his spot in the corner, uncomfortable as it was. Most of all, he feels the lack of Frank more than ever. He can't hear anything more than about 6 steps outside the door. As silence descends, he rips off the blindfold, only to be faced with more near-pitch darkness. As his eyes adjust, Gerard pulls a sheet down and around himself, huddling into a corner away from the door.

___

Downstairs in Frank's room, Grant is confronted with a silent, staring Frank. Something about him doesn't seem muted, though, and Grant knows his work isn't done. He places the tip of the walking stick under Frank's chin. "I can make you talk, Frank."

"You can make me scream." It's not quite assent, but it's true.

"And there are the words. Anything else you want to say, while you're talking?"

"No." Frank's fangs have clicked back down, and there's a defiant fire in his eyes. Step one: Survive.

"Fangs out, hmm? That'll just make it easier for me."

Frank slides them right back in, suddenly afraid Grant's going to break them.

"Afraid?" Grant slings the walking stick over his shoulder. "How quickly things change."
Frank just tightens his jaw. This waiting game is worse, but he has nothing to say to Grant that won’t invite pain.

"No words, then? Whatever you prefer." Grant starts the walking stick towards Frank's ribs. "I think these should go next, unless you have another suggestion?"

Frank shakes his head, bracing for the worst. He looks up at Grant, waiting for the first swing.

"Let's get started." Grant takes the first swing at Frank's ribs.

One cracks under the first blow, and Frank knows Grant is't holding back. He yelps as the second third fourth blows come down. Grant hits him once more, before pausing again. "Really, would playing the good boy for another week have hurt you so badly? Then I could have gotten rid of Gerard quietly, instead of this mess."

Frank curls in on himself in the chair, wincing at the shifts in his ribs. "Yes."

"Really? What do you think it would it have cost you, in the end? I'm actually interested, Frank."

Speaking hurts more than anything, and Frank is incredibly thankful he doesn't really need to breathe. "P-Probably my sanity. And Gerard."

"I'm not sure Gerard would even notice if we let him go at this point. He's accepted whatever I could do to him. If you ever do get him back, I'm not sure you'll want him back for long."

"That's because he's terrified of you."

"You have just as much a reason to be scared as he does. Maybe more, I haven't broken nearly as many of his bones. And yet you're not shutting down like he is. It's interesting."

Frank manages a tiny shrug. "Different sorts of people."

"I suppose we'll have to keep going, then. Find out what breaks you so I can rebuild you correctly."

Grant swings the walking stick at Frank's ribs again.

There's another sharp crack and Frank yelps, "Motherfucker!" Successfully surviving is getting harder and harder, it feels like.

"Language." Grant grips the walking stick near the top and smashes the bronze head into Frank's jaw.

His jaw doesn't snap cleanly, but it shifts a little too far, probably dislocated. Frank reaches up to touch it and whimpers.

Grant lightly taps the same spot again, watching Frank flinch. "We're getting close, aren't we? Amazing how much of your defense mechanism depends on you being able to talk."

Frank doesn’t think he could really disagree. Grant presses the walking stick into Frank's windpipe, slowly crushing it. "I'm so disappointed in how you turned out. I really am. You would have been a good second."
Frank stops breathing. It's really the only thing he can do, unbroken hand coming up to try to pull the walking stick away. Speaking is out of the running at this point.

"Not so fast, love. You really think I'd make this so easy on you?" Grant raps the walking stick sharply on the wrist of the offending hand.

Frank whips his hand away, hoping Grant won't pull it back to break it.

Grant grabs the hand, turning it palm up. "I won't break this one yet. But rest assured, if you try to fight back, I will."

Frank squeezes his eyes shut and nods. He can feel his ribs knitting back together awkwardly, and he sits up straighter, hoping it's enough.

"Good. I'll be back once you've healed up some more. I have other things to attend to." With one last tap on Frank's jaw, Grant sweeps out.

Frank moves slowly out of the chair, too exposed. He carefully curls up by it, and closes his eyes while he heals. Grant hasn't left the walking stick behind, and it's the closest thing to a wooden stake he can think of. He sags against the legs of the chair and slips into sleep.

Gerard's corner is becoming a nest. He's taken to ripping up one of Grant's spare sheets just to have something to do, which he's sure will get him in trouble, but at this point he'd almost prefer that.

Grant opens the door and leaves it open behind him, knowing Gerard won't run, and that the light will be almost blinding. "Is that one of my sheets?"

Gerard doesn't respond. Silence can go both ways.

Grant steps just out of the door, letting the light hit Gerard's face.

Gerard wraps the largest intact portion of the sheet around his shoulders and curls up tighter, away from the blinding light.

"You're nesting and non-verbal. I'm sure that's exactly what Frank is getting his bones cracked for."

Gerard's hand tightens under the sheet, fingernails scratching into his arm, but he still says nothing. Because whatever he does, Grant will keep him locked up here, and Frank will continue to get his bones cracked. It's not worth it.

Grant shakes his head. "If you don't speak to me by the end of the week, I might just forget where I put you. It's a rather small place to die forgotten, isn't it?" This is a disappointment. Maybe Gerard is unrecoverable.

Gerard is fairly certain he's already resigned himself to being here forever. He's also not entirely sure he cares at this point. Frank will go free and he'll find someone else and his life will go on, and that's fine.
Grant watches him, waiting for an answer. When he doesn’t get one, he silently gets up and walks out, slamming the door.

—

Alone in the dark, Gerard has nothing to do but think. Wallowing is hopeless, and he’s sort of resigned to a slow and painful death alone in the dark. So he does the only thing left to him and daydreams.

He thinks about Frank, and home, home in Rhode Island and builds up the quiet, normal life he wishes he could have had. In it, he and Frank are human, planning a wedding after returning from their Italy trip, a trip where Grant didn’t look twice at them, and better yet, Gerard amends his fantasy, didn’t exist. Linda would start to call Frank and Gerard her sons, plural.

Frank would love that. He’s got a big, open heart, and he’d wanted Gerard to love his little family, Jamia and Linda, as much as he loved Frank. The two women had met him with open arms, and Gerard is never exaggerating when he says he loves them as well. Back home, Frank would bother Gerard constantly to retire to Italy, back to Gerard’s home, a place Frank fell in love with at first sight.

By the time they’d talk about that, they’d be married, rings -and those Gerard pictures as the one he bought Frank, and a nondescript band for himself- well worn and loved and the finish a little dull with time. Their wedding album would be dusty on the shelf, and everyone would know all the best stories from all their trips by heart.

Maybe by then they’d have a child of their own, a small family that grows piece by piece. Aunt Jamia, Grandma Linda, and they’d have to navigate who would be Daddy and who could be Papa, or Dad, or even Dada.

For a second, Gerard’s thoughts take a wild turn, crystal clear vision like it could be real, Frank sitting up on one elbow in bed, in a bedroom in a house they don’t have yet, sunshine slanting over his more heavily tattooed shoulder as he grins at Gerard and says “A kid! Our kid! For real! We’re really gonna do it!”

Gerard kisses the smile off his face and it comes back stronger, mirrored on Gerard’s face now. “Yeah, you knew you’d break me down someday.”

Frank kisses him again, and Gerard loses track of that daydream, background of the kiss blurring into a classroom, late in the afternoon and quiet. This almost breaks the little fantasy, because what school would allow two Mr. Ways? But in this little daydream, a school does, and he and Frank work in classrooms side by side and share students and listen to school gossip and Gerard is here to gently pry Frank away from grading and out to dinner.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m coming,” Frank says, and his smile is the same warm soft one Gerard gets now, when he brings Frank coffee. Gerard leans back against a desk and says, “Yeah, yeah, yeah. You would’ve forgotten.”

“Never.”

“You nearly have before.”

“Yeah, but I set an alarm on my phone this time.” The banter is easy, cheerful, and familiar. It’s a life Gerard can cherish, and he slowly spends hours fleshing out the details and quirks, the gifts they exchange for birthdays, the tattoos Frank gets, the portraits Gerard paints without crying. Just enough
is based on memory and reality that it feels real, and Gerard thinks he would do anything to live that
life, or even a snatch of it at this point.

While Gerard daydreams away the hours upstairs, Grant leaves Frank alone for a few hours to let
him heal. He doesn't want to break him beyond repair, tempting as it might be. But when he starts
hearing noise from the room, he enters.

Frank is smashing the chair. He’d woken up leaning against the leg of it and realized that he was
leaning against a wooden dowel. The walking stick left with Grant, but the chair’s legs are a close
second. The fact that he has enough strength to splinter the wood into sharp stakes just by smashing
it is a bonus that gets him closer to step two.

"Oh, now this won't do at all." Grant steps back out and summons two of his men. "Take everything
out of one of lockable rooms, and move Frank in there. Let me know when you've finished."

Frank finishes his task while the vampires move furniture and has time to shove the most-stake-like
piece into the waistband of his pants, walking with Matteo and Lorenzo to the new room without
complaint or any resistance.

When they lock the door behind them, Grant pulls them aside. "Did he take anything with him?"

Lorenzo shakes his head. He and Matteo didn’t see anything in his hands or up his sleeves.

"Are you sure? Because rest assured, if he attacks me, I will survive and you will not."

Matteo speaks up. "I didn't see him pick up anything, sir."

"I hope for your sake that you're telling the truth." Grant enters, walking stick held at the ready.
Something has changed, and Grant has not lived to a thousand years old without putting down a lot
of fights like this.

He leaves Matteo and Lorenzo in the hall. Lorenzo looks over at Matteo, who shakes his head, lips
tight. He’s seen Grant kill a vampire he had turned before, and he has no desire to see it again.

“Come on, we shouldn’t linger here.” Matteo hurries Lorenzo away. The physical distance only
matters a little, as they’re all bound to Grant, and his emotions and will sit over them like a heavy
physical presence. For them, his anger is a very real, physical thing, even past the scars they all bear
from it, deeper than the perfectly healed skin.

As Matteo and Lorenzo reenter the servants wing and their unofficial offices, Julian grimaces at
them, on the phone with a man they’re grooming to lead the Italian mob. Matteo makes a face back.
Julian was brought in and turned after Grant killed Harry, so he doesn’t feel the same creeping dread
that Frank is about to suffer the same fate. But Matteo does. He remember being ordered to bring up
a silver knife, and then not fleeing fast enough after giving it to Grant to not see Grant butcher the
boy, carving open his chest and cutting out his heart while Harry screamed and screamed and finally
went silent when his heart was littered in bloody chunks on his torso.

Grant hadn’t cared, just handed the knife back to Matteo and brushed past, silently ordering him to
clean up the mess. It would crush him to see any of the boys he’s come to think of as his own, Julian
and Lorenzo and Antonio, meet the same fate. He doesn’t know Frank that well, and doesn’t really
think the whole mixed up deal between them and Gerard is worth this, but Matteo is sure he doesn’t
deserve to get killed over it.
They feel Grant’s anger spike and Lorenzo squints, migraine coming on instantly with it. “teo? What’s he gonna do?”

Matteo shakes his head. Julian is starting to look sick as well. Matteo gathers Lorenzo up in a loose hug and says “Jay, go get Antonio. Something’s wrong.”

It feels like Grant is thrashing, somehow, winking in and out and flailing. Matteo sinks to the floor to sit next to Lorenzo, both feeling sick with phantom pain and the deep sense of the binding aching and pulling.

Grant suddenly shoves at all of them, then everything shifts, and Matteo hears Antonio whimper. A wordless order tugs at them all and they stagger up, Julian taking the careful lead toward the room Frank is shut in with Grant.

—

Back in the hallway, as Matteo leads Lorenzo off, and Grant shoves the door open and bears into the room he’s keeping Frank in. Frank is leaning against the far wall, arms casually crossed. "You brought my favorite toy."

The cocky speech is back too, and Grant isn’t pleased. "Whatever you're planning, Frank, I highly suggest you don't go through with it."

"What am I planning? I decided I hated the chair because you just broke all my ribs in it. I didn't want to look at the fucking thing."

"Oh, I'm sure. Why don't you show me what you're hiding, Frank?"

Frank raises his arms. "I'm hiding my healing ribs Grant. Nothing else."

"I see. Are you all healed up, then? Can we start again?"

"I'm still creaky."

"How unfortunate for you, then." Grant moves forward to lift Frank's head with the walking stick. "Clearly your jaw is back to normal."

Frank twists sideways to dislodge him. "It's really not. I just hate looking hurt. So no, it hurts like a bitch."

"Still, you're talking, which is more than I can say for your lovely boyfriend. I'm honestly not sure if he'll make it through the next few days."

"Where is he, by the way? This is his old room, isn't it? How's he doing?"

“Perceptive of you. He's been moved, he was being a little too vocal. Now he's just not speaking at all. Where are you hiding your makeshift stake?”

“I don’t have a stake.”

“You can’t lie to me, Frankie. You’re not the first to try. Now, where is it?”
“I don’t have one!”

“Shall I break your hip, then?”

“Please don’t, I don’t have anything!”

Grant takes a furious step closer, grabbing Frank’s collar and slamming him back into the wall, walking stick barred across his chest. “Do not lie to me.”

Frank grabs at Grant, one hand fisting his shirt at Grant’s stomach while the other scrabbles against the wall.

“Now, Frankie, do not take me for a man—” Grant cuts off, gurgling a little. He looks down. Frank has one hand in Grant’s shirt, holding him close, and the other is gripping the base of a chair leg, forcing it higher up into Grant’s stomach toward Grant’s heart even as he watches. The pain is unbearable, and Grant snarls in Frank’s face, walking stick falling from his grasp. Frank shoves off the wall with desperate strength and bears them both to the floor, still shoving the stake into Grant’s chest in a desperate hope it hits his heart somewhere, somehow.

Grant thrashes, reaching for Frank, and Frank grabs his face, accidentally digging a finger into one of Grant’s eyes, then doing it on purpose, as Grant scrabbles at that hand first, trying to buck Frank off. It shifts the stake, and suddenly Grant screams, hands flying down to cover Frank’s where he’s still pushing the stake in.

Frank jerks, would have scrambled off Grant if Grant’s hands hadn’t covered his, and suddenly there’s blood pouring out of the wound and Frank realizes he’s hit Grant’s heart. Dizzy with sudden victory, he puts his weight behind another push, slipping the stake in deeper. There’s only an inch not embedded in Grant, now, and his hands push weakly at Frank’s. Frank looks up and meets Grant’s eyes, face tight with pain and fury.

“How- dare you- I was- I am- Sutherland’s- sire of your sire- you!” Half of it doesn’t make sense, but Frank sneers all the same.

“You fucked up my life, you fucked up the person I love. You fucked up countless others. You deserve this.”

Grant’s eyes blaze for the last time. “You’ll have to seize that power.” He coughs, weak and pained, and seems to finally accept his death, brightness fading from his eyes.

Frank stumbles backward. He can't leave until he sees Grant go still, until he can be sure that he's dead.

Grant keeps thrashing and twitching weakly for a long few minutes, trying to say more, but the words won't make it up his throat.

Every second feels like it's own separate horror as Frank watches him die. It's sinking in that he has no mercy for this man, this monster that he's killed. His mercy is buried under the events of the last week and a half.

There’s a moment where Grant seems to teeter on the edge of something, then he goes still and something opens in Frank’s chest and he knows the vampire is dead.

Frank’s ears ring in the silence. He’s never been this close to a body, not like this. The humans Grant had forced him to kill don’t feel real, don’t feel like people Frank killed. Grant does. Frank is a little
proud he managed it. Step two: Kill Grant. Done.

Frank stands on shaking legs and takes a step closer, looking at Grant’s distorted grimace. The floor under Grant and Frank’s hands are slick with blood, and he steps back again, the smell of it suddenly assaulting his senses. It feels like several minutes while Frank stares at the body, but Frank can’t tell when he slides from shock into panic. Time moves at a double suddenly, and Frank feels something move in his chest, something close to his heart, which doesn’t beat anymore, and the sensation is terrifying. Frank suddenly wishes someone else was here to deal with this and a moment later the door swings open and Julian stands in it, looking at Frank with wide eyes.

Frank wishes he wouldn’t stare like that, and something huge in Frank’s chest twitches, and Julian looks away. He’s carefully not looking at Frank when he says, clearly shocked as well. “You killed him.”

“I’m sorry.” Frank doesn’t know what else to say, bloody hands held limply at his sides.

Matteo steps into the room around Julian. Frank isn’t sure how he knows Julian’s name, but he does, and it seems to go with part of the living thing in Frank’s chest. Matteo stares at the body, and if not for the writhe and clench of the Matteo-shaped thing Frank can feel, he wouldn’t know Matteo’s voice was full of forced calm. “Frank, you’ve killed Grant. We’re bound to you now.”

Frank stares at him. “How?”

“You killed Grant. We’re bound to you. The binding transfers.” Matteo looks back at the body, and Frank makes the mistake of looking at it too.

“I did that.”

Lorenzo nods.

Frank shakes his head minutely. “I didn’t- I don’t want to be like him-“

Antonio cuts him off. “I don’t think there’s any coming back from… that. Regardless of intent.”

Julian nods, looking solemn. Matteo moves first, gathering himself up. “Well, good fucking riddance to him. I thought he was going to kill you.”

“Kill me?”

“He’s done it before. 1947. His name was Harry.” That’s all Matteo offers, and even Julian seems floored.

Frank goes to lay a hand on his shoulder, the dead silence of the house oppressive, and stops when he registers the blood starting to dry on his hands and wrists. It’s enough to shock him into silence again.

They all stand frozen in their own minds for a long moment, all trying to cope with the scope of this. Antonio twitches, looking at the body again, then spins abruptly and dry heaves into the corner. Nothing comes up, but he wipes his mouth, and there’s a little blood around his lips. The retch brings them all back to life, and Julian reaches for Frank. “Your hands. And.. everything. We’ll need to deal with.. all of this.” He looks to Matteo for help.

Matteo stares back for a second and says “We should probably burn the body. Just in case.”
That gets nods from all around, and Matteo adds, “But right now… It can wait. Until this actually feels real.”

Lorenzo nods. “There’s probably gonna be a shitshow on the work side.”

Matteo nods, not at all willing to think about that yet. Lorenzo doesn’t sound like he’s eager to jump back in either. Julian ends that thought with, “It won’t fall apart overnight. What about us?”


“Upstairs. We should, yeah. We should let him out.” Lorenzo nods slowly.

“Is he okay?”

Antonio shakes his head. “He’s alive. But I don’t think he’s okay.”

“None of us are okay. Frank, come wash your hands with me before you go get him.”

Frank nods and lets Julian lead him out.

Antonio takes him upstairs to Gerard, just indicating the door and passing Frank the key. Frank unlocks it slowly and eases open the door.

Gerard looks up at him with huge eyes, and Frank nearly sobs. He doesn’t manage much more than crawling into the nest of bedding around Gerard and clinging to him.

Time is unknowable up there in the gloom, and after some time, Gerard shifts a little and says “Are you real?”

“I think so?”

“Where’s Grant?”

“He- how?” Frank is off script, and Gerard has never envisioned this conversation. Frank appearing as a death hallucination is one thing, but this is not something Gerard pictured him saying.

He also didn’t anticipate Frank saying, “I murdered him.”

“Oh.” They lapse back into silence.

Frank’s head is heavy on Gerard’s shoulder, resting against him when he quietly says, “I’m so glad you’re still alive.”

Gerard just nods, still feeling a little like this can’t be real.

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Reality comes back in tiny pieces, too strange to be a fantasy. Frank falls asleep against Gerard, still and just a little bit warm. Gerard’s mind spins out a small, fragile dream where maybe this is reality, and the idea of them going back to a normal life is real, and possible. It feels to delicate to even really think about, and he tries not to think about it too much, lest it burst.

Antonio comes back a few hours later with two hospital blood bags in his hand. He knocks quietly on the half-open door, and Frank stirs. Gerard doesn’t speak, but he blinks, and Antonio seems to get
“Lorenzo says it’s not very good, but it’ll help get your strength back up. Are you and Frank gonna come back out? It’s just past nightfall now, and Matteo wants to burn the body.”

Gerard weighs the bag in his free hand. “It’s real? He’s really dead?”

Antonio nods. “I felt it. Grant hurt really badly, then the binding shifted. I can feel that it’s Frank’s now.”

“He bound you?” Gerard is horrified by the possibility.

“No, he killed Grant and we transferred. We were all kind of in shock, so Matteo didn’t even ask about getting unbound. And he hates being bound the most of all of us.” Antonio tilts his head. “Frank’s not so angry, I think. It doesn’t burn, it’s just kind of heavy.”

Gerard nods, finally giving in to his hunger and biting through the bag. It’s stale in a way blood isn’t supposed to be, but it’ll keep him going. When he’s done with the bag, Antonio passes him the second one, sitting down for a moment on the floor of the closet with them.

While Gerard drinks, Frank wakes up, apparently smelling the blood and registering it as food. A moment later when he’s properly awake, he turns up his nose a little and looks at Antonio. “Are you okay?”

“Best I can be. You can’t just feel it?”

“Feel what?”

“Me, in the binding?”

“I haven’t- no. I didn’t want it.”

“Teo will teach you how to undo it. Come downstairs? He wants to burn the body.”

“Gee?” Frank looks up at him as Gerard finishes the last swallow. Gerard shakes his head. “I don’t know if I can see that.”

“Lorenzo wrapped him up.”

“Okay. Is- is it really over? This is real?”

Antonio nods grimly. None of them know what this means, none of them are ready for a future they were all too afraid to imagine.

They burn the body out in the back, in a pyre built in a long-drained pool. Lorenzo carries out two bottles of scotch and some glasses and says, “Cheers?” Offering it to the rest of them, standing in a small huddle by the side of the pool.

Matteo holds out a wordless hand and knocks back more than is probably healthy. “Alright. Let’s burn the bastard and really be done.”

Julian lights the Molotov cocktail he’s holding and hurls it at the pyre, unwilling to go light it up close. It catches quickly, and Frank winces at the smell of it, something grisly under the woodsmoke. He reaches for the bottle, and Matteo passes it easily. Frank takes a burning swig and gives it back to
Lorenzo.

Gerard takes Frank’s hand and squeezes it a little. “This still doesn’t feel real.”

Frank nods. “I think I was in shock, when I killed him. It’s like… it feels like I dreamt it.”

Gerard just nods. He still feels like he’s dreaming. Julian plops onto the grass, putting his arms around his knees and staring into the blaze. “What do we do now?”

Antonio shrugs. Lorenzo knocks back another shot and grunts “Live our fuckin’ lives, I guess.”

Antonio nods. “I don’t know what I wanna do.”


“I don’t have a home to go back to anymore, I don’t think.” Matteo says slowly. “Maybe I’ll do Grant’s work. Move abroad, out of Italy. Russia or the US.”

Lorenzo nods. “That’s an idea. I’ve always wanted to live somewhere that’s not this fuckin’ island. Especially now.”

“We could. Suppose as long as he likes it we can do whatever.” Julian adds softly.

Frank looks over. “What do you mean as long as he likes it? He’s dead.”

“I meant you.”

“Why?”

“We’re all bound to you now.”

Frank’s mouth drops open. He can’t believe it’s slipped his mind again, and stumbles over his next words in his haste to get them out, “I’ll undo it. You all, you shouldn’t be bound to me. I just- uh, Gee? Can you tell me how you did it again?”

Gerard blinks and nods. “You’ll need their true names. And the rest is just ‘I release you’ and the intent behind it. You’ll have to sort of, acknowledge them and then release it?”

“I think I can do that. Matteo, do you want to be first? You’ve been bound the longest, right?”

“Yes. Please.” Matteo stands to face Frank and gives him his name. As far as rituals go, it’s short, simple, and informal. But in the light of a man’s pyre, it feels heavy. Significant.

One by one, he releases them and finally, they all sit down on the grass again. Lorenzo raises the bottle for a toast. “To living our new lives.”

Matteo and Gerard quietly say, “Hear, hear.”

They linger in silence for a while, watching the pyre burn down. They’re all a little caught up in their own heads, the doubts and uncertainty of the world they’ve made. When the pyre is just smoldering, Matteo pushes himself up. Five other pairs of bleary eyes look at him.

“Let’s find beds. Frank, Gerard, there’s a guest room near us that’ll suit you two.”

Frank nods thanks, and they all force themselves up and schlep across the slope of the lawn.
In their room, Frank wraps his arms around Gerard, who silently hugs him back.

“I still love you.” Gerard breathes into the silence. “I’m so sorry.”

“You better not be sorry you love me.” Frank mumbles into his shoulder. “Because I love you too.”

“I’m sorry about this.”

“So am I. I’m just glad we’re alive, though.”

“Barely.”

“Enough.” Frank gently wriggles out of the hug and tugs Gerard toward bed, barely kicking off his shoes in the process. They both fall into bed still half-dressed and fall asleep clinging to each other.

The next morning is equally quiet, Matteo and Julian making a quiet decision to start the slow process of moving out of the house. They’ll have to discuss as well if the vampire inheritance laws, or at least the ones they know, mean Frank is in charge of Grant’s crime empire now. Privately, Matteo thinks it probably does, and it’s probably polite to offer the mantle anyway.

None of them bother with breakfast, just espresso, brewed the old-fashioned way on the stove. The few hours of silence gives them all time to retreat into their thoughts, and Gerard is still staggered by the idea that the specter that has haunted him for three centuries is no more. He’d been in the same thought spiral last night, and this morning it’s just beginning to sink in. He’s never seriously envisioned a future where he wouldn’t be looking over his shoulder. It seems almost unreal that he’s even still existing, that he’s here in this house that still feels like Grant’s, and with Frank. Gerard doesn’t know what to do with that, at all.

He has no plans, no higher goals in mind for a life beyond Grant. Teetering on madness, he’d barely been able to conceptualize a future beyond when he’d proposed to Frank, and those fragile constructs had been smashed by reality and now he can barely believe that he’ll be free for the next day, let alone that he may go back to Rhode Island and get married and build a life with another vampire.

So Gerard waits, and resolves to make his decisions as they come, and hope that life can deliver him joy somewhere in its messy span.

Frank is working through the fact that he put a stake in Grant’s heart. In the moment, it hadn’t mattered, all that had mattered was doing it. But now, Frank knows he has committed premeditated murder. That’s a crime no matter how flexible his ethics have been about the forced killings to feed.

Something of that may show on his face, because Lorenzo slides him a second cup of coffee and says “We’ve all got blood on our hands. I think it comes with the vampire territory. At least you can say it wasn’t indiscriminate and it wasn’t for fun.”

Frank nods. “Guess so. Still feels like it’s wrong.”

“I’m a hitman and I think murder is bad. At least the mob’s all between made men. They know what they’re getting into. Nobody should just go out killing other people randomly.”

“I’m not in the mob, though. My only excuse is that it was like self-defense.”
“It was. ‘teo said he was going to kill you. He was mad enough for it.”


Lorenzo continues, “Self-defense against someone who was going to kill you is admissible in court, even. So don’t go on a murder spree, and you’re still a decent person.”

“Thanks.” Frank toasts him.

Matteo looks at Julian, who inclines his head.

“About you not being in the mob, Frank…”

Chapter End Notes

For a while, we entertained ideas of them not quite escaping, Frank folding before he snaps as he does here.. they didn't end nicely. If you want them.. message me on tumblr, and I'll whip you up some custom angst.

But for you all here for the canon of this universe, we're on to the slow reconstruction. It's going to be messy and angsty and delicate and everything you've hopefully come to expect from these two.
Okay dear readers, two notes:
1. This is the last chapter I have written... before now I had a buffer of a few chapters written ahead and I have slowly squandered that. If I miss a week it's because I'm still writing the chapter. Sorry in advance if it happens.
2. Would you guys like the ending of this fic to be happy or angsty? There is far more story after this, but "Part one" as it stands will end soon-ish and it's a question of if I want to cut it before or after one event. So let me know if you have a preference and which you would like to read more.

Frank looks at him, a little startled. "What about it?"

"As far as any of us can tell, when you killed Grant, you inherited by right of conquest all of his things. Which, at the time, included us."

Frank nods.

"Grant was lord over a quite expansive crime ring."

Julian looks at him. "'teo, it's the entire Italian mob, a good 35% of the Russian is under our influence or could be bought if we cared to, and he was about to put about three-quarters of the American mob under our control."

"That is the specifics of it, yes. And Grant was, admittedly, a shadow head, so the day-to-day work fell to Julian and I. Lorenzo is both our guard and an enforcer."

Frank looks stunned.

Gerard frowns. "And Antonio?"

"Grant decided he was not fit to work like we did, so he was mostly directed to be used as an errand boy. And he is the youngest, so, of course until the two of you appeared, he had the duty of bearing Grant’s.. affections."

Frank’s face twists. "Why ‘because he’s the youngest’?"

"Because he long ago tired of me. I’m nearly 150, I have been nearly a century working in the mob alone. Julian is second oldest of us here now, and Lorenzo third. Antonio isn’t even 50. Grant prefers his toys shiny and new.” Matteo’s voice is hard, delivering that truth.

"Were there others before you? You said of us here now."

Matteo nods, and something like grief shows on his face. "Three others. One vanished, the second was killed by another vampire while working, and Harry was after me. Grant ordered me to bring him a knife, up to his room, and when I did, he hauled the boy out of bed and killed him. I was so afraid I would be next, or Julian would meet the same fate he did.”
Frank covers his mouth. “Oh my god.”

Matteo stares at his hands on the table. “He was the worst kind of man, and I am only glad that he is twice dead, now.”

Gerard nods. “I remember two vanishing while I was with him, the first time. I never knew them, but I was in his bed then.”

Matteo gives him a grim look. “I can’t believe you got away. Did he not bind you, then?”

“Oh, I was bound. But the world was smaller. I just ran. And I wouldn’t doubt he’s gotten better at control. It breaks over distance.”

“Really?” Matteo looks surprised.

“But you have to get far enough before they call you back. So you can fight it.”

“I doubt any of us could have gotten that far. He was overwhelming. Heavy.”

Frank can’t help being curious. He turns to Gerard to say, “It wasn’t that heavy when you bound me.” Then looks at Matteo. “Was it heavy when I killed Grant and you guys were bound to me?”

“No. You weren’t pushing, I don't think. It didn’t feel like you had a lot of conscious control. When you summoned all of us, it was not an articulated order. More of a compelling plea. I think, had any of us truly wanted to, we could have ignored you.”

“But you wanted to know what the hell just happened?”

“Yes. Very much so. Grant had never felt like that. Though his last sort of orders were strange.”

“His last words were strange too.”

Matteo looks up. “What were they?”

Frank shrugs. “Something about ‘sire of your sire’ which I suppose is just like, him not being able to believe I’d just killed him. And a name? Like, Southland? Something like that.”

“Sutherland?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“That was the last coherent thing he pushed at us. Asked us to avenge him, by right of Sutherland.”

“Who’s Sutherland, then?”

“I have no earthly idea.”

“Well, neither do I.”

“If we find mention of that name, we’ll pass it on. Maybe he had family.”

“Do you think his family would care? Maybe they’re all humans and it’s like, his great-great-great-granddaughter is the only one alive.”

“I don’t know. I heard whispers, once, of vampire clans. I asked Grant about it and got beat to hell and told they were all disloyal degenerates who turned their back on vampires who didn’t join their
culs. I wasn’t moved to ask again.” Matteo shrugs.

“I don’t blame you.”

“Thank you. But, given that we don’t know who Sutherland is, we have you.”

Frank jolts and holds his hands up a little. “I don’t know how to be a mobster. And I’m, well, I kind of have a job that’s expecting me to come back in the fall.”

“Do you not want to be involved at all?”

Julian speaks up for the first time in several minutes. “That is an option, by the way. I’d like to arrange this so we can all live comfortably. I’ve had access to Grant’s accounts for years, I know it’s possible. Even if you weren’t interested in involvement, I could set you both up with checking accounts set to be paid into by the interest on bond funds and investments. It’s what I intend to do for Antonio.”

Frank nods. “That’d be nice. Gee and I get along fine, but it’d make paying for a wedding easier, and it’d be nice to pay my Mom’s bills.”

Julian nods with a small smile. “We’ll have to pin down the details and such over the next few days, weeks, things like that. Get rid of this fucking house.”

“Do you wanna go back home?” Frank sets down his coffee. “I know that like, Grant’s affairs need work and shit, but I can’t help but feel a little responsible for you guys. I know I want to go back home with Gee, but what do you guys want?”

“I will go back to Nigeria someday. But I-“ Matteo pauses. “If my family is there, they are not the family I was stolen from. Seeing that may hurt more. Maybe, in a few months or a year I will take a trip. But I have been in Italy for most of my life. I am fine remaining or going to the US.”

Lorenzo takes a thoughtful sip of his coffee and says, “I want to see the US. And if ‘teo is going to go run the US takeover, I should go with. Which is perfect for me.”

Julian looks at Antonio.

Antonio sighs. “Rome? Jay, you could come with. I know there’s a lot of your people in Sicily, but Rome is lovely, and it’s close.”

Julian nods. “Rome would be wonderful. My English isn’t as good as yours anyway,” he indicates Matteo and Lorenzo, “And then maybe this October I could finally do my Hajj, now that I’m not bound and really, truly istita’ah.”

Gerard looks lost for a second, then says, “Your pilgrimage to Mecca?”

Julian nods. “Born and raised in Palestine and never did it then. Stupid, right?”

Frank shrugs. “Guess you figured you’d be able to anytime. Can’t really blame you for that.”

Julian shrugs. “This year, though. Finally.”

Matteo smiles at him, and Antonio looks happier as well, both glad that one of their number has hopeful plans for the future.

Frank smiles at them all and finishes his coffee, taking Gerard’s hand.
They repack their suitcases and do laundry at Grant’s house the rest of the morning, still wary of wandering the house alone and ending up someplace that brings up bad memories. Gerard knows nightmares are imminent, and he’s just waiting to see how bad they’ll be.

Around noon, Frank finds the ring they’d hidden from Grant in the toe of one of Gerard’s socks and slips it back on with a smile. Gerard looks over when Frank waves it at him.

“Oh. You found it?”

“In your sock, right where we put it. Shit, I don’t think I ever really looked at it in good light. This is beautiful, Gee. I love it. And I love what it means. And I need to get you a ring. I want you to have an engagement and a wedding band as well.”

“You don’t need to.”

“But would you wear one?”

If Frank wanted him to, Gerard might just wear anything. And Gerard probably would have sort of wanted a ring anyway. He just nods.

Frank looks pleased. “Good. I think I know what I want to get you. I just gotta get one of the guys to tell me where I can buy a ring here. Because our flights out aren’t for another 4 days, and we might as well stay and help with the cleanup here.”

Gerard nods, even though he really really wants to get out and never see the inside of this place again. He can manage another four days, if he just reminds himself that Frank is here and Grant is dead.

Frank seems to understand, though, because he adds softly, “I won’t be sorry to leave either. And if you wanna go stay in town, we could.”

“No point. We don’t need to. What, three days? I’ll live.”

“But will you be happy?”

“Happy enough. I’m here, with you.”

“Okay.” Frank kisses his cheek. “I’m gonna go ask Antonio about getting into town. I’ve got a ring to put on you.”

Gerard offers him a small smile.

Frank ends up going into town alone, and Antonio shows Gerard a hallway full of paintings, bought not for love of art, but for status years and decades ago. Antonio has a feeling Gerard will be able to appreciate them for art, though.

It’s a good distraction, and it works. Some are museum quality, and probably ought to be donated, for a good cause. Some are just old paintings, not really worth much. Gerard still sorts out his favorites, unable to help from adding ones that would help him teach his students, and equally unable to stop telling Antonio about teaching, and about his students. Antonio smiles and thinks quietly, that if he can ever trust being around that many people again, he’d like to teach.
Down in town, Frank finds a jeweler and buys a simple gold band, getting the man to engrave the inside with a simple phrase, “Per Sempre Significa,” looping all the way around the band to read as “Per sempre significa per sempre.” or “forever means forever.”

He comes back up to the house with a victorious smile and bursts through the side door by the carriage house-come-garage. “Gee? Gerard, where are you! I have a ring!”

The shout brings Lorenzo out of his office, not sure anyone has ever voluntarily shouted in this house, ever. By the time Frank finds Gerard and Antonio, he’s being trailed at a small distance by Matteo, Lorenzo and Julian.

Frank drops to one knee next to Gerard, already sitting on the floor, and says, “Gerard, will you marry me?”

Gerard cracks a wide smile. “I asked you first, didn’t I? Yes, I’ll follow through.”

Frank beams and slips the ring on his finger. “I’m holding you to that.”

Gerard loops an arm around his waist and says, “Let me show you these paintings.”

Frank settles in.

Matteo smiles at them both, and silently gestures Antonio away to give them some space. The four of them have begun packing up Grant’s things, going through his personal effects for the first time and packing their own things to move away.

Matteo, the eldest and thus the highest in Grant’s chain of command, is in Grant’s old office, going through his desk drawers. There’s a couple of things he wants, awful as that concept is. But Matteo has been in the industry, playing wealthy and untouchable, now most of his life. He knows the value of Smythson planners, Montblanc pens and Armani suits, even if he personally thinks some are rather tasteless.

He’s not just packing for himself and Julian, though. Even though Frank has gently turned down the mob, Matteo somehow doubts that’ll last, and even if it somehow does, eventually he’ll need to be able to defend himself. With that decision made, he packs attaches of extra stationary, relevant files, and small arms for all of them. Julian’s, Lorenzo’s and his own are easy. Antonio’s is just diaries and pens and a knife, no gun. Gerard and Frank are harder. Matteo doesn’t know if they’ll be able to cope with the inherent violence of being one of Grant’s vampires. Matteo suspects Gerard will adapt faster.

He sits back on his heels for a moment, weighing a knife in one hand and a snub-nosed .22 in the other, wondering which Frank would prefer. Lorenzo comes around the corner, idly flipping a small battle axe in his hand, clearly pleased with the balance of it.

“You need an extra hand? I moved all our favorites into the van.”

“Which do you think the kid will prefer?”

Lorenzo shrugs. “Give ‘im both. Never hurts. He can figure out a favorite in the next twenty years.
Only matters he’s competent with both.”

“Guess so.” Matteo sets them both in the case. “You worried about this?”

“I wasn’t. It didn’t look like you were, so I figured it was fine.”

“Really?”

“I’ve always just looked to see if you were freaking out before I did.” Lorenzo walks into the room, setting the axe on the table and sitting on the floor next to Matteo to lean on him. “Talk to me?”

“What if we can’t do this? What if Frank turns out like Grant?”

“Well, I think we can do this. We’ve done it before, pretty much. And now we don’t have to scrape and pander to Grant. And if Frank goes off the rails, Gerard’ll be our early warning. I think we can successfully go to ground and take him out if we need to.”

“Are we going to get in trouble for letting him defer leadership? The binding did transfer. We should be his.”

“Who’s gonna police us? I only know you guys, and Grant taught us to avoid clans all the same.”

“Fair enough. Guess I’m in charge of the two of us.”

“Works for me. I’ll follow you.”

Matteo slings an arm around him. “All the way to America, hmm?”

Lorenzo leans into the half-hug. “It’ll be off this island for once. All the better for a fresh start. Helps that your English is like, perfect.”

“Yours is fine.”

“More accented.”

“They’ll understand you.”

Lorenzo snorts, nodding a little. “I’ll just brood in the corner, you know? Be hulking and foreign.”

Matteo laughs, a little rusty. “Or that.”

Lorenzo smiles, more open than it ever was with Grant alive.

—

Downstairs, Julian pulls up another hard drive, taking a piece of tape and labeling it. Back in the 1930’s, pre-Grant, he had been studying document preservation and curation, trying to put together history after the first war, and some habits die hard. He’s stellar at organizing and making sense of data. Antonio is helping, scanning documents, then shredding them. They’ll burn them later, but it’s much easier to carry out a box of hard-drives than it is to move a library full of records and papers. This drive will be copied and sent with Matteo and Lorenzo, slowly filling with contacts and personnel files. Julian watches another .pdf page load and sync and sighs, cracking his back.
“We really ought to digitize this, but I’m not in the mood. And this is harder to sweep, data-wise.”

Antonio flips the tray open, places the next page, and sighs. “This’d be faster if we had one of those office ones where you can lay down the whole file and it runs it through automatically.”

“Those exist?”

Antonio nods. “Doubt it’s worth getting for this, though.”

“I might want one just to play with.”

“You’re so weird.” Antonio shakes his head, grinning at Julian.

Julian shrugs. “Guess it wouldn’t work for bound pages, though. Damn. Also, been meaning to ask. Where in Rome do we want to move?”

“I don’t have a neighborhood in particular. But I picked Rome because it’ll be like home, and it’s a huge city, so we’ll be totally anonymous. But not so city I couldn’t get a dog.”

“You’re gonna get a dog?”

Antonio shrugs, “I had one when I was a kid. And yeah. I love dogs.”

“Weird how we know so much about each other but that’s news to me.”

“Dogs were never relevant. It’s okay, it’s like, the smallest bombshell I could drop on you.”

“That’s probably true. What kind of dog?”

“No clue. Big one.”

Julian laughs. “Okay. Big one. That’ll be fun.”

“I’ll train him well, promise.”

“Even better.”

Antonio smiles. “Oh, also. Is it okay with you if I don’t work for a while? I might, I dunno. Take classes online or something, but I don’t think I’m ready for a job.”

Julian frowns a little. “Take all the time you need. We don’t worry for money, and we won’t be without income. We can handle rent in Rome in a nice place, and a dog or few.”

“Rent not buy?”

“Matteo and I decided on rent not buy. Not yet. We’ll see where work takes me, and then if you want to go elsewhere.”

Julian nods. Planning ahead like that is still a new and slightly frightening world. The copier whirrs and startles them both out of their brief silence. Julian turns to turn it off. “How about we go see what the boys upstairs are up to?”

“’kay.” Antonio flips the lights and follows him up.

Lorenzo meets him in the hall. “’teo sent me to find you. Wanted to ask if last night’s small party should be a two-night affair.”
“Get drunk off priceless Scotch whiskey?” Antonio nods. “Count me in.”

Julian shrugs as well. “As long as we can get glasses tonight, yes.”

“Sure, prude.” Lorenzo grins and leads the group to the large parlor, where Matteo is perusing bottles.

“'teo, just grab one, we couldn’t tell the difference last night anyway.”

“Hush, hush, I wanted to see if he had the 62-year-old Macallen Lalique.”

“How much does it go for?”

“26,000 Euro.”

“'e's got the Macallen Select Reserve? That it?”

“No, that’s the 13,000 Euro bottling.”

“Oh. Nevermind.” Julian sets down the bottle. “I forgot you only drink single-malt Scotch worth over twenty thousand euro.”

Matteo turns with a scandalized look, and Julian raises one eyebrow.

Matteo declares, “I drink my dead master’s whiskey from most expensive to least to best enjoy and deplete his wealth. Now set down that 13 thousand euro swill and help me find a Glenfiddich 50 or Glenfarclas 60-year old thing.”

Julian laughs at him. “Can’t argue with logic that sound,” and starts looking, while Lorenzo and Antonio team up to bicker amicably with Frank about movie choices in the background. Gerard abstains from the argument, claiming Frank’s taste is categorically awful, but he can’t side against his fiancé.

Somewhere around two they all fall asleep on each other, Gerard wrapped over Frank, Frank’s head in Lorenzo’s lap, Lorenzo’s head on Matteo’s shoulder, Matteo himself collapsed against the arm of the couch and Julian and Antonio spooning on the loveseat. Staggering back into wakefulness is far worse.

Frank and Antonio both nearly throw up, Frank sitting up and instantly looking very nauseous, mouth very firmly closed, and Antonio staggering for the bathroom just in case. Gerard refuses to move. Julian drags a blanket over himself in the absence of Antonio’s warmth. Matteo and Lorenzo barely move, Matteo making only the vaguest of sounds to indicate he’s awake when Frank finally whispers “'teo?”

“You got ibuprofen?”

“Mhmm.” Matteo gathers himself for real words. “Kitchen, first aid on the left, upper shelf.”

“Fuck, that’s far.”

“Mhmm.”
Frank doesn’t move for about another ten minutes. By then Matteo has cracked an eye to see if he looks like he’s going to. Eventually, Frank just sinks back down to curl up with Gerard and sleep more of it off.

—

They spend the late morning and afternoon staggering around, Julian pulling Frank aside for a crash course on Grant’s money while Lorenzo takes Gerard to see if he can shoot.

Gerard can shoot, and is a dead shot if he puts his mind to it. On targets, it’s easy. He makes it clear to Lorenzo that shooting at a person would not be. Lorenzo just puts his hands up and accepts it, only insisting that he feels more comfortable knowing Gerard knows how to if he’s moved to at least. Best he knows his way around a gun, either way.

They switch not long after, Julian having run through a rough budget Frank sketched out and briefing him on the cashflow and structure Julian would give him access to.

When they switch, Gerard proves his age and competence, able to define his own accounts quickly and requiring far less explanation and information on the ways the finance is structured. When Julian inquires, he chalks both up to his time with Grant, long before, and his time in the American mob.

Julian nods. “Makes sense. Sometimes I forget you’re much older than me, and then you remind me by already knowing things like this.”

Gerard looks at his hands. “Sometimes I wish I hadn’t lived this long.”

“I’m a quarter of your age and sometimes I wish the same thing.” Julian reaches out and lays a hand over Gerard’s. “We just keep going, I guess. You’ve got Frank, and you’ve got us as well. We’re all gonna have each other.”

Gerard turns his hand over to clasp Julian’s. “Thank you. Thank you for everything you’ve done for us here.”

“Thank you for being the catalyst to ending Grant’s reign. We owe you more than we could probably ever repay.”

“That was all Frank.”

Julian shakes his head. “He was here for you. It was to get back to you he killed Grant.”

“I almost wish he hadn’t. I don’t know how to be loved like that.”

“Does anybody? But you love him back as best as you can, I suppose. And hope. Pray? Are you a praying sort?”

Gerard considers that for a moment. “Was. Sort of still am?”

“Then, sure, pray a little. I’m sure it’ll turn out well, regardless.”

“Thank you.”

“Thank you.” Julian squeezes once more and then lightens the mood by gently pulling back and saying, “Shall we head downstairs and see if your husband-to-be has managed to control pistol recoil yet?”

Gerard shakes his head. “Probably hasn’t yet, but might as well.”
Gerard is right about that, and Frank is released by Lorenzo an hour later, not much better and both hands stinging a fair bit.

Gerard just shrugs and says “You’ll get better. Lorenzo is a good teacher.”

“I didn’t expect it to be that hard.”

“Rifles are easier.”

“Good, because otherwise I’m avoiding them at all costs.”

As it gets dark, Antonio tugs Gerard toward the garage. “Come pray with me? I haven’t had a chance to really be in a church in a while.” Gerard acquiesces and lets Antonio drive them down into town.

As Gerard told Julian earlier, he doesn’t pray anymore, but he watches Antonio light a candle and sits with him, soaking in the quiet peace while Antonio’s lips move silently. It’s a little bit of a balm, even a temporary one.

The priest comes to gently start to move them along as it gets late, and recognizes Antonio from around town, and Gerard from with the American schoolchildren. He’s a little surprised to see Antonio lingering, as he’s usually been unable to do more than duck in then hurry out. Antonio tells him that the man who made him hurry has moved on, and Gerard knew him from long ago. It’s a deft lie, clearly implicating that he and Gerard’s lives have shifted, but avoiding any specifics of Grant’s nature or death.

The priest accepts it at face value and offers them both a blessing of fortitude, resilience, hope and God’s love as they go forward and Gerard murmurs, “Amen.” with the other two, truly meaning it for the first time in years. Antonio looks at peace for the first time Gerard has ever seen, then his brow clouds.

“Gerard, can I ask you a question?”

“Sure?”

“How do you not kill somebody when you hunt? Grant said you didn’t, and Frank didn’t at first until Grant made him either. How do you know when to stop?”

“Oh.” Gerard blinks. “You listen? You can kind of tell when the pressure starts to drop, it’s time to pull back. I fed from Frank for a while, and he was always fine when he woke up when I stuck to that. And he’s pretty small.”

Antonio nods. “Can you come with me? I don’t wanna have to kill people all the time, not anymore.”

“Yeah. That’s good. I can come if you need.”

“Will you just hang close?”

“I can probably manage that.”

Antonio, it turns out, has a very different hunting style than the one Gerard taught Frank, and it’s a little jarring to witness Antonio loiter, invisible, in a doorway, then grab the next man to walk
through it and pull them down in a single, swift motion. It’s clear he’s more than deadly, and Gerard wincses when Antonio’s fangs sink in. It’s not what really could be called gentle. But Antonio doesn’t kill the man, and that, at least, is a success.

Antonio leaves the man and comes back to Gerard, beaming. “I did it!”

“Yeah, you did.”

“Thank you so much. I’m gonna tell the others about this too, it’ll be so much better, we’ll just have to feed more.”

“How often do you eat?”

“Well, I’m only like, thirty-five. So about once every five-ish days?”

“That often?” Gerard is shocked.

Antonio shoots him a confused look. “That’s how often I need to. ‘teo’s oldest, so he goes like once every week and a half, Jay goes about every week, and Lorenzo goes with me, but sometimes can skip. Grant said you like, starved yourself. How often do you eat?”

“About once every two weeks.”

“You’re nearly 400, though, right? That should be okay, though.” His brow furrows. “Wait, was Frank only eating with you too?”

“Yes.”

“Oh. Oh, shit, yeah. No wonder Grant was mad. That’s not enough.”

Gerard sighs. “He never complained about it. And he seemed fine. Trust me, Grant gave me hell for not making him kill people every other day too.” He turns away, walking up the street.

Antonio takes a long stride to catch him. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it like that. I know as well as you that Grant shouldn’t have done that the way he did. But didn’t Grant turn you? He would have fed you that much.”

“You know the blood-high?”

“‘course.”

“I didn’t want him to be out of control like that.”

“Oh.” Antonio goes quiet.

Gerard sighs, a little upset with how upset Antonio’s careless comment has made him. “It’s okay, you didn’t mean it like that. I overreacted. And I guess Frank will just eat when he wants to now. I haven’t talked to him about it.”

Antonio nods. “Either way, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have just said that. But I can’t see Frank like, wanting to kill people to eat, so I think he’ll be okay.”

“I couldn’t see him killing people period, and then Grant said he did.”

“Grant made him. He always stopped halfway and wanted to stop there, but Grant always made him. I had to watch, I was there.”
Gerard slumps a little. “Well, I guess that’s good.”

“How can I not be?”

Antonio shrugs. “I don’t think anybody who wasn’t as fucked up as him could have enjoyed Grant. You know him better than I do, though.”

“Yeah. I worry, that’s all.”

“Fair.”

They head home not long after, and it’s another day of puttering around before Frank and Gerard are getting on the bus back to Palermo and their flights home. It’s remarkable how much has changed, and how little.

—

By the time they land, Frank wants to be at home asleep so badly he has to really focus to give the cabbie the right fare at their doorstep. Gerard dead stops as soon as they’re both inside, and Frank crashes into Gerard’s back with a muffled grunt.

“I never thought I’d get to come home to here again. Especially not with you.” Gerard sounds a little bit choked up, and Frank can sympathize. It’s starting to feel like they’re still really alive, awful fever dream of the last two weeks fading.

“We made it.” Frank edges around Gerard. “Can I make it all the way to bed, though?”

“Oh, yeah.” Gerard scoots out of the hallway and gently takes Frank’s suitcase from him. Frank gives him a smile and continues his determined stumble toward bed. Frank has a really fantastic ability to apparently not need sleep while he’s under stress, but it always catches up to him, and he’s been under a lot of stress. He’s practically asleep when he hits the bed, kicking his shoes off and curling around Gerard’s pillow.

Gerard watches, a little concerned, and goes to start putting their things away. They’d checked Frank’s bag, now a little overstuffed with a few bottles of Grant’s liquor and a few of Julian’s hard drives of paperwork and files. Those Gerard props by Frank’s school laptop and puts the bottles in the kitchen. The clothes he piles with his own in the laundry to deal with tomorrow.

He can’t resist peering in at Frank, just to make sure he’s really there. He is, totally unmoved from where he’d hit the bed and sound asleep. Gerard smiles and plugs both their phones in, grimacing at his own. It might be nice to get a new one, just to get away from the memories this one has now.

Frank’s beeps with a text from Jamia.

— yo u guys are due back today, rite?let me kno if ur home safe or need a ride or w/e—

Gerard unlocks it to reply —This is gerard. We just got in, Frank fell asleep immediately.— —See you sometime next week?—

—happy hr on for thursday?!i wanna here all about italy!—

— Yeah, the students loved it! Frank told you I proposed?—

—YES!!i screamed, ngl!!so happy for u guys—
Gerard sets the phone on the nightstand and crawls into bed, nudging Frank over to his usual side of the bed and curling up. Frank makes a half-aware sound at him and nuzzles close. They both sleep late the next morning, both too exhausted for nightmares that night.

They hold the quiet truce of not discussing what’s happened to them for two more days, cleaning the house, doing their laundry, putting away school supplies that never made it out of the living room. They don’t speak to each other much, just quietly cooperative. By nights, they alternate sleep, one keeping watch for nightmares at a time. Both of them find themselves shaken awake more than a few times, and a few midnight tears are shed. By the third morning, Frank faces a to-do list with only calling his mother to really talk beyond a —home safe, will call, love you— text and seeing what time they’ll be meeting Jamia on Thursday. He can’t really put off talking to Gerard about Grant’s lies and teachings anymore.

Gerard is quietly sinking into the new normal of silence and almost-avoidance, haunted and still shattered by Italy. He’s sipping his coffee standing over the desk in the spare room, ceding the kitchen to Frank.

He hears movement in the hall, and Frank taps the outside of his foot against the baseboard twice in lieu of a knock. “Am I interrupting?”

“No.” Gerard doesn’t really turn, but shifts his shoulders to show he’s listening.

“Can we talk?”

“Talk-talk? Or have a conversation?”

“I mean, right now I’m asking to talk-talk, but conversation never hurts. It’s been a little too quiet in here.”

“Yeah. Go on, though.”

Frank circles Gerard to sit on the desk, facing him. His bare heels knock against the drawer, and he takes a fortifying sip of coffee before saying “We need to look into therapy. And figure out where we stand with each other.”

Gerard’s throat goes dry. “I thought you still wanted to get married?”

“I do. But do you think we’re at a place where we can? I dunno about you but Grant spent a lot of time putting little shims in my trust and then knocking them in deeper bit by bit. And I know he lied, but I don’t know to what extent and exactly what about. So I have questions about vampirism. I’d like to be able to trust you, but you and Grant telling me opposite things and him telling me you didn’t tell me because you wanted to hurt me...” Frank trails off. “As much as I’d like to point-blank discredit that, I can’t. Not about everything, anyway.”

Gerard nods. He knew this was coming, more or less. “Where do you want to start?”

“You never planned to turn me, did you?”

“No.”

“Did you plan to start drinking my blood and keep doing that?”
“No. I told your mother the same. It was,” Gerard grimaces at himself, “an accident? Perhaps, if I really truly didn't want you I could have resisted when you sliced your hand. But even then I liked you, and my control broke.”

“Didn’t want me?”

“Frank.” Gerard sounds pleading.

Frank matches the tone. “Gerard. It’s one thing to be liked as a person and another to be wanted as a body. Please?”

“It was the first, I liked you. But I couldn’t ignore my instincts. God, back before any of it, I had thought of you when I hunted, but it was just a fantasy. I had no intention of acting on it. Until I did.”

Maybe Frank had been an idiot, and when Gerard had revealed himself as a vampire the first time, Frank should have gone with option A or B and kept himself out of this mess. “I trusted you to look out for me.”

“I know. I’m sorry I wasn’t worthy of that trust.”

Frank sighs, staring past Gerard out into the hall. “Problem is I still love you. I can still see us spending our lives together, because we work well together. But I don’t know what to think of how we got here anymore.”

Gerard takes a deep breath. “You can break off the engagement if you want.”

Frank makes a hurt, angry sound. “I don’t want, that’s the thing. I want to trust you. Can we start here and never do that shit to each other again, and by to each other I really mean you to me?”

Gerard stares at Frank. “You would- is this a second chance?”

“Yes. Can we make that promise to each other and start there?”

“Yes. It’s probably more than I deserve, even.”

Frank shrugs and shuts down Gerard’s self-deprecation. “You deserve to be able to move on from Grant. And I deserve the same. And Jamia deserves to be asked to be my maid of honor and probably also to be told the truth.”

Gerard nods to all of that. “How do you think she’ll take it?”

“I think I’m going to start by pouring her a drink and hoping she doesn’t pitch the glass at me.”

——

That is exactly how they start, Frank inviting her in and pouring her a few fingers of Grant’s scotch. She accepts the drink with a raised eyebrow, and Frank plops into the seat across the table from her. “Drink that, I’ve got some shit to tell you.”

She hesitates, takes a sip and does a double take at the glass. “This is good, what is this?”

Frank slides the bottle toward her to look. She does, then looks up, shocked. “This is like, ten grand whiskey. This is not you, what the hell is up?”

Frank nods, grimaces to himself and says “Please just finish the drink before I start telling you so when you throw the glass at me you don’t have to feel bad about throwing three hundred dollars of
whiskey with it?”

Jamia obligingly knocks it back, feeling a little blasphemous. She thunks the glass down and sits. “What’s up?”

“You remember how back before Gee and I were dating I told you the kids thought he was a vampire?”

“Uh-huh.”

“They were uh, they were right. He is. He’s 387, and he’s uh, been a vampire since he was 28.” Jamia stares at him. “Are you fucking me right now? Where is he?”

“He’s in the back bedroom. I think he was painting, but he’s probably just gnawing his fingernails off and trying to eavesdrop without eavesdropping.”

“Why? Why are you telling me this and not him, and where does this-“ she indicates the whiskey-“come into it?”

“Well, I’m telling you because he turned me. I’ve been a vampire since, well, since McCracken. So fall of 2012.”

“Over a year and a half ago.” Jamia says it slowly.

Frank nods, apprehensive.

“You’re telling me you’re a goddamn fictional creature and oh, by the way, this didn’t happen last week, it’s been a goddamn year and a half and you only see fit to include me on the joke now…” Frank flinches as her voice rises. “It’s not a joke. Trust me, it’s pretty damn serious.”

“I don’t think I quite believe you.”

Frank pulls back his lips in a mockery of a smile and drops his fangs. It’s Jamia’s turn to flinch. Frank closes his lips, but doesn’t retract his fangs and says “Do you still think it’s a joke?”

“God, goddamn. Frank. What the fuck? I thought we were friends?”

“We are. I didn’t tell anybody.” The ‘it wasn’t just you’ goes unspoken.

“Does your Mom know?”

Frank hesitates, and that’s all the answer Jamia needs to shoot him a sardonic smile and reach to pour herself another serving of whiskey. “So you just didn’t tell me. Thanks. Love being lied to.”

“Jai- I didn’t know how to tell you. How do you even begin to explain that?”

“I dunno. How’d you tell you Mom?”

“Gee knew my grandfather. There’s a picture of them together in one of her photobooks. She recognized him and asked. Grandpa told her about the vampire he knew, and she put it together.”

“You should have told me.”

“Yeah. I should have. I just didn’t- I didn’t know how to start.”
“What changed? You getting engaged?”
Frank shakes his head. “No. Grant did.”

“Who’s Grant?”

“Bastard who turned Gerard.” Frank pours himself whiskey and shakes off a haunted look, but too slowly for Jamia to miss it.

“Frank…”
Frank nods. “We got kidnapped. Bob, but, orders of magnitude worse. A thousand years old, impossibly powerful.”

“How are you here?”

“I killed him. It- it was murder. But Gee was there too, and he had four other vampires bound to obey his orders, I had to try.”

Jamia takes a deep drink. “You’re a vampire. You’re engaged to a vampire who’s over three centuries your senior, and you’ve murdered another. Is- was this his?” The whiskey finally makes sense.

Frank nods. “Matteo wanted it gone. Better than pouring it down the drain. If you want it, you can take it. Gee and I don’t drink much.”

“Why not? I noticed you going light on happy hours, but I thought we were just getting old.”

“Not much blood in us vampires. I get drunk really fast.” Frank stares into his glass, lips twisted a bit.

“Can’t really have two beers, even.”

That, as much as anything else, is what makes this real. Frank isn’t human, has lied, and is not very much like himself, it seems. “Frank.”

He looks up. He deserves her anger, has trampled their trust and knows it, and is just hoping she’ll let him have the chance to rebuild it.

“I don’t appreciate being lied to like this. I didn’t think that you would do this to your friends, to me. Keep your dead man’s whiskey. I think- I think I’ll text you for our next happy hour.” Something in her tone and phrasing says it won’t be next week.

Frank takes it. He knew he would have to. “Okay.” He stands, swallowing the lump in his throat and follows her to the door, “For what it’s worth, I’m sorry.”

She pauses at the door and says, “It means something that you know you should be.” And she’s never really been able to resist the dejected slump of his shoulders, because she drags him into a fierce hug. Frank clings. “I’ll be in touch, okay? I’m not- I don’t hate you. I just need time with this.”

“Thank you. Thank you for- everything. Always. I’ll try to be worth your trust again.”
She shoots him a wry smile. “Goodnight, Frankie.”

“night, Jai.”

Frank closes the door behind her and slumps against it. Gerard appears out of the shadows of the hall and wraps Frank up in his arms. Frank needs this hug just as badly, because he takes a ragged breath.
and hides his face in Gerard’s neck.

—

Lying over the phone is much easier, and they just pretend that nothing unusual happened in Italy. Frank hopes by the time they visit again over winter, the lie will be practiced enough to be believable.

—

That night, Frank crawls into bed and asks, “When do you need to hunt again?”

Gerard shrugs. “Soon. The bagged blood Antonio had helped me. What about you?”

“Probably should in the next day or so. ’s been a week.”

“Are you going to go weekly, now?”

“Weekly, week and half. Dunno. Whatever I feel like.”

Gerard nods.

Frank curls against him and shrugs. “If I can manage to hunt again. Grant might have ruined feeding for me. You might have to coax me outta the car again.”

Gerard manages a smile. “I think you’ll manage.”

Frank makes a noncommittal sound and curls up next to him. “G’night, Gee.”

“Sleep well.”

“You too.” Frank closes his eyes.

Gerard wakes up cold with sweat hours later, afterimages of his nightmare still lingering. Frank, suited like Grant and the worst of the mob, mouth and face and fangs all glistening wet with blood. If Gerard didn’t remember how the other bodies in the room looked- ripped open and discarded to the floor, some still bloody- he might be able to stay in bed. But he can, and all too well, Frank’s sleeping face somehow still holding the shadows of the version from Gerard’s nightmare.

Gerard gets up, determinedly filling a glass at the sink and not thinking about how he’s running away from the man he’s asked to marry him. Gerard drinks the whole glass very firmly not thinking about it and then heads back to bed, damming himself for the hesitation in his step outside the door.

Alone in the bed, Frank twists, hunching in a tiny bit more, and Gerard’s fear breaks. Frank is not Grant, will never be, and is just as scarred by his legacy. Gerard gets back in bed and curls around Frank, hushing him. Frank quiets.
Hello Hello! I’m still on time! Fuck yeah!
This chapter and the next have a bunch of tertiary characters that we wont see again and who are referred to by both their first and last names, so I’m gonna just list them for you, and I’ll do the same next chapter as needed.

In rough order of appearance
Dr. Pete Wentz- therapist
Dr. Bebe Rexha- therapist
Ms. Katie Zhao- Chinese teacher at Earheart w/ Frank and Gerard. She and Frank are buddies because they’re both the only teachers of their respective languages
Mr. Justin Borucki- Photo teacher at Earheart with Frank and Gerard. He and Gerard are buddies because they work across the hall from each other and together are the Art Department
and as a refresher, Mr. Joe Trohman is Earheart’s principal.

They move through the last half of the summer gingerly. Work is looming again, and Gerard feels uniquely underqualified this year. Three weeks before school is to start, a huge package shows up at their door, plastered with fragile stickers and imported from Italy. Confused, Gerard enlists Frank to help him slice the box apart and finds a stack of paintings, most still in their frames.

Julian’s email shows up about an hour later, apologizing for not sending warning, but he had forgotten until he got the delivery notification. It’s all the paintings Gerard had set aside in Grant’s house, and Julian says he wasn’t sure if Gerard had really wanted them, but that he might as well send them along. The house was sold with about half its furniture intact, and has fetched a good price for being so far from a major city.

Gerard shrugs. They might as well hang onto them. It’ll make his classroom more interesting, for one. Frank claims a landscape of Northern Italy for his room with a grin. Gerard just rolls his eyes. It’s some sort of an equilibrium, even if it’s not the same as before.

The things that are the same are the easiest to catalogue. They spend their nights curled up together on the couch, or side by side at the table. They talk to each other in Italian for practice and some small memory of home. They go to the Tuesday matinee films, both for the cheap tickets and the two hour escape into someone else’s head. It’s a normal, adult, summer routine that fits well, both of them used to the flow of months.

The changes are harder to fully catalogue.
They’ve both started therapy, Monday afternoons, two therapists, same practice. Gerard tries Dr. Hurley for two weeks and they both agree to have him try with Dr. Wentz. Dr. Wentz puts Gerard on anti-depressants two weeks later and sticks around. Frank goes to Dr. Rexha, across the hall, and gets along well with her from the start.

Separately, they’re asked if they’ve considered couples therapy, and both shrug. “We get along fine, always have.” “This is for me to get over my own issues while he does the same, then we’re good to meet in the middle for each other.”

Both doctors let this lie with the caveat that they can discuss Frank and Gerard with their respective coworkers. This is unconventional but agreed to by all parties.

Therapy overall is, in a word, good. Frank tends to over analyze his own reactions, Gerard tends to disconnect from his experiences, but they both muddle through with something approaching honesty.

Frank takes a walk one lovely evening, calling his Mom as he leaves the house, Gerard drawing in the office. They catch up for a while as Frank laps the block and starts wandering towards a strip mall about a mile away.

She wasn’t happy when Frank had dropped the small bombshell that hey, we’re not trying to rush into a wedding, it’s probably going to be a year or two. That had sparked a line of questioning only stopped by Frank rolling his eyes and saying, “We’ve only been together for two years, really. Being engaged for two more isn’t even a long engagement.”

Linda lets him have it and reminds him that a wedding takes a year to plan, anyway, so he better not forget about it and put it off.

Privately, she didn’t totally believe that nothing happened in Italy. But she knows her son, and she knows these things will come to light eventually, so right now, she doesn’t push.

Frank comes back from the strip mall with a pack of cigarettes in his pocket and his phone half-dead with how long he’d let his Mom talk about a wedding. He hasn’t really accidentally picked up smoking again, but the itch is back, and hey, lung cancer can’t kill him anymore.

As soon as he’s inside, Gerard wanders out, suddenly craving one for himself. Frank offers, but Gerard turns him down and settles for a long hug, nose suspiciously close to Frank’s shirt. Frank just laughs at him. “Next time just ask, you can loiter with me.”

Gerard snorts. “That obvious?”

“Gee, you’ve got your nose in my shirt. Little bit.”

Frank feels Gerard smile, but neither of them move for another long moment.

Matteo calls, often. He talks to Frank and Gerard about moving and work, and passes on Julian and
Antonio’s new address and phone numbers. Frank cajoles him into giving up all their birthdays as well, and Matteo is surprised but not very when he gets a card for his, two weeks later.

Some time in mid-September their work alarm wakes Gerard up, curled around Frank as usual, unusually sporting morning wood. Frank, still mostly asleep and totally unaware, rolls out of Gerard’s arms and turns off the alarm, shuffling off to the bathroom. This leaves Gerard alone and a little bit confused.

Gerard’s sex drive is present but not insistent. He likes sex, loves sex with Frank, but usually isn’t the one to initiate anything. Frank usually makes some overture towards it, and Gerard is more than happy to take the cue. That’s how it’s always been, and that’s always satisfied Gerard. So why is his libido waking him up like this?

It takes half the morning and two cups of coffee before Gerard is awake enough to put the pattern together. They haven’t had sex since Grant. They’ve been intimate as usual, sure, brushing a kiss when they meet at the end of the day, hooking chins over shoulders and leaning against each other on the couch, in the kitchen, sleeping just as close as always, but. They haven’t had sex.

A month, Gerard wouldn’t have questioned, even if that’d be a bit of a dry spell for them. But four? And after Grant? Frank is avoiding it, and undoubtedly Grant is the cause.

At work, watching students paint, Gerard considers. If the situation were flipped he’d be loathe to talk about it with Frank, but it probably should be mentioned. If Frank has talked to Dr. Rexha about it, Gerard won’t push past that.

It takes two more days before Gerard actually brings it up. They’re curled up on the couch on Friday night and Gerard knows, if this were any other time, Frank would probably be coaxing Gerard into a bit of couch sex, not just absently watching the movie next to him.

“Frankie?”

Frank ‘hmm’s to show he’s listening.

“How are you?”

“How am I? Right now or big picture?”

“Big picture?”

“Alright. I mean, I’m happy right now, and I’m getting over Grant. Not having to be worried I’ll see him again helps, actually.”

“I’m glad.” Gerard shifts a little.

“Are you okay, Gee?”

“Yeah. Better than I thought I’d be.” He’d railed against the antidepressants Dr. Wentz had put him on all summer, but he can’t deny that getting himself to work every day feels less Sisyphean than it
had last year, despite everything else.

“Good.” Frank squeezes Gerard’s hand gently.

“Thanks. I was kind of asking for a reason, though.”

“What?”

Gerard braces himself and just says it. “We haven’t had sex since Italy.”

“Oh.” Frank doesn’t even try to lie and say he hasn’t noticed. “We can, though, if you want.”

Somehow, that’s the last thing Gerard wants. “I want you to be comfortable, with me. I’d say with sex in general, but I guess I’d kind of hope it’d mostly be with me.”

Frank snorts. “It’d be with you. I just- Grant.”

Gerard nods. “I know. You know I don’t hold it against you, right?”

“Thanks. I didn’t figure you did but, means a lot anyway. It’s just- I don’t remember it.” Frank pauses. “I guess I just totally shut off when it happened.”

“Did you talk to Dr. Rehxa about it?”

“Yeah. And that didn’t happen with Bob, it was just bad sex and I hated it. But she asked me to try to remember and I like, leaned back on the couch and suddenly all I could picture were his sheets and-” Frank cuts himself off and starts again, calmer, “I had a panic attack, right there. Bad. Took like, the rest of the session for her to calm me down again. That was in late July? I think. She just told me we’d work on it later and to avoid triggers if at all possible. Like, don’t buy new sheets right now. So I bet if we had sex I’d flip out on you, instantly.”

“Oh. Frankie, I’m sorry.”

Frank shrugs. “I don’t remember it, so it can’t bother me that much. But I’ll ask Dr. Rexha what I can do to get past the panic attacks.”

“You don’t have to.”

“I want to. If your sex drive is finally waking up to the fact we haven’t fucked in four months, imagine how I feel.”

“Pretty bad?”

“Pretty bad. It’s aggravating. Because I can’t do shit without balking but I want to be able to.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Not your fault.” Frank turns and gently kisses Gerard. “Therapy Monday, and I’ll ask about it.”

Therapy on Monday is, well, strange. Dr. Rehxa just hollers across the hall to bring Dr. Wentz and Gerard in, then quite seriously asks Frank if he’s comfortable with this.
Frank is a little less comfortable with that in front of Gerard, but he just shrugs and scoots over a little bit to make room for him on the couch. Gerard perches, confused.

Dr. Rexha leans back in her chair, Dr. Wentz popping up to sit on her desk behind them. “So, Frank, I’d like you to repeat the clinical rundown of the times Grant raped you, so Dr. Wentz and Gerard have a background for what we’re going to work on.”

Frank stalls a little, eyes wide and mouth a little open. Gerard glances over at him and immediately asks Dr. Rexha, “What’s the purpose of this? I know what Grant did, he doesn’t have to repeat this.”

“Because you need to be aware of what exactly, and I mean exactly, his triggers are going to be. And Frank wants to figure out a way to be intimate with you, so we’re going to have to find them and work together.”

Gerard, of course, has seen Frank fresh out of nightmares, hell, saw him fresh out of Grant, but Frank is still leery of having to repeat Grant’s assaults in front of Gerard. Frank has no desire to repeat his panic attack and spook him.

Gerard gives Frank another careful look, and Frank’s hackles go up. He hates that kind of look. He hates the pity, and the heavy expectation in the room. So he fixes his gaze on the pointed toe of Dr. Rexha’s boot and starts talking.

“The first was after he made me hurt another man, badly,” and if that’s not the most misleading way to say killed for blood, Frank doesn’t know what is, “I was, I suppose, a little out of it, endorphins and such, and he brought me upstairs to his room, and told me to nap in his bed and sleep it off. I couldn’t sleep, and when I was tossing and turning he came over and pinned me down and kissed me, asked me if I knew what he wanted, and I did, and I let him. Second was the morning, he came back to bed when I woke up. Third was when I asked to see Gee-” Frank jerks his head over at Gerard, first he’s moved since starting to speak, “He said yes, and so I thanked him for it.”

Frank can’t look at Gerard, doesn’t even want to look at Dr. Rexha, and really wishes Dr. Wentz wasn’t here, because it feels like a crowd.

Dr. Wentz is the first to speak. “Gerard, is this in line with what you have reconciled with yourself happened between them?”

Gerard must nod, because Wentz continues, “How do you feel about this?”

Gerard swallows heavily. “Sorry. Sorry I ever let them meet, and let Grant get that close to him.”

Frank snorts. “We were separated. Not much we could do about it.”

“Still.” That “still” could be the start of a long argument, but it’s a circular one Frank and Gerard have looped many times, and Frank just jerks a shoulder at him in an approximation of a shrug. That says enough, and Gerard drops it.

Dr. Rexha waits a moment to see if they’ll continue, then gently says, “Now, Frank, you’re pretty certain of this timeline, so I’m curious to know. When exactly does your memory end?”

Frank shrugs. “Depends. First time, I don’t have real memory after he came over to the bed, but I have,” he waves a hand, “an impression? I remember how I felt. Morning, almost nothing. I woke up in the middle of the night alone, and that’s the only way I know they’re separate times. I just woke up again and knew I’d been awake earlier, but after I’d woken up alone. Third, I think I disassociated, but it was the only one I sort of initiated? I remember the start,” Frank looks a little queasy. It’s one thing to know what he did and another to put words to it in front of Gerard, “I sat
down... next to him and thanked him for letting me see Gerard.”

Gerard knows Frank well enough to spot the lie in where Frank exactly had sat. He can’t help the way his face sort of crumples.

That gives it away to Dr. Rexha. “Frank, we all need your honesty, here.”

“You have it.” Frank snaps.

“I don’t think we fully do. There’s nothing to be ashamed of here, this is a traumatic event we’re working to help you resolve. This is not an arena for judgement.”

Frank stares her down for a long moment, for half a second wishing his had Matteo’s well-practiced quelling look. If it could make mobsters pause and consider, it’d make his therapist walk back that assumption in a hurry.

“I’m not afraid of your judgement, I am simply not proud of that action, and don’t wish to repeat the details of an affair in front of my fiancé, thank you.”

Gerard snorts. “I don’t think we can call that an affair.”

“Oh? We were engaged, what would you call it?”

“Rape.”

“He would have called us lovers.”

“I know. But would you consider me his lover? Antonio? Lorenzo, Matteo? Julian, who toasted his death?”

“No.”

“Then what makes you different?”

“Because you told me what he was and I still walked into it.”

“Frank!” Gerard cuts in. “I would have rather you ran and I died there, rather than let him even see you!”

“And then I fucking delivered myself to him on a damn silver platter! So yes, I understand why you’re upset, because I did exactly what you hated for me to do!”

“I’m not upset you wanted to save me. I’m sorry you felt you had to.”

“You fucking proposed! You know what I’m willing to do for you, unless you really thought McCracken was a fluke!”

Gerard looks stunned. “It was,” he continues slowly. “It was supposed to be a fluke.”

“It wasn’t a fluke.”

“You only let me because you wanted-“

“I let you for the same reason we starting having your dinner dates after Thanksgiving, when I knew.”
Gerard looks about to cry. “Frankie...”

Frank shakes his head and pulls Gerard close, arms around Gerard’s where they’re crammed into his chest. “None of it was a fluke. You idiot, I love you. Of course I’d do what I’ve done. I’d do it again, ‘cept most of those are one time deals.”

“I don’t deserve you.”

“Sucks, because I want you.”

“Okay.” Gerard extracts his arms to hug Frank as well.

Dr. Rexha gives them a moment, then quietly asks, “Frank, are you willing to try to talk about Grant more?”

Frank pulls out of the hug, but not, both therapists notice, out of Gerard’s arms. He nods.

“All right. In terms of coping, and be as clinical or vulgar as you feel, how different is your sex with Gerard from the sex you think you had with Grant?”

“Emotionally worlds apart. Physically? Gerard’s closer to my height and strength and shit.”

“Functionally?”

“Same, ‘s far as I can tell. I know when I’ve had a dick in my ass, so that’s not gonna be different. Didn’t find bruises from anything else. Probably wouldn’t anyway.”

“So pretty vanilla in both cases?”

“Yeah?” Frank has no idea where she’s going with this.

“You and Gerard could consider incorporating a kink practice into your sex life in order to differentiate it and avoid triggers. Of course, this’ll only work if you share any kinks that would be feasible.”

Frank nearly laughs at her. All his privately kept fantasies are rough, closer to Grant’s style than Gerard anyway. He manages not to laugh and just shakes his head. “I don’t think me starting to experiment with the stranger porn I’ve watched is going to do any of us any good.”

Gerard looks flat-out alarmed. “I don’t think I could really add much to any shortlist here.”

“Frank, why not yours?”

“Because my unpracticed kinks are more likely to trigger a panic attack than anything else?”

She looks surprised by that. “Is that a kink or an expectation you’re hoarding as one?”

“A what?”

“Is that a true kink of yours or do you expect to be treated roughly and seek it out in the guise of something socially palatable?”

Frank stares at her and thinks about that for a moment. “No? I don’t, I don’t know.” It’s one of the more appalling suggestions someone has made about him, and he wants to dismiss it outright, but Frank really truly, right now does not know. So he goes with his gut and denies it out of hand.
Gerard hugs him a little tighter and Frank realizes he’s shaking, just a little twitchy tremor in his back and hands. Gerard’s physical presence helps.

Dr. Rexha gives him a calming nod and says, “Okay. Then my only other suggestion would be to teach Gerard how to manage one of your panic attacks and caution you to take this very slowly. Structure it if need be.”

“I don’t even know how to manage a panic attack.”

“That’s what we’re going to teach you.”

“Okay.”

“Can you describe how your panic attack felt? The one you had here in July?”

“I just shut down. Went straight back into that ‘no’ mentality. Lost time, between you asking about it and me getting out of that panic attack.”

“You were aware you were going into it?”

“Yes.”

“Would you be able to tell Gerard if you got close to it again?”

“Probably.”

“Gerard, would you be able to cope with the stress of him having a panic attack? You’ll have to remember this is not a reflection on you.”

Gerard nods. “I’ve had my share of panic attacks, so yes.”

“Alright. Frank. I talked you through this method in July, but it sounds like you don’t remember. It’s pretty simple, but it’s effective. I want you to start by being still, sitting down if you need to, and cataloguing everything about yourself and your surroundings to find differences between it and the assaults.

Frank nods.

“Gerard, I want you to help him with this. Ask his name, the date, simple things first. Then about where he is, what he was doing, things like that. And Frank, if Gerard ever has a panic attack you can do the same.”

Two nods this time.

“Okay. If you both feel comfortable with that, Frank, if you don’t mind me asking again about Grant..?”

Frank shakes his head. “Go for it, I guess.”

“Talk at your pace. Anything about it, anything pertaining to the memory.”

Frank makes a semi-hopeless gesture and thinks for a minute, then shudders, leaning into Gerard a little more.

Gerard ‘hmm’s and Frank shakes his head. “Face to face kind of guy. Probably didn’t want me to be able to hide my face and cry.”
Gerard nods.

Frank shudders again, unable to help it. If it weren’t for Gerard’s arms locked warmly around him, the returning memory of Grant’s hands sliding over Frank’s body would scare the shit out of him. He elects not to say anything else the rest of the session, and half-listens to Gerard talk to Dr. Wentz about solitary confinement and maladaptive daydreaming for another twenty minutes.

—

Back in the car, halfway home, Gerard turns to Frank and says, “Are you okay?”

“I mean, I’m here, not having a panic attack. So yes. But all the memories came back. They’re a little hazy, not like I told you how when he locked me up it was really sharp?”

“Yes. And how I couldn’t tell dream from reality?”

“Mhmm. But I remember all the times we fucked. And I didn’t want to say it in front of them, but I think it’d be easier to get over if it was bad sex. Like, it was awful enough in circumstance I totally blocked it out for months, but the sex itself was fine. Good, even.”

“Oh.” Gerard isn’t sure what to say to that, and Frank isn’t quite sure how to continue.

“I’m sorry?”

“Was I not, um, not satisfying?”

“Oh no? You’ve always been great.”

“I’m not rough with you.”

“Yeah. And if you were, it’d be out of character and strange.”

“But that’s what you’re into.”

“That’s what gets me off fastest with my hand around my dick. That’s not the kind of sex I want to have with my husband. Sure, maybe once in a while it’d be hot if you threw me around and whatever, but I like our system. I like the sex we have, Gee. You make me very happy.”

“Are you sure? Beca-“

“Yes! Yes. I’m sure. God.” Frank scrubs a hand over his face. “This is fucking embarrassing. I don’t want us to like, start practicing BDSM. Kick that idea out of your head. Neither of us would like that. And, also, if you so much as look at me with your eyes bright I might just start trying to deck you. Nothing personal about that, I know that as of like, a month ago I thought it was hot but- Yeah. Not anymore.”

“Perfectly understandable.” Gerard drums the steering wheel. “When you were first turned you looked at me all, all vamped out, like you had to be with Grant, and I nearly freaked out on you. Because it was gorgeous, but I had a second of fear because I’ve really only ever seen vampires like that at his house.”

“Oh. Oh, yeah, shit, I can imagine.”

Frank sits back for a moment. “If neither of us ever look like that again, I’ll be happy.”
“Mhmm.” Gerard pulls into their parking spot in front of the apartment, and they both climb out.

Frank gives them all of five minutes to get inside before he comes over and nudges Gerard. “Hey.”

Gerard wraps an arm around him absently, putting down his book and saying, “Hmm?”

Frank leans against him and says, “I do. Want to work on us. Our sex life, you know. I don’t want to end up on Reddit, like, r/deadbedrooms or something. That would suck. So can we just, I dunno, take it slow? Like teenagers figuring it all out again?”

“I didn’t have sex with a man, well, ignoring Grant, but with a guy I was into until the 1730’s, I don’t think that counts as teenage fumbling,” Gerard says it with a smile anyway, putting his other arm around Frank and gently tumbling them down to lay on the couch.

Frank rolls his eyes and swats at his arm, smiling all the while. “Fine, my teenage fumbling and your, uh, ninety-year-old fumbling.”

“Yeah, that.” Gerard leans down and kisses him.

Frank hauls him close and kisses back. They don’t do more than kiss that night, but afterwards, it’s a slow rediscovery.

There’s a lot more talking to each other and Frank realizes that Gerard, once he gets over his embarrassment, can come up with some incredibly hot dirty talk.

As the fall gets cooler, they spend more time under blankets with each other, laughing and jokingly swatting at each other’s wandering hands. Frank’s freshman assume he’s always been awful at returning grading on time, while his seniors squint suspiciously at his ring and then Mr. Way.

By the Christmas of 2014, Frank and Jamia are back to bi-weekly hangouts. Frank relishes it, and loves having her back. Especially because they can gang up on Gerard. They talk him into submitting a piece for a gallery, and to neither Frank or Jamia’s surprise, the gallery takes his whole series.

Gerard freaks out, and Frank just laughs and laughs and tells Julian about it on their next phone call. Julian quickly passes him on to Antonio, who wants to hear everything about it.

The gallery will be displayed through Frank and Gerard’s spring break, so they invite Antonio out. Matteo and Lorenzo are moving in the summer, so it might be two trips in a short amount of time, but Antonio is happy to hunt down tickets.

The night of the gallery opening, the four of them go out to dinner, Jamia and Antonio both intrigued by each other, but a little confused. Antonio’s English is passable, but he sometimes asks Gerard or Frank to repeat something in Italian, to make sure he understands. He’s a little shocked when Jamia shows that she knows about vampirism and Grant, and Jamia later confesses to Frank she’s honestly surprised by how normal Antonio seems.

To that, Frank just shrugs, then asks, “Wait, do Gee and I not seem normal?”

“No, you’re weird, but I can’t tell if that’s because I know you or anything else. You’ve always been weird.” She shrugs.
Frank shrugs back. “I dunno, then.”

The gallery, much to Gerard’s relief, keeps about five artists at a time, and the opening reception they all walk into is crowded with people there for the other artists, and Gerard feels like he can hide a little, melt into the crowd.

He’d let the gallery price his work, and Frank peers at the price tag and smirks a little. “Hey, babe, four digits for Gangs of New York.”

Gerard blanches. “What?”

Jamia looks at the card as well, “Eleven hundred. Nice.” She offers a palm for a high-five.

Gerard shakes his head. “That’s too much. It should be half that.”

Frank nudges him, none-too-gently. “No, that’s a fair price. It’s a huge piece, and you worked on it forever.”

“It feels too high. It’s just a painting.”

“But it’s an incredible painting,” Antonio throws his two cents in. “I couldn’t do this. You have real talent.”

Gerard blushing, and it’s the best thing Frank has seen all night. “‘tonio, you’ve got it. He’s that good.”

“That he is.” Antonio turns to smile at them both. “Would you paint for Julian and I? We have some horrible landscape at the top of the entry.”

“Sure? How big is it?”

“I will ask Jay to tell me. But we would pay for this, too.” He narrows his eyes a little, knowing Gerard will fight him on this.

“Not more than six hundred USD.”

“Whatever the canvas size’s appropriate worth is. It is a big picture.” It seems that is as low as Antonio is willing to go, a price based on size, not content.

Gerard sighs, and both Frank and Jamia chuckle. “If they want to pay you, let them. You paint really well.”

Gerard makes a face, and gets glared into submission by the other three. Antonio shoots a small smile at Frank, then takes Gerard’s elbow to start wandering the rest of the gallery, switching back to his native language to describe his apartment in Rome to Gerard, as he lacks the vocabulary to do justice to the furnishings and finishes.

He stays the week, and Gerard and Frank make sure he gets the full cultural immersion, even driving a full hour out of town to the closest decent mom and pop diner. Antonio hates nearly every part of his southwestern omelette, and is only really okay with Frank’s country potatoes. Frank ends up eating Antonio’s hash browns, teasing him all the while.
Gerard and Antonio gang up on Frank for his movie taste two days later, and he ends up calling Jamia to weigh in and offset the argument. She refuses to take Frank’s side on principle.

It’s the most fun spring break they’ve ever had, and they’re not happy to return to work.

—

They drive back to Jersey for the early part of the summer, and Gerard floats moving on, maybe moving after they get married. Frank shrugs at it, and is surprised when his mother agrees they should and heavily suggests a school district closer to her. Frank is willing to consider the suggestion after that.

Matteo and Lorenzo move into a NYC condo not too long after, and two weeks later, Frank and Gerard get two hotel rooms nearby and take Linda with them into the city. Matteo and Lorenzo are impeccably polite to her, in the old-fashioned manner that has her calling them both ‘gentlemen’ and nearly blushing when Lorenzo gives her his elbow on the stairs into the subway.

At dinner with just her and Frank she confesses that, “I didn’t know there were black Italians. Suppose I’ve only met white ones.”

Frank gives her a small smile, “Didn’t see a bunch when we went. Matteo is Nigerian, he just lived in Sicily for a while. Lorenzo is Sicilian, and he’s from the coast, so his family is probably a huge mix.”

“Moors, maybe?”

“I don’t think you’re supposed to call people that anymore, but I don’t know.” Frank shrugs, taking a bite of toast.

Linda appraises him, “And are they otherwise like you?”

“Like me-me, or like Gerard-me?”

“The second. But I wouldn’t be surprised if the first was true also. But then again, European,” she considers, “You never know with them.”

“Well, I can’t say anything to that. But yeah, to the second, yes, they’re like Gee and I.”

“What about that other friend of yours, Antonio?”

Frank nods.

“Good. Well, I’m glad you found them. You need community, in a way like that.”

Frank remembers the not-subtle nudging to join an LGBTQ group on campus when he was a student and snorts to himself. “Dunno if this is quite the same, but yeah, it’s nice to know them.”

“Mhmm. You’ve done well, even if I’m still not really happy with the way your life has gone.”

Frank reaches over and takes her hand. “I’ve had the support of a fantastic mother.”

“Oh, you flatter.”

Frank just smiles at her until she gives in and squeezes his hand back, smiling as well.
The 2015-2016 school year contract renewal offer letters are at the apartment when Frank and Gerard return from New York and New Jersey, and Frank looks at the year and cringes. “Lord, we gotta plan a wedding and get out of here. I’m gonna be like. Thirty four.”

“You’re going to be thirty four? I’m going to be 351. But yes, I’m glad you agree we should move, because I was going to start getting really insistent.”

“Yeah, I know. I don’t quite look 34. Or, well, I look decent for my mid-thirties.”

“You look good. But yes, you’re going to have to start lying about what year you were born in in about three more years.”

“God.” Frank shakes his head, “That’s weird to think about. I guess I’m really gonna start feeling not human then.”

“I’m sorry I took that from you.”

Frank glares at Gerard. “Fuck off. It’s just lying about my birthday. Funny to think about, that’s all. But anyway, what I was really trying to say is how about we sign these, and start planning to get married? Then move? I don’t want to plan a move and a marriage at the same time, and I’m starting to really want to marry you.”

“Oh?” Gerard teases, wrapping his arms around Frank, “What changed?”

Frank just snorts and kisses him. “Nothing changed and you well know it.”


“Well, I don’t know if anybody would give us a Catholic service.”

“Probably not. So where do you want to get married? We still want a small wedding, right?”

“Yeah. Be nice if Julian and Antonio could come out. But other than them, uh, Mom. Matteo, Lorenzo, Jamia. Could probably invite Trohman. Jamia’s mom’d probably come, that’d be nice.”

“So ten or twelve people?”

“Yeah. Fifteen, figure we could let Mom bring a few of her old friends.”

“The ladies from the diner?”

“Yeah, you’ve met them. They and Mom go way back.”

“We could do that in somebodies backyard.”

“How about Mom’s backyard? Potluck dinner? Rent a few tables and extra dishes, make it family style?”

“Sounds wonderful.” Gerard smiles. “I’d be very happy with that.”

“So would I. A party with family.”
“Mhmm.”

“I’ll ask Mom, then. And hell, if we wanted to, that wouldn’t take too long to plan. We could get married in five months.”

“Even better. Are we going to keep our names?”

Frank pauses to consider, “I think, as long as we’re planning on teaching together, maybe, legally, we hyphenate? Way-Iero? Just so we don’t risk having two Mr. Ways or two Mr. Ieros, which would be worse.”

“I’d be very happy to be Gerard Arthur Iero.”

“Ouch. No, too many vowels in that. Frank Way is snappier.”

Gerard loves how that sounds, then covers it, a little ashamed with the possessive thrill. “Up to you. I’d be happy to give my name or take yours.”

“Hyphenate. We can probably change it later. Whenever we next have to get new identities with new birth years.”

“Yeah, we always can.”

“Yeah. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

—

With that decided, they both start looking into how to actually plan a wedding. Matteo flat out insists on them making a registry and getting fitted for new suits. Gerard protests his single suit is fine, but when Frank sees the lapels, he takes Matteo’s side, and they end up at Men’s Warehouse with Lorenzo making sure they actually follow through on getting the suits.

After two hours of both of them rotating out of the dressing rooms to model different suit patterns and cuts, then ties and shirts for both, Frank huffs at Lorenzo from the fitting dais, finally getting the decided suit marked for tailoring.

“You’re a slave driver. It’s a suit.”

Lorenzo raises an eyebrow. He’s wearing a perfectly fitted, if more snugly European, dress shirt and pants, knowing he’s here as fashion director and dressing the part, “And you would have bought a single-vent suit and made your ass look cheap.”

“You let Gee get a vented suit jacket.”

“I don’t wear suits enough. I need one. In black. And a couple of shirts. And maybe one new tie.”
“And a pocket square and socks. You’re getting married in this suit, I’m not letting you look bad in it. ‘teo and Jay were conspiring for our wedding gift to you two to be a trip out to Armani. Antonio said Gerard wouldn’t stand for it.”

“I think I’d have had to put my foot down on that as well. We’re teachers, Lorenzo. You and Matteo might have use for an Armani suit, but we don’t.”

Lorenzo just shrugs, then adds in Italian, “You’re welcome to our work. It is your right, as Grant’s heir.”

Frank responds in Italian as well, “Gee was bound by human mobsters. Me working there? It’d be like betraying him.”

“I didn’t know. My apologies.”

Frank inclines his head instead of shrugging, mindful of the tailor.

After that, Frank gets to sit and watch as Gerard gets fitted too, mostly just casually staring at his ass. Lorenzo is silently laughing the whole time.

——

The suits get warmup use a few weeks later, when Trohman corners Gerard, a known good sport about school spirit, and volunteers him to help chaperone the school’s homecoming dance. Gerard wants to do nothing less and passes on the misery by also volunteering Frank.

Frank nearly sleeps on the couch when Trohman emails to tell him he’s been volunteered, just to make a point, but Gerard pulls out his puppy eyes and gives Frank the handjob of the year against the kitchen counter. Frank doesn’t sleep on the couch, but he holds his small grudge close.

The next week finds them both in suits and ties, Frank rebelling by wearing Gerard’s tie with the tiny skulls on it. Gerard just wears a plain blue tie, calling Frank dramatic. Frank ends up working ticket sales, and after six complements of his suit, finds the job not as awful as he thought it would be. At least Gerard has to be inside, listening to the blaring trash the DJ is playing and breaking up the more offensive grinding.

It’s too good to be true that Frank could last the whole dance outside, and his position is relieved by a parent not long after, sending him inside. He finds Gerard, and they take up position shoulder to shoulder along the back wall, glaring down any students who think to creep off to the back of the gym for a bit more frisky action.

They get a photo of themselves snapped by whatever college student photographer they have at the dance, and both grimace. That can’t be a good photo.

——

The teachers get a link to a Google Drive of pictures three weeks later, and Frank finds that actually, it’s not a bad picture. He sets it as his school laptop’s background and takes shit for it for three weeks from students.
The next three months pass quickly, and they’ve got a date set at December 28th, and then it’s just a matter of getting everyone to get there. Antonio and Julian opt to fly on Christmas Day, fares very cheap late in the day. Jamia’s mother just comes the week before Christmas and plans to stay through the wedding. Matteo and Lorenzo will just drive out for the day and spend the night in the town’s motel before returning to New York.

Gerard checks the weather and finds that the chances of a white Christmas, and therefore a storm on their wedding day, are slim. Frank nods. “Good. Because we’re already doing the ceremony in coats on the deck, a winter storm would blow.”

“Maybe we should have rented a place? Your Mom’s house isn’t huge.”

“It’s only 18 people, counting us. And the officiant from the city hall isn’t staying. That house will fit 17 of us for dinner.”

“I guess. Might be cramped.”

“Would we want it any other way?”

“No.”

“I’m glad we invited Justin and Katie. It’ll be nice to have like, totally normal friends there.” Frank plops onto the couch next to Gerard, firing off a text to Jamia and then turning to Gerard with a sudden, questioning look, “Didn’t you have some old vampire friends? We could invite them.”

“Yeah.” Gerard sighs, leaning his head back against the couch.

Frank pokes his ribs, “Do you have their contacts?”

“No. It was one woman, Lindsey Ballato. I have no clue where she is. Could be anywhere.”

“We’ll put you online and say you’re seeking a childhood friend who’s named Lindsey Ballato, and see if she reaches out.”

“That won’t work.”

“People do that all the time. It could,” Frank insists, leaning against Gerard.

Gerard sighs. “She might not even be in the US.”

“Internet is international.”

“No. If it goes viral my face will be searchable and it’ll be suspicious if someone looks me up in twenty years.”

“I guess. Still, maybe without a photo?”

“I’ll ask Matteo if he knows a way to reach out.”

“Okay.”
Matteo, as it turns out, does not. “Unless she’s involved in organized crime somewhere, probably not. Civilian surveillance is pretty massively illegal anywhere in the west. I did Google, just to see. Didn’t find anything. There’s a Lindsey who’s a painter in New Zealand with a different last name, though she’s dirty blonde and very freckled, and blue eyes.”

Gerard shakes his head. “No. She had dark brown eyes and dark hair. Thanks for looking, though.”

“No problem. If any more Lindseys turn up, I’ll send them on to you, yeah?”

“Thanks.”

The day school gets out, Frank shoos all the kids out as soon as the bell rings, crowing at them to leave quickly. Most don’t need the rush, but a few jokingly demand to know why they’re getting kicked out.

Frank levels a finger at one of them and declares, “I need to get my butt down to my Mom’s house for my wedding!”

“Wait, your wedding!? You’re getting married?”

Emily’s friend smacks her. “To Mr. Way, dipshit!”

“Oh! OH! Congrats! Have fun!”

“Thank you. I’m sure I will.”

“You’re getting married at your Mom’s house?”

“Mhmm. Sixteen guests, we didn’t need to rent anywhere.”

“What date is it?”

“28th.”

“Oh. Shit. I wanna get you a card!”

“You don’t have to. But thank you for the thought.”

“Is anybody from the school coming?”

“Ms. Zhang, Mr. Boruki, and Mr. Trohman and his wife.”

“Oh, that’s cool. I didn’t know you and Mr. Boruki were friends.”

“He and Gerard work together a lot, we’ve gotten dinner with him and his girlfriend.”

“Is he bringing her?”

“No, I think she’s a bridesmaid in another friends wedding in the Bahamas.”

“Oh. That’s a sweet gig.”

“You have to pay for it, you know?” Frank asks, amused.
“Oh. Nevermind.”

Frank has to laugh at that, and the last students trickle out of the room, swarming him with congratulations. The few bravest follow him to Gerard’s room, where he’s packing up.

His last two students see Frank’s hangers-on and perk up. They’re not left wondering for long, because one of their shared students points at Gerard and says, “You could’ve told us you’re getting married!”

Gerard looks a little surprised. “I uh, didn’t think of it?”

Frank snorts at him. “By which you mean you didn’t think it was their business?”

“Mhmm.” With the cat very out of the bag, Gerard figures he might as well and ducks close to kiss Frank hello, then turns back to the students. “And we need to get all the way to Jersey tonight, so we’ve gotta kick you out.”

Frank nods, and they shoo the students out and endure only minimal cooing.

Chapter End Notes

To finish up announcements without making the starting note too long.... I hear your pleas and will go forward with the ‘happy’ ending as planned. Fair warning is that when I say “happy” I mean “hopeful”. Please just picture me as a villain of your choosing, perhaps GLaDOS?

And I think we all know what’s coming next week!!
Frank and Gerard leave school hand in hand, suitcases already in the trunk and suits hanging in garment bags in the backseat. Joe waves them off from the front door of the school with a smile and a cheerful, “See you in a few days!”

They wave back and head to the car, chill wind prompting Frank to turn up the collar of his jacket. They’re both in their nice coats, no point packing doubles, and Gerard snorts at him as they pile their briefcases into the backseat.

“You look like a count, with the collar like that.”

Frank grins, “I vant to suck your blood!”

“That was atrocious, I’m getting an annulment.”

“We’re not even married yet!”

“Good. Unconsummated. Even easier to annul.”

“Is that even how it works still?”

“I think I can make a claim on the basis of that.” Gerard shrugs, sliding into the driver’s seat, “Haven’t tried recently, I have no clue.”

“Better not have tried recently,” Frank faux-sulks, turning the heater’s vents toward himself.

Gerard just laughs and pulls out of the parking lot.
They drive into the evening, stopping only for gas and a quick stretch, Gerard’s back popping in at least three places. He settles back into the passenger seat with a sigh and reclines it a little, getting comfortable for Frank’s half of the drive.

“Would sir care for some Champagne?”

“What?” Gerard lifts his head to look at Frank.

“You’re all settled into first class up here, all reclined.”

“Oh.” Gerard laughs, then adopts the same snooty accent. “A dry Champagne then, fresh cork.”

“As sir wishes.” Frank merges back onto the highway and Gerard lays his head back down.

Frank laughs a little to himself and hums along to the radio.

They don’t pull into Linda’s house until nearly 10pm, but she’s left a key under the mat just for them. Frank and Gerard let themselves in quietly and take their bags upstairs. Linda’s reading light is still on, and Frank ducks around the door and says hello, giving her a quick kiss on the cheek. She tells him to make Gerard come say hello too, and Gerard does, giving her a gentle hug and a very similar kiss on the cheek. Linda smiles. “I’m glad you’re going to be my son-in-law.”

“And I couldn’t have asked for a better mother-in-law.” Gerard gently squeezes her hand. “Shall we catch up in the morning?”

“Mhmm. Goodnight, dear.”

“Goodnight.”

She turns off the light as he leaves and falls asleep to the rustle and murmur of her boys unpacking and settling into Frank’s old room down the hall.

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Frank cooks her breakfast the next morning and the three of them sit together with the paper split up. It’s quiet, comfortable, and Linda can’t quite keep herself from beaming the whole time.

They’ve got four quiet days to spend before Christmas, then two more that will mostly be devoted to wedding setup.

The days before Christmas are cold and still and relaxed. They make use of the fireplace and Gerard scoffs at Frank for buying firewood. Linda indicates an old pile of unsplit logs out back and says Gerard is welcome to it. To both Frank and Linda’s great surprise, Gerard shrugs, pulls on a hoodie, and picks up the axe still hanging in the garage.

As he heads around the house outside, Frank watches through the back window and gapes. “I’ve never even known him to work out.”

Linda looks equally shocked. “Frankie, go tell him he doesn’t have to do that.”

Frank opens the door and yells across the backyard, “You’re crazy, come back in!”

Gerard shrugs back, leaning the axe against his leg. “I wasn’t raised on a farm for nothing!”
“And how many years ago?”

“Oh hush,” Gerard hefts the axe with an easy motion and swings it. The log splits. Frank is admittedly impressed, and stands for a little too long with the door open watching Gerard quarter logs into firewood with efficient, easy chops.

The cold air reaches Linda, and she barks at him from her chair, “Oh close the door, ogle him through the glass.”

Frank gives his Mom a look and slides the door closed, then does just that and keeps watching Gerard. His Mom is laughing at them both from her seat behind Frank.

Gerard comes in about twenty minutes later, pink-cheeked and fingers a little stiff, but arms full of firewood. Frank braves the cold to run out and help him pile some of it up on the deck, then ducks inside to let Gerard build up the fire so they can warm their hands.

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Christmas Mass is a must, and Frank and Gerard wear their new suits, making Linda nearly weep. They go with Jamia and Sharon, Jamia’s mother, all crammed into one car.

Frank takes Gerard’s hand during the service and while Father Robert recites the Christmas Story and whispers, “Two Christmases in a row in Jersey. Should we keep that up?”

Gerard just looks over and nods, smile playing around his mouth. Frank squeezes his hand a little extra for a moment before letting it go, equally happy. Frank is pretty sure nothing could upset him now, not even his father and Bob showing up at the wedding together. He could just laugh at them.

Before the wedding, of course, is Christmas. They exchange gifts late in the day, once Matteo, Lorenzo, Julian and Antonio have joined the group, trunk full of wrapped gifts. There had been a bit of a scramble once those plans had been finalized. Given that Jamia has only met Antonio the once, and Julian has never met any of the humans, they’ve all agreed to keep it simple, price capping all gifts at a maximum of $35.

Matteo brings wine he swears can’t count as a gift, and they let him pour everyone small glasses while their group of nine fills the living room and settles in, Frank and Jamia kneeling to sort gifts and owners.

Unlike last Christmas, there will be no round robin of gifts, just a circle of unwrapping. Nearly everyone has at least one card that promises a gift card in it, and Julian shakes Sharon’s hand when he sits down next to her, both of them exchanging polite smiles.

Jamia sits back on her heels to look at Frank, “Did you and Gerard not get each other anything?”

“Nope. We’re getting married in what, two days? Neither of us need anything.” Gerard nods from the couch, and Jamia sighs at them both, then goes to sit.

Frank looks around, sees that everyone is settled and says, “Okay, oldest first, then, Gee? Wanna get us started?”

At the looks of unmitigated surprise from all the vampires, Frank laughs and says, “I’m joking. Ladies first. Sharon, Mom? Would one of you like to start?”
Linda rolls her eyes and says, “I suppose I can start Christmas off.” Frank passes her her gifts and goes to squeeze on the couch next to Gerard.

She unwraps three separate houseplants from Jamia, Sharon, and then, surprisingly, Matteo. They’re all quite different shapes and sizes as well, and are lined up by the window. Antonio and Lorenzo have played it safe and gotten two beautiful coffee-table photo books, one of the Italian country, and another of food from cafes around Europe. Frank and Gerard’s two part gift is a bird feeder and seed, one that can be attached to the window so Linda can watch birds from her chair. Jamia and Sharon have gotten a set of porcelain bookends in the form of bears.

Linda’s pile done, Sharon starts. She ends up with an Instant Pot from her daughter, a kitchsy frame from Linda, wine from Frank and Gerard, and a huge Williams Sonoma gift card from the vampires. She’s thrilled.

Matteo looks at Gerard and sighs, playing next-eldest and starting his pile. He’s recently been exploring bookbinding, as a consummate note-taker finally free to start looking into his own interests. His gifts are all tools, leather, paper, and a joint safe bet gift card from the older ladies.

Julian accepts the elbow in his ribs from Matteo with a sigh and reaches for his first gift. Laughing, he unwraps book after book, some old and written in Farsi, some new histories. Small library in his lap, he sits back with a broad smile and says, “Frank or Jamia. I won’t presume to know.”

Jamia cackles. “Frank, by two months.”

Frank rolls his eyes at her. “Lorenzo, what month are you?”

“So me, you, Jai, Gee, and ‘tonio?”

Lorenzo nods. “Sounds right.”

“Okay.” Frank unwraps two pairs of dress socks, asks if he’s expected to get married twice, is told a resounding no while Gerard pouts, then unwraps cufflinks from Antonio, a bottle of lube wrapped like a Christmas cracker from Jamia, who shrugs, unrepentant, and only says “Didn’t figure you’d be opening that in front of your Mom.”

He glares at her for a while before unwrapping a joint gift desk set with a very realistically sharpened silver letter opener from Matteo and Julian for his school desk, and a gift card to a range near the school in a card from Lorenzo that says “Now practice <3.”

Linda does a rough count and says, “Gerard, what’d you get your husband-to-be?”

Frank waves his left hand. “He got me this! We’re not doing presents for each other. We decided.”

“Oh alright.” She gives them both a mild stink-eye, then lets Lorenzo start unwrapping.

It seems like everyone has figured out Lorenzo’s weakness is fashion, and he unwraps a handsome card case, two elegant pocketknives, a lapel pin, a tie pin that clashes with the lapel pin, and a knit tie that won’t go with either. He laughs at the combo, then unwraps a tie and cufflinks that will go with the other two gold pieces, and breaks into a huge grin. Matteo is the only one with a non-fashion gift, giving him a shower caddy. Lorenzo looks only a little faux offended, and Matteo says mildly, “Corral your three million shampoos.”

“I was under the impression you liked them. Considering you use them?” Lorenzo fires back, to a
Matteo cracks and says, “It’s for both of our shampoos,” and Lorenzo cedes the floor to Jamia.

She starts with the one in her mom’s wrapping paper, and finds a new toaster oven from Sharon and Linda. Frank has gotten her a cardigan for work, Gerard a set of interestingly shaped pint glasses meant to accentuate the flavor of different beers, and the four other vampires have pooled for the box reprint of the Sandman, her all time favorite comic. It takes her a few minutes to get over the fact the box set is sitting in her lap, hers forever, and Gerard reaches for his first gift with a teasing slowness.

Jamia hand waves him to start and pulls her eyes off the books to watch. Gerard’s first gift is cufflinks from Antonio, complementary to Frank’s. He makes it half the same by unwrapping two pairs of socks next, waving them at Frank. Frank snorts at him. Matteo and Julian have put together a very differently styled, but functionally similar desk set for him, Antonio has added a jeweled tie pin, and Lorenzo a small knife. Judging by the appreciative look between Gerard and Lorenzo, it’s more functional than it looks. Jamia surprises by gifting a set of toasting flutes: “For tomorrow. Yours is tomorrow wedding, Frank’s is tomorrow night.”

Frank groans, “You’re the worst best friend ever.”

Gerard just laughs, and all eyes turn to Antonio. Julian has let everybody in on the fact that Antonio will be getting a dog as soon as they’re back, and he unwraps a braided leather leash, a set of dog bowls and a few toys before getting to the card from Julian that declares the adoption fees for a dog have been paid for. That makes him gasp, and he tears into the last two gifts, a leash bag and a pack of doggie bags. Full set of dog paraphernalia unwrapped, every gift is opened.

With the presents now reduced to a mass of paper and a small piles of new things to cherish, and the wine glasses empty, Jamia and Matteo end up together in the kitchen rinsing glasses, Linda and Sharon’s laughter rolling into the kitchen.

Jamia smiles out at them, “I’m glad you all seem to get along with us.”

Matteo pauses at the sink and looks over. “Hmm?”

“It seems like you guys fit in. I don’t know, I was worried you and the other guys would- okay, this is stupid, but replace me.”

“Jamia, I don’t think we could. We’re all brothers in a sense, because of who and what we are and what we’ve seen and done, but he chose you.”

“And then he lied to me about it for a year and a half. And told me over like, $300 of whiskey.”

Matteo half-smiles, “So that’s what he did with it.”

“You gave it to him?”

“Yes.”

“Why’d you give it to Frank?”

“What was I going to do with it? There were nearly twenty bottles. Everyone took what they wanted
and I kept two and poured out the open ones and sold the still-closed leftovers.”

“Why not pour it all? If that dude was so awful?”

“Wasteful. I hope you were able to enjoy it in a better context.”

“I didn’t.”

“I’m sorry. Perhaps they’re only harbingers of ill. But pouring it all out didn’t sit right with me, same as burning the villa didn’t.”

“What else did you give him?”

“What do you mean?”

“Something is, I dunno, off? New? He’s got a new credit card, for one, and has been kinda spendy. I know he offered to pay Linda’s bills. Which isn’t like, something he could afford before. And I worry that he’s gotten in over his head somehow.”

“That’s Julian’s work. Grant’s money.”

“How’d he get it?”

“Julian has managed those accounts for years. He’s the one that wrote the passwords for them. And Grant hadn’t legally existed in centuries.” Matteo plays obtuse, knowing she wants to know the manner of work.

Jamia sighs at the non-answer. “You know that’s not what I’m asking.”

“Frank is not involved in anything. He turned down our invitations in favor of returning to the familiar course of his life.”

“Is having that money going to get him in trouble?”

“No. It’s a credit card, for one. Second, it’s payed by a debit account whose balance is maintained on the interest of two bond accounts. The bonds are held by internationally respected investors. No part of it is-” Matteo does a delicate set of air quotes, “’-Dirty money.’ At least to the extent it would compromise Frank. I have a decidedly low opinion of international investors and their choices, but that would reflect on the firm, not his accounts.”

“Okay. Good to know.” Jamia picks up a glass and dries it. “But I’m not wrong in assuming there are accounts where the money isn’t quite as squeaky clean.”

“Yes. Frank will have some someday. Gerard already does. Please remember that all of our modern legal identities, financial ones as well, are, to an extent, falsified. By necessity.”

“But not Frank’s.”

“Not yet. He’s outlived Grant, no reason to think he’s dying anytime soon.”

“Fair enough.” Jamia dries another glass. “Thanks for your honesty. And sorry for like, interrogating you.”

Matteo shrugs. “I lived. You don’t inspire terror, I’m sorry.”

That gets Jamia to laugh. “Yeah, the CIA doesn’t want me.”
“Oh, the CIA can go fuck itself.”

“Oh?”

“Full of nosy terrorists.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Most don’t care. But it’s no matter.” He smiles over at Jamia, and she smiles back, quiet for the moment.

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After the spell of a peaceful Christmas is broken, it becomes full speed ahead for the wedding setup. Gerard is sent out with the car and Jamia to pick up flowers and wine, and Frank and his mother buckle down to prep everything. The 26th is all prep, the 27th will be an all day cooking marathon. The day of the wedding, all they’ll need to do is carefully fit everything back in the oven and bring it back to temperature.

While Gerard and Jamia are gone running errands Frank crushes walnuts for a salad and whisks a vinaigrette dressing. They return in time for Gerard to relieve Frank at the cutting board chopping the root vegetables for roasting. Frank moves to the side and starts studding oranges with cloves, cigarette dangling precariously from the corner of his mouth. Gerard slides the third bowl of vegetables into the fridge and comes over to nab the cigarette, prompting Frank to grumble at him.

Gerard returns it after a long pull and Frank takes it back with a smirk. “Smell not enough for ya anymore?”

“This is stressful!”

“It’s a lot of cooking.” Outside the kitchen, Jamia and Linda’s voices rise and tangle, arguing about tables and flower arrangements. Frank shrugs and ashes the cigarette into the sink. “But we’ll live. And I’m still excited about getting married, so.”

“Oh, I am too.”

“Good.” Frank steals a kiss.

They all fall into bed that night, Gerard flexing his wrists and nudging Frank until he does the same so they can chop more tomorrow if needed.

Breakfast is simple and cold, Frank and Gerard inhaling coffee and helping drag chairs into place. When they’re all set, Frank looks over and says, “This looks like we’re getting married tomorrow now!”

Gerard sweeps him into a kiss in lieu of an answer. That doesn’t last long, as Linda yells at both of them for wasting time and demands they go to the county clerk and get the legal marriage out of the way. They leave twenty minutes later, Linda occupied with the ham in the kitchen.

The county clerk is out for the holiday, but a secretary collects copies of both of their IDs and lets them know it’ll be a provincial license that they’ll want to register in Rhode Island as well later. Frank and Gerard both sign and grin giddily at each other. The secretary asks, “Are you two having a ceremony?”
“Tomorrow!”

“Well, congratulations! This all looks in order, and James’ll be in tomorrow to rubber stamp you guys!”

“Thank you!” They head back to the house, hand in hand.

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They’ve collected extra serving dishes from friends and as Frank layers ratatouille into one, his mother finishes glazing the ham and Gerard folds napkins. Within the hour, everything is set, ham in and timer on, places set, and Frank just putting the steamer away, both suits hanging in the bathroom.

Linda goes to bed early, wanting sleep before the wedding tomorrow, and Frank and Gerard hole up in their room early as well.

They’ve got the blinds open for now, moonlight and the warm glow of a streetlight keeping the room perfectly bright for their eyes. Frank shifts so his head is on Gerard’s chest, then props his chin up to say, “Is it wrong I’m super nervous?”

Gerard considers. “Nervous to be marrying me or nervous to be getting married?”

“Both, kinda. It’s not that I don’t love you it’s just that, like. This feels huge. Bigger than you turning me. Because we planned this. Maybe I’ve just got cold feet because we didn’t rush this?”

“Maybe? I’m nervous too. I’m afraid you’re going to hate being married to me and hate being with me and divorce me in five years.”

Frank looks like he’s about to speak, so Gerard continues, “And I’m afraid you’re going to come to hate me for the way I’ve completely trashed your life and taken away everything you knew. And I’m a little afraid that if you hated me you’d kill me, but I think that’s the last time I tried getting married more than anything you’ve done.”

“Jesus, Gee. We don’t have to get married tomorrow.”

“I want to. Despite all that, I want to. Because I can’t help but start to believe you when you tell me every week you don’t hate me for what I’ve done.”

“I could never hate you. I can what-if myself into a hole over things I was hasty about, but it’s already done. And I still like you.”

“I’m still sorry I turned you.”

“Sorry you did or sorry about when you did? Because I’m pretty sure if you hadn’t and I’d been human in Italy Grant would’ve, and as shitty as my turning was, I’m very glad it was you and not him no matter the situation.”

“I’m sorry I made it shitty.”

Frank shrugs. “What-if’s again. What if we’d planned it and you overthought it and fucked up and killed me? What if you’d never turned me at all and I’d stayed with you until you had to bury me? What if I stayed with you and came to resent you for not aging like I was? Too many what-ifs.”

Frank rolls off Gerard’s chest and curls into his side to sleep, muttering, “Too many ways it could’ve
gone wrong. Maybe it was fucked up when we did it, and it was pretty snap decision making but it’s done. Maybe I wouldn’t do it again. But maybe if I had the chance to re-do it I’d be smarter and make you keep blood in a mini-fridge under your desk. Maybe I’d’ve reported Bert earlier and gotten him arrested. Who knows.”

“I guess we don’t. Are you sure you want to get married tomorrow, though?”

“I’m gonna be scared shitless during our vows, I think. But I wanna be married to you, and I think you mostly have to have a wedding for that.”

“We could elope.”

“You want Mom to kill us?”

“She’d come around.”

“You clearly don’t know my mother that well yet.”

Gerard snorts. “Guess not.” He wraps an arm around Frank, holding him a tad too tightly for a human to be comfortable. Frank only huffs a laugh and relaxes. Maybe someday Gerard will be used to vampire stillness of Frank next to him. Maybe one day it’ll be comforting.

Frank loosely curls his fingers into Gerard’s ratty old sleep shirt, half-asleep by now. “G’night Gee. Tomorrow’ll be g’night husband.”

Gerard can’t help but smile at that. “And I’ll be able to say the same thing. I love you.”

“Love you too.”

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Linda wakes them up early, blithely ignoring her son’s grumbling about how the wedding isn’t until the afternoon.

Once they’ve all got one cup of coffee in them, Linda snorts at them both. “You both look about ready to call this off from nerves. Frankie, back porch, have a smoke. You’re marrying a wonderful man. Gerard, front porch, take a smoke with you as well. You’re also marrying a wonderful man. You two will be fine.”

They both share a look, and Frank taps an extra out of his pack to hand to Gerard. Linda tosses him her lighter and says, “I don’t know how you don’t have one.”

“I’m still trying to not pick it up again.”

Frank snorts. “Bullshit. You just steal mine. And leave my lighter in your pockets and I have to go dig through your jackets.”

Gerard just shrugs, pulling a jacket on. They retreat to opposite sides of the house and bask in the silence and the comforting pull of nicotine. Frank stares at the trellis in the backyard, patches of slightly muddy snow still lingering under trees, and thinks about getting married. He’s wanted this for years, if he thinks about it. Something about having it in front of him suddenly feels enormous. But it’s Gerard. And Frank is already committed to him in possibly more binding ways than marriage.
Frank shrugs to himself, shaking off doubt, and can practically hear Dr. Rexha in the back of his head telling him to build a positive growth story. So he does. He’s got Gerard, Linda will get to sit front and center and watch him get married to a man that genuinely makes him happy. That should at least help validate the trials she put herself through to protect and nurture him. Jamia will walk him down the aisle, and Matteo and Gerard will walk down just before. Frank doesn’t mind taking the bride’s slot in the procession at all. Gerard’s escort is non-traditional anyway, and Frank wouldn’t want to be given away by anyone but Jamia. It seemed fair.

They’ve got a small and tight community of vampires, friends and brothers to share in their inhumaness, and old friends that love them for all they are. He and Gerard will be happy. And they’ll move down here next summer. Closer to Mom, closer to Matteo and Lorenzo. Frank stubs out the butt of his cigarette and can admit to himself that being close to Matteo and Lorenzo means being that much closer to the temptation of their work, but that’s possibly not even a problem. Maybe he and Gerard will be married and co-running a small sect of organized crime one day, living a glamorous, high-stakes life.

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On the front porch, Gerard squints at the ice on the neighbor’s roof and fervently hopes this marriage goes better than the first. It ought to, but he still worries. At least this time they know he’s a vampire. That changes quite a lot, in fact.

Gerard can appreciate that, and remembers the tense days after he’d first turned Frank, when he’d been terrified Frank would want him gone. Instead, Frank had turned to him and expected and received his support and for that, kept Gerard close to his heart. Maybe one day Frank won’t want Gerard, and for the first time, Gerard wonders if that’s okay. They’ll be married, they’ll have lived a lifetime or more by then, and hopefully when they drift apart they can stay friends.

But now, they’re going to solidify that right now, they’re committed. And maybe for the first time in his life, Gerard wants nothing more than to be bound to Frank just as permanently as Frank will be to him. A two-way street, neither of them slaves to the other. Gerard can be happy with that.

With his last two slow drags, he sends up a silent prayer to his family, long lost, and returns to the familiar language of a blessing from his youth, asking them to look upon him with love on his day of marriage from where they dine with the saints. He hopes they hear it.

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They meet back inside, both a little less nervous, at about the same time, and Linda tells them to get in the shower —“Separately! You’re not married yet!” — and start getting shaved and make sure their hair is nice. The photographer will be in in an hour and a half for the first look photos, and it’s Jamia and Lorenzo’s job to keep Frank and Gerard separate until then.

Frank is barely allowed to grab his own shampoo and toiletries out of the bathroom before he’s shut in the master suite, Jamia sitting on the edge of Linda’s bed to keep him in the rooms. Lorenzo will be similarly hounding Gerard down the hallway.

They both roll their eyes and shower, shave, and start getting dressed. Jamia keeps watch on the time and makes Frank comb his hair three times. Frank gets nervous again and quietly unloads all his fears on his best friend, shirt half-buttoned and standing on the carpet in just socks.
Jamia gives him a severe look. “You’ve wanted to get married for fuckin’ years. And Gee’s great. And he’s been a great support system for you. And given that you’re doing this well seven months out from what you call a full-Bob regression? I’d say he’s fantastic. And you’re nuts for him, come on. Even back when we were laughing on your couch about vampire rumors, you were stupid into him.”

Frank smiles at the memory. “Yeah. And now I’m gonna marry him.”

“Mhmm. I’m really proud of you.” Jamia pulls him into a hug, careful of her dress. Frank squeezes her back.

“Thanks for always being here for me.”

“You’re welcome. This is why I’m giving you away. I raised you right.”

“Damn straight you did.”

Frank grins at her, nerves finally starting to give way to excitement. Jamia leaves him to manage his tie and shoes himself and goes out to meet the photographer.

He’s a lovely man, with a direct, unfiltered style more appropriate for their venue and small wedding. Jamia steps onto the porch as the photographer- Jon- checks his shot of Linda, standing on the porch in her gown, hair all done up in perfect swirls of grey. Jamia presses a short kiss to her cheek and steps down to shake Jon’s hand and introduce herself.

Jon shucks his coat briefly in the front and catches Frank first, getting a great shot of Jamia coming into the room as he finishes tying his tie. Frank dressed, they head down the hall for the first look outside. Frank takes the opportunity to hammer on the door and call to Gerard, “You at least half-dressed? I’m told we can look at each other now!”

They can hear both Gerard and Lorenzo laughing as they head down the hallway, and Jon leaves Frank outside in the side yard and goes back in to follow Gerard out.

Jon’s first photo of Gerard is of him pulling his coat on, looking nervous and thrilled.

Their first look is fantastic, from Jon’s perspective, and unlike some couples they don’t need to be coached to get into good angles and good expressions. It’s easy for him to get one of Frank staring at Gerard while Gerard smiles at Jon, and a second later he snaps the matching photo as Frank looks at him for the photo and Gerard turns to look at Frank.

There’s only one serious photo in it, one of two that Jon usually tries to take, even if most couples aren’t into it- the first is more somber, a portrait of the couple, usually just holding hands and standing side by side. Both Frank and Gerard are smiling in theirs, but the contrast will still be there. The second photo will be after the reception, long after the vows and cake when the couple will lean gratefully into each other and beam. If it makes the wedding album cut, it’s always Jon’s favorite.

First look done, the officiant’s car now parked a little ways down the street, and the food back in the oven to warm up, the clock feels like it’s speeding up as more and more people get to the house.

It’s all a little terrifying, and Frank and Gerard are locked in their room to wait for the ceremony to start. At least now they can cling to each other’s hands and both try not to smear and crumple their vows into illegibility. It’s the one thing they haven’t shared with each other.

They will soon, though, because Matteo and Jamia are at the door, both looking far too excited. Frank gets up and wipes his sweaty hands on the bedspread, and Gerard tries and fails to discreetly
do the same on his pants. Matteo offers Gerard his arm, and they head out, Frank and Jamia holding hands behind.

At the door and about to walk down the aisle, Gerard glances back at Frank to flash him a smile and turn forward again, threading his arm through Matteo’s. They start their walk down the aisle, and when they’re at the trellis and in front of the officiant and Matteo has sat down again, Jamia takes the first step out onto the deck and Frank goes with, body totally numb. If he had a hand free he’d be patting himself down for his vows, just to make sure they’re in his pocket where he put them a moment ago.

Somehow, his feet carry him across the yard to Gerard, and they’re standing face to face. Frank shifts nervously on his feet, and all Gerard can hear is the rush in his ears. He knows the officiant is offering platitudes of how good they are, can almost hear Jon’s camera clicking quietly, and can hear Linda sniff, eyes certainly damp. But he only had eyes for Frank.

The officiant nearly has to nudge Gerard to get him to pull out his vows, and Gerard fumbles them out. He’s a traditionalist, so they’re pretty much just Roman Catholic, but Gerard says every word with sincerity, “I, Gerard, will take you, Frank, uh, for my lawful husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and health. And I promise I will love you and honor you all the days of my life.”

Frank is definitely tearing up, and Gerard gets the vague impression some of Linda’s friends are dabbing at their eyes. Frank fumbles his paper out and squints at it, “I, Frank, take you, Gerard, to be my lawfully wedded husband and to be no other than yourself. Loving what I know of you, trusting what I do not know, I will respect your integrity and have faith in your abiding love for me, and so I pledge to you my living and dying, equally in your care though all our years and all that life may bring us.”

Frank holds his hand out mostly steady and watches more than feels Gerard’s chilly, pale fingers gently push a slim band down his finger to rest against the engagement ring Frank already wears.

Frank’s is a little bit more non-traditional, a little bit more non-denominational, but the additional words make a few tears find their way down Gerard’s face. Only Frank would choose to remind Gerard of the depth of his love by adding a pledge to give Gerard his living and dying after he’s already given his life. Frank knows Gerard gets it, because he squeezes his hand tighter.

Frank then gets to take Gerard’s hand and slide his wedding band down it, taking a moment to appreciate the two plain gold bands, one engraved on the inside with his promise, and the newer one engraved with today’s date, December 28th, 2015.

The officiant asks the big questions, “Gerard Way, do you take Frank Iero to be your lawfully wedded husband?”

“I do.”

“Frank Iero, do you take Gerard Way to be your lawfully wedded husband?”

“I do.”

“Then by the power vested in me by the State of New Jersey, I now pronounce you man and husband, by the laws of this land. You may now kiss your groom.”

They meet in the middle, and Jamia leads a raucous cheer, Jon snapping photos left and right.

They thank the officiant, and everyone rises at once to head inside, Frank and Gerard leading the
way, hand in hand. They don’t bother with any gap between ceremony and reception, both Frank and Gerard vanishing to the kitchen to help Linda carry out hot food while everyone takes off coats and finds their seats.

Gerard finds the officiant as he’s leaving and presses a warm cup of cocoa into his hands as an extra thanks for officiating a ceremony in the dead of winter. He’s more than happy to wrap his gloved hands around it and head home to his own family for dinner, happy with the afternoon. They had been a sweet couple, and the tiny wedding was oddly endearing. Frank and Gerard are seated in the middle of the huge, snaking table, and get to lead a toast to friends who are more like family, and everyone cheers. Gerard beams.

Conversation stalls for a moment while everyone eats, and mostly picks up around Frank and Gerard. They get a small bubble of pure joy, Matteo making friends with Justin to his left, and Antonio charming Pat silly. He has a gift with old ladies, really, because within the hour all of Linda’s friends, including Sharon, are nearly hanging off him. Antonio looks in his element.

Jamia and Lorenzo are in deep conversation, a fact that would be more worrying if not for the fact Joe is thick as thieves with them, heads close. At least they can’t be talking about vampires.

Marie is chatting with Linda and Katie, possibly the most civilized conversation of all, and it’s the perfect cover for Julian to quietly thank Frank and Gerard for making them all be so normal so soon after Grant. Frank gently takes Julian’s hand. “We did it for us, but I’m glad everybody could be here.”

Julian smiles. “I’m glad we could be too.”

—

Someone breaks to put on music, and Frank and Gerard have to have the first dance, Jon snaking through the cramped living room to snap the best photos of their waltz. Linda is unsurprised by the grace Gerard has and a little surprised with how competent Frank seems with the steps. Maybe they really did practice.

Everyone joins the dance floor after a round of applause, and Frank spins Linda past Matteo and Sharon, Antonio and Pat sweeping around the other corner. Gerard takes Jamia to the floor, and Justin steps up with Katie. It’s only minutes until no one is really dancing with a partner anymore, everyone teaching each other steps and laughing over the music. It gets hot fast, and someone slides open the screen door. Frank sheds his coat and learns to Lindy Hop. Gerard flops into a seat next to Lorenzo and sighs, “I never had the stamina for balls.”

Lorenzo cracks up, and it takes Gerard a second of squinting at him to realize that Lorenzo is a little bit drunk and took his statement quite another way. Gerard hits him in the shoulder to shut him up. Maybe Frank is rubbing off on him. Obligingly, Lorenzo stops laughing. “You don’t have the stamina for balls, huh?”

“No. Can’t dance quite that much, thanks.”

“Mhmmm. Yeah.”

“You’re insufferable.”

“So ‘teo tells me. Congratulations, by the way.”
“Thank you.”

“Is one of you gotta chuck some flowers so we can see who’s getting married next?”

“You gonna try to catch it if we do?”

Inexplicably, Lorenzo flushes a little and says, “No. Not quite yet.” quietly.

Gerard considers. “Matteo or Julian?”

“Who do’ya think?”

“‘teo. How long?”

“Fuckin’ ages. And it was hopeless forever. So. Too soon off the gun for either of us. I just hope he doesn’t get hitched before I manage to grow a pair. Or killed.”


“Thanks. If you do throw a bouquet, chuck it at him just for shits.”

“I think that if either of us are throwing anything, it’s gonna be Frank.”

“Give ‘im another drink and he will.”

“Yeah.” Gerard sits back to watch his husband hang onto Jamia’s hand and try to coordinate his feet to match Pat’s sure steps. Both Frank and Jamia are laughing hysterically, neither learning all that quickly.

Winter brings dark quickly, and when more people than not are flopped back into their seats, everyone resettles for dessert.

Frank and Gerard had been more than happy with the idea of just homemade cannoli for dessert but Linda wasn’t going to have it. Fortunately, Betty bakes. Linda had enlisted her to bring a tiny 6” round cake so Frank and Gerard could cut it and feed each other a piece.

When Linda pulls it out, there’s a bit of a hubbub from Frank, but they settle and he cuts a piece happily, cheerfully saying, “Oops,” and feeding Gerard’s piece more to his cheek than his mouth, smearing frosting on him.

Frank is clearly a bad influence on Gerard, because he turns and does almost the same thing, catching Frank’s nose more than his mouth. At least they’re both laughing, cake all over their faces. Jon snaps another photo, and everyone digs into their cannoli, plowing through a few pots of decaf with it.

With no one dancing, the dropping evening temperature cools the living room quickly, and Linda gets up to close the sliding door to the outside, setting off the back motion sensor light as she does it. The reminder that the afternoon is well and truly over rouses a few, and the good thing about a small wedding is that when everyone rouses themselves to help clean up, it goes quickly.

Borrowed serving dishes go home with their owners, the rented tables and chairs are stacked up neatly on the porch for the church to pick up tomorrow, and Julian and Justin run the trash out to the bins in a few trips.

By 8:45, everything looks back to normal, and people take the last of the cannoli with them and head out, giving final well-wishes to Frank and Gerard at the door.
Jon is nearly the last to leave, and takes his second picture in the hallway. This time, they’re leaning slightly into each other, all the nerves wiped out of their smiles and replaced with a little bit of exhaustion and a lot of settled happiness.

To their surprise, Linda leaves with Sharon and Jamia, the last guests to go.

“Mom, are you leaving?”

“I’m staying with Sharon tonight, dear.” She even winks at Frank. “It’s your wedding night, honey, your mother doesn’t need to be next door.”

Both Frank and Gerard turn bright red, and Jamia wags her eyebrows. Linda pats Gerard’s cheek and heads out, small bag in her other hand.

A little boggled, Frank and Gerard lock the door behind them, both reeling from that departure and the rush of the whole day.

After a beat of silence Frank says, “Well, shit. We did it. We survived getting married.”

“I’m fairly certain that in terms of relationship milestones, this was our least deadly.”

Frank snorts and nods. “For sure. Hey, we’re improving.” He’s starting to sag into Gerard’s side as well, with the adrenaline and nerves of getting married finally bleeding out of his system. Gerard can tell he’s three minutes from swaying on his feet as well and starts directing them to bed.

Frank gets out of his suit and faceplants into bed, muffled when he says, “God, I’m so fuckin tired, and we didn’t even do much.”

“I think we did plenty.” Gerard flops next to him.

“Mhmn.” Frank flops a hand into Gerard’s to hold it. “Can we sleep and consummate our marriage in the morning?”

Gerard nods, “Yeah. Too tired for anything worthwhile now.”

“Yeah. Goodnight, husband.”

Gerard can’t help but grin, “Goodnight, husband.”

Frank giggles sleepily and turns on his side to fit them together in their usual cuddle. Gerard wraps an arm around him and they fall asleep in minutes.

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Lorenzo must have opened the blinds at some point while he and Gerard are getting dressed, because it’s the morning light that wakes them up. At least the winter sun is weak.

Gerard proves beyond a shadow of a doubt what he is by hissing at the light and leaving Frank to struggle over him out of bed to tug the blinds closed. He comes back to bed and wriggles close to Gerard. “Hey. You still tired?”

Gerard knows exactly what that question is really asking and rolls over, arm over Frank less on his waist and more on his ass. “Are you suggesting we consummate our marriage?”
“I am indeed.”

“How could I refuse my husband?” Gerard kisses Frank before he can answer that, slick and dirty and open mouthed.

Frank’s breathy moan is lost in the rustle of sheets as Gerard kicks off his boxers and Frank wriggles out of his. Gerard is sure he’ll never tire of touching Frank.

Frank noses Gerard’s chin up for another slick kiss and rolls their hips together. It really doesn’t help Gerard put together the coherent question of what they want to do. They’re still not quite back to 100% post-Grant.

Gerard ends up asking, “Hey, hey? Frankie? What are you up for?” Which is about eight times pushier than he wanted to sound, and he almost grimaces at himself for that wording.

Frank narrows his eyes, not really helping his expression any from three inches away and says, “I’m down for real sex. Fuckit. This is our goddamn wedding sex, I’m not half-assing.”

“Let me know if you’re not okay.”

“Promise I will.” Frank tangles their left hands and grins at the slight scrape and slide of the metal bands.

Gerard comes up with Jamia’s unopened lube and grins at Frank. Frank just grins back and shrugs, “Might as well use it for what it’s for, huh?”

“True.” Gerard peels the packaging apart and juggles the bottle for a second, “This is nice. Like, glass.”

“Shit.” Frank pushes himself up on his elbows to see it, nodding approvingly. “Well, shit, it ain’t there to look at, but we should keep the bottle.”

“Mhm, yeah.” Gerard pumps some on his fingers and rubs an experimental thumb through the lube, nodding to himself. It’s a little slicker than the silicone stuff they usually use, but it should be close enough. Frank rolls onto his stomach and settles a pillow under his hips, dragging Gerard’s attention back to him. “God, you’re so fuckin’ pretty. I really got lucky.”

“Damn straight you did.” Frank wriggles a little more, less to get comfortable and more to keep Gerard staring at his ass. It works, like it always did before.

Gerard opens him up slowly, a little quietly, and coaxes little breathy moans out of Frank before Gerard kisses him on the shoulder and says, “Up on your knees?”

Frank pushes himself up and sets his weight on his left elbow so he can jack off with his right, nodding to Gerard he’s ready.

Gerard tugs the blanket under their knees a little haphazardly and settles in behind Frank, a little nervous. He’s not sure if he was even this nervous the first time Frank tugged him into bed and said, ‘come on, fuck me.’ Apparently, he’s lost in thought a moment too long, because Frank looks over his shoulder at Gerard and says, “Come on, or I’m gonna jack myself off before you’re even in me.”

It’s not the prettiest wording, but it gets Gerard moving. He still takes it slow, and when they’ve both hit a good rhythm, his nerves evaporate. This is the same as it’s always been.

Frank pretty much just slides down into the bed after he comes, face buried in the pillow and hair
curling with sweat. It’s just enough change Gerard comes a moment later, blanketing himself over
Frank, who barely flops them out of the wet spot.

Neither of them move for a moment too long, then finally try to peel themselves up and apart, both
grimacing as muscles pull and tacky sheets catch them. Frank just strips the bed and goes naked
down the hallway to throw them in the laundry, then comes back to herd Gerard into the bathroom.
“Shower, shower, shower.”

“Okay.” Gerard only pauses to kiss him.

Frank smiles and kisses back. “Hey. We did it for real. We got married, we had sex again. We’re
gonna be fuckin’ fantastic.”

Gerard just nods. “I love you.”

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed the wedding! Question moving forward... I can't ignore that Frank
and Gerard are two gay US citizens in 2015. And the next chapter will cover roughly
2016-2020, and we here in 2018 know that it gets a little wild politically in these years.
Do you guys think that it would be an oversight for me to ignore the American political
climate that they're living through, or do you guys read for escapism and would you
prefer that We Don't Talk About That Shit? LMK, I live to serve <3
When the water runs cold and the laundry is beeping, Frank and Gerard pull themselves out of the shower and get dressed. Frank calls Linda and they make plans to meet for breakfast at the diner with Sharon and Jamia.

They’re all still a little tired, so breakfast is quiet, but a comfortable type of quiet where everyone knows everyone else. Frank drives his mother and husband home after.

As they pull up, Gerard asks, “Linda, are you expecting someone?”

Linda looks over, and sure enough, someone is on the porch, knocking by the looks of it. Frank pulls into the driveway and is a little surprised to see that the man has grey hairs, not typical for the young door-to-door salesmen that sometimes come by.

Frank turns off the car and the man turns. Linda gasps. “Oh, Frankie. That’s James.”

“That’s Dad?”

Gerard looks over and makes the connection between Frank’s wavy brown hair and this man’s and instantly decides he’s happy Frank got his mother’s family’s features and not his father’s.

Both Frank and Linda have stalled a little, so Gerard is the first to open his door and climb out, deciding to disarm him with unfamiliarity and asking, “Hi? Are you going door-to-door?”
Frank and Linda scramble out and Frank gives his Mom an arm on the other side of the car. Frank shouldn’t leave his husband to his father’s tender mercies, but Gerard is tougher than Frank usually gives him credit for.

James steps off the porch, looks at Frank and Linda, and sticks out a hand. “You’re Gerard.”

Gerard doesn’t take it. “How do you know my name?”

“You filed for a marriage license. And while I admire Kim Davis, I don’t want to be run out of town. Figured I ought to come and ask Linda what she thinks she’s doing.”

“What she’s doing?” Gerard keeps his tone mild, but Frank can see his shoulders tensing up.

“Letting my son live like that. No reflection on you, of course. I know some families are lenient about this sort of thing. Ieros don’t want to degrade themselves to that.”

Frank rounds the car and snaps, “Well, you don’t have to worry about that. Not your family.”

“You’re still an Iero.”

“Must be an unrelated branch. You’re not my father, and I’d thank you to get off this property and stop trespassing.”

“You’re still my blood.”

“Cut me. See if I bleed a drop that’s related to you.” Frank shakes his head in disgust and adds, “Come on, Mom.”

Frank leads her around James, shouldering past him a little more aggressively than necessary. Gerard follows with a glare that says not to push it. They leave James on the porch. He stands there to knock and Gerard leans just into the bay window next to it and glares at him. Something about the color of his eyes makes James hesitate and he stomps off down the porch.
Frank glares around the kitchen. He’s fooling no one with that act. Gerard and Linda both know there’s upset a millimeter under the surface. Linda sits at the counter, and it bubbles over.

“He admires Kim Davis! God, there’s gotta be other gay people in this county, and they don’t deserve that shit! Hell, we don’t deserve that shit. We got the fuckin’ right to get married. Federal damn law. Fuck him. I’m so fuckin’ glad we get to live in Rhode Island and get a different fuckin’ clerk to do it right. I can’t fuckin’ believe. And then to come to the house! We’ve gotta be able to file a complaint, get him fired.”

Gerard nods. “I won’t pull any I told you so’s, but I’m not surprised something like this happened. There was bound to be blowback on any social change as jarring as that.” Frank turns, and the look in his eyes has Gerard holding up a hand. “I’m not upset about the change, clearly. But there’s always blowback. They’ll do anything to stay in power. Or feeling like they are.”

Frank deflates, and Linda sighs, “I wish you didn’t have to feel it, though.”

Gerard shrugs. “Not the first, not the last time. I’ll live.”

Frank nods. “Been taking shit my whole life. I can deal.”

She just sighs again. “You shouldn’t have to. I’m sorry.”

“None of it’s your fault. You can’t change homophobia all by yourself. Sorry, Mom.”

She just pulls Frank into a hug. Frank hugs her back and then peels himself off to curl into Gerard’s arms. Gerard tucks his face into Frank’s neck and presses a kiss there. Linda gives them both a tired smile.

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The newly minted Way-Iero’s spend New Years Eve in New York, indulging in tourism and braving the cold and the crowds to join the rest of their vampire family in Times Square for the ball drop. They all sneak in flasks and get drunk by eight thirty. Julian kisses a stranger while Antonio screams the countdown and Matteo and Lorenzo cheer.
After that, and still both nursing hangovers, Frank and Gerard bicker about who has to be driving all the way back to their apartment, then both go straight to bed. January second, they unpack and hunt, ready for the 2016 school year.

January 3rd, they start school again. They also break it gently to Joe that they plan for this to be their last year, and that they’re moving back to Jersey in the summer.

He’s sad to lose them, but not really surprised. He’d been able to tell at the wedding that New Jersey was home for them both. He jokes that they better break it to their students early that they’re leaving because they’re both well-loved teachers.

They both promise to and Frank spends his 4th period on Zillow looking for houses. He also sends an email to a school friend down near New York to ask about districts they ought to send resumes to. She emails back recommending they check out Newark or the school systems in New York and Long Island proper.

Gerard thinks Newark sounds good, and it’s two hours to Linda, and one to Matteo and Lorenzo, nearly perfectly placed for them.

They send out feelers and wait, settling in to have fun and enjoy their last months at Earhart. They stop being quiet about being an item and exactly one student drops Frank’s Italian One class. Giving Joe early warning also means that they both get to sit in on interviews for their successors.

Gerard is very happy with the first candidate for his post, an ex-military wife who quit teaching art years ago to move with her husband and has spent her time as a military spouse painting and selling through gallery shows whenever she can. The husband is now retired, and Gerard is charmed by her enthusiasm and prior experience. Justin and Joe like her as well, and Marie is hired.

It takes Joe two more months to source an Italian teacher, and they end up with a very recent graduate who ends up spending the last two months of the year co-teaching with Frank to get the hang of a high-school classroom. By the end of the year, Frank is practically kicked back at the back of the room letting Amanda- Ms. Ordonez to the kids- have the wheel and only interjecting when the upperclassmen try to run roughshod over her.

He and Gerard pack their effects out of their rooms in June and Frank ends up carrying a box with
Doom Patrol out to Gerard’s car. He peeks in and laughs. Gerard looks over with a question on his face.

“When you first came. And I helped you move in, I carried in a box with like, Ink and Doom Patrol in it and I remember looking at it and looking back at you—well, your ass— and thinking ’shit, I’m gonna have to peel myself off this dude’ and look at us now. I really did that.”

“Oh, you really did that?”

“Oh, I did.” Frank steals a kiss and sets the box down.

Gerard smiles, “You were very helpful and very enthusiastic and I was charmed, I admit, but I didn’t realize I had a crush until we started trading comics.”

“That was when I told Jamia about you. Because I’d mentioned ‘oh, I’ve got a hot new coworker’ and she gave me shit about leaving fresh meat alone, but I didn’t mention your name ever then and then, I think it was early October, I was sourcing her for a comic to recommend you and she put it together and was like ‘is art comics Gerard’ also ‘hot new coworker’ from three months ago?”

Gerard laughs, “I love your descriptions for me. I love how they evolve. That I went from superficially hot to being comics buddy, then boyfriend and now I can be, I dunno, nerdy husband.”

Frank pushes the door open for them to head back inside for another round of boxes and considers. “I think now you’re like, past an epithet. You’re Gerard. I’m lucky to be your husband. And I know you better, so it’s hard to distill you to like, three things.”

“I can’t be nerdy, immortal husband?”

“Hot immortal husband. I think you’re a poser, you don’t go for niche stuff, you just know old shit.”

“You wound me.”

“I speak only the truth of my observation.”
“Mhmm. I see.”

Frank laughs at Gerard’s projected annoyance. They both know it’s all fake.

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A few boxes later, Frank and Gerard are both on the verge of sweaty and their rooms are empty. On their last pass through the hallways, keys left on their doors, they run into one of Frank’s just-graduated seniors who is dropping her freshman sister at a summer club meeting.

She stops them by shouting “Mr. Iero!” down the hall and jogs up.

“Hey Kelsey! Dropping off your sister?”

“Just did. Are you moving out?”

“Just finished. You caught us on our last pass through the halls of Earheart.”

“Oh, shit.” She throws her arms around Frank. “I’m gonna miss you! I’m so glad you waited until I graduated to leave.”

“I waited just for you.” Frank hugs back.

She laughs and drawls, “Suuuureeee you did. Can I get a picture with you before you guys are gone?”

“Sure. Gee, will you take one?’’

Gerard nods, shepherds them both over to a wall with the school name on it, and takes Kelsey’s phone.
Kelsey is taller than Frank now, so she leans her head almost against the top of his. Frank tilts his against her shoulder and Gerard snaps the photo.

“Thank you Mr. Way!” She takes her phone back and turns back to Frank, switching to show off her Italian to say, “Thank you for being my favorite teacher all four years and making learning Italian super fun. I will keep studying it in college because of you.”

Frank nearly tears up right there in the hallway. Gerard looks immensely proud of both of them, somehow. Frank manages to swallow the lump in his throat and say- still in Italian- “No, thank you, Kelsey. It’s students like you that keep teachers like me going and make us love our jobs. Thank you for letting me be a positive part of your school career.” He pulls her into a second hug, and she clings back.

The three of them walk back to the front and Joe waves Kelsey through the door with a genuine wish for her to succeed and be happy in college, then embracing Frank and Gerard and thanking them for their time and effort in teaching here.

It’s another five minutes before Frank and Gerard are in their cars, heading home in a two-piece caravan with boxes filling both their backseats.

They make the very poor choice to move in July, and both curse and sweat and fight far more than necessary while they box up the apartment on Marshall.

Gerard has convinced Frank to let them just Goodwill their current furniture and buy new things in Newark when they get an apartment so they can just move in their cars. They put Rhode Island in the rearview mirror just after the 4th and head for Linda’s.

She’s happy to let her living room become a box city for a few weeks and Frank and Gerard take one car to Newark to stay with Matteo and Lorenzo and apartment shop and job hunt.

They end up renting an entire house, a tiny three-bedroom with a near non-functional tiny galley kitchen that they both get a good laugh at.

The same week they sign the rental papers on the house, they both have interviews, at different schools. Frank has one at a private school just over the state line that apparently busses a lot of Long Island kids in, and Gerard at the local public.

Frank wears a tie and jacket to the interview just in case and ends up very happy he did, as the headmaster- and they have a headmaster, Frank has some reservations about that- is in a full suit. There’s another teacher in the Italian department, an expat from Tuscany, and they chat in Italian, Ms. Conti making it very clear that while his Sicilian-Jersey accent marks him as a lesser, she approves that he’s fluent, unlike some candidates she won’t name.
Frank leaves feeling a little like he’s rubbing shoulders with the lacrosse players who feel that they run the school and are only humoring a grimy, working class punk kid for kicks. At least the interview was promising and the salary fantastic.

Gerard’s interview is much less trying. He’s applied to an English position and ends up being asked if he’s okay doing a split-load of English honors and ESL to fill two gaps in their staffing. Gerard is fine with that.

They meet at their empty house and sit on the kitchen counters for a minute to check in with each other, then pull out the tape measure and start measuring rooms. The last stop tonight is a furniture store.

On the ride over Frank flips on NPR and grimaces. It’s all presidential election coverage. Trump looms more awful every day, and his choice of Pence had both Frank and Gerard worried, but both are reassured by Hillary’s bedrock solid foundation and progressive choice of Tim Kaine as running mate. They listen to the hum of discussion on some shit in Iowa, polls in Montana, and something about the Russians. Brexit gets cut off when Gerard kills the engine in the parking lot of the big box.

Frank sighs and hauls himself out of the car. Radio was a mistake.

They decide on a simple bed frame with a flat headboard and two built-in nightstands. The kitchen table is a small one, and they get the leaf so they can squeeze their whole family there if needed. Gerard wants a drafting table for the non-guest room, and Frank just trails quietly while he picks one. The guest room they go traditional and buy a set in dark wood. Frank watches Gerard arrange delivery for tomorrow afternoon and blinks.

Somehow, watching Gerard pull out their joint, post-Grant, credit card jars Frank into realizing that he’s married. Somehow, the enormity of having everything he’s ever wanted never hit him, slipping by and soaking in in a train of quiet, unremarkable moments. But the man standing a foot in front of him is his husband. Wanted to be married to him. Wanted to make Frank happy and be with him, and genuinely wants to share their lives. That doesn’t miss Frank, and he’s staggered by the incredible enormity of it. Gerard turns and catches his arm to walk out and Frank’s feet follow while Frank marvels at the whole thing.

Gerard notices how quiet Frank is and nudges him in the parking lot. “You okay? You’re awful quiet.”

“I just. We’re married. Really married. Like, forever. And it’s working.”

Gerard beams. “Yes. I know, it staggers me every day.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Every day. I wake up and you’re next to me and I have to marvel a little.”

“Aww. I wonder if it’s always gonna be like this.”

“I’m sure at one point we’ll stop being a wonder to each other, but I think we’ll always love each other. At least, I hope so.”

“Mhmm. Because even when I’m having a bad day or I’m annoyed at everything, I still like being
married to you.”

Gerard’s smile softens a little. “That’s what counts the most, right? That we still want to make it work no matter what?”

“Yeah. I think it is.” Frank takes his hand over the center console.

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With the very basic furniture moved in, Frank heads home to get the rest of their things, and Gerard stays in Newark to get sheets and at least a bare minimum kitchen. Frank returns with a full car and Linda the next morning, smirking at Gerard’s surprise.

“I know how minimalist you live, and nobody makes a home like a mother can.”

Gerard only grimaces a little, which is fair enough. He can’t even be too mad at Frank’s duplicity. Frank has always been a stand and fight guy, and somehow it always works out. He just welcomes Linda in and takes her bag to the guest room.

Frank gives him a kiss for playing along as well and Gerard considers Frank forgiven.

Linda makes quick work of helping settle all their knickknacks in and around and in two days they’re moved in. On the third day, Frank gets an offer letter from the private school on some ridiculously expensive stationary. Linda tells him to buy another suit jacket and has a friend who was in the city for the weekend drive her home.

Gerard can’t help but agree. “Maybe two? You’ve got plenty of button downs, and between us plenty of ties, but maybe a sport coat and a linen jacket?”

“You’d know better than I would, so sure.”

“I won’t be as bad as Lorenzo, I promise.”

“I appreciate that. Really.” Frank kisses Gerard and goes to respond to the offer.

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The rest of the summer is by in a blink, and the first day of school rolls up. Frank carefully puts on a linen suit jacket and tie and makes a face at Gerard’s button down, top button open to mock him.

“Okay, have fun at the public school. Your kids will probably be better than mine.”

“Maybe. I’m a little worried about my ESL classes, because I don’t speak any Spanish or Hindi, and the ESL kids out here are from like, Ecuador and India.”

Frank shrugs. “Aren’t you doing more upper level sort of remedial crash-course type of classes? And anyway, still better than my Staten Island kids, probably.”

“Have fun with Ms. Conti.”

“I’ll leave you for her,” Frank grumps. Gerard laughs.

---
Frank starts his morning with freshman, Ms. Conti able to claim upperclassmen based on seniority. Frank doesn’t mind too much. Freshman are an easy start, too, and Frank enjoys his first hour of getting to know the students and finding out why they’re taking Italian.

He introduces himself in Italian to sophomores next period, then roughly repeats the same class, asking how comfortable they are with basic sentences and vocabulary. They’ve all got awful accents, and Frank has to wonder if Ms. Conti’s is fake or if she doesn’t try with younger students.

The private school is funny, because all of Frank’s classes are about half the size of the one’s he taught at Earheart, and the teachers lounge has a nearly fully stocked kitchen in it. Ms. Conti introduces him to the rest of the language teachers, and they all look like he’s in for something with Italian. Frank presses as to what, and one of the Chinese teachers says, “Well. It’s the socialite mothers that enroll their students in Italian. Wait till parent-teacher conferences when they find out you’re not having them read Dante in the original language.”

“Oh.” Frank shrugs, “At my last school, I taught all four years, and my upperclassmen used Dante’s original texts to perfect accent and rhythm. It’s antiquated now, but it’s in a similar rhythm to Shakespeare. The content of the Inferno is good to gloss over in a cultural discussion, but reading it? Explaining his extended metaphors to students who are struggling to put together the action of a single canto? I’d need a year. That’s a college-level Italian literature course, not an assignment in a high-school language class. And I’ll fight some New York socialite on that.”

The rest of the language teachers toast him for that. “Good. You won’t buckle under the pressure.”

“I hope not.”

On the other side of Newark, Gerard’s classes are going well. Honors English is going to be fun, and he’s got other teachers sharing the load, so the syllabus is pretty well developed. That always makes it easier. His coworkers are nice, some more burnt out ex-New Yorkers who miss the city more, but some love Jersey for what it is. Gerard thinks he’ll get along better with those teachers. Bad memories of the 1950’s aside, Jersey is a home he’s cherished and building new memories with Frank there is something he’s looking forward to.

Political fear settles over the US like a miasma. Over dinner with Linda at Frank and Gerard’s house, Matteo comments that he and Lorenzo are moving. “Too many Trump stickers around our building. And the doorman didn’t believe that Lorenzo lived there when he came home late the other night. We’re not welcome anymore. I think we might try Harlem.”

Frank gives a grim look and Linda looks a little shocked. “They would treat you like that?”

Matteo nods. “Yes. Day to day it flip flops if they don’t like me just because I’m black or that they don’t like me because I’m an immigrant. At least at work we’ve bullied them down into submission. I don’t doubt that half of them hate me behind my back, though.”

Lorenzo makes a face of agreement and adds, “Oh, they do. Their men shit-talk you to me all the
time. Because they think I’m hired. No way somebody who looks like me could be me, you know?”

Gerard grimaces as well. “I never had to deal with that, I’m so sorry.”

Lorenzo shrugs. “Racism is racism. If you guys think you can fix it singlehandedly, be my guest, but I sure can’t.”

Linda sets down her fork. “That sort of treatment is unacceptable.”

Matteo sort of looks surprised at her. Linda continues, “It’s unacceptable, and you shouldn’t have to deal with it. I’ll be looking into what our politicians are doing about those issues. Frankie, you should have let on sooner.”

“That there’s homophobia? And racism? Mom, you’ve known about homophobia since Dad. And we’re pretty white, so we’re more the racists. But I thought you knew that?”

“Well, I don’t know! My whole neighborhood is whites, as you say. I only really know the Scotts. And they’re Presbyterians, so I only know them in passing. And I only met your friends last year before your wedding. I didn’t know this.”

Lorenzo gives Frank a short, ‘is your Mom always like this?’ glance, then says, “Linda. It’s alright you didn’t know. But if you want to learn more about it, one of my friends has put together a list of books that you might enjoy reading?”

“I’d love it.”

“I’ll email it on through Frank, then.”

“Thank you.”

Lorenzo sends the list the next week, and Frank buys the books and sends a heavy flat rate box to Linda.

Linda changes her registration to Democrat just in time for the November presidential election.

Frank bullies Gerard into civil participation, getting nervous as the more moderate polls inch closer to a tossup. They canvass, phone banking until they both want to throw their phones against the wall. Gerard’s school is much more liberal, and Frank joins him and a large group of their teachers to work as afternoon poll workers. Everyone spends the day of the election stressed.

Gerard’s ESL students stay in his room during their lunch breaks, watching the news on school laptops in at least three different languages and comparing them, asking Gerard questions. Gerard looks up answers when he doesn’t know and tries to reassure them that no matter what happens, they’ll survive the next four years, even if the worst happens.

Gerard knows he shouldn’t make those promises. He was in the US during the AIDS crisis, and even children like his students died, or lost family members. Those holes aren’t filled quickly, or ever.
He meets Frank in their quiet little house and pulls him into a hug. “Are you nervous?”

“Yes, but I shouldn’t be.”

“So am I. I didn’t think I was, but it’s been growing on me.”

Frank nods into the hug. “We should watch the news anyway. I’m not gonna be able to sleep. And I wanna be watching when Hillary wins.”

“Okay. We can watch the votes come in.”

Frank nods and goes to flip the news on. CNN’s map is updating slowly, and they watch New York offset six other state’s Electoral Votes. Virginia trickles from red to blue as the northern counties’ votes are counted, California numbers not even showing up yet as their polls are just now closing.

Frank and Gerard settle in on the couch, both quiet. As sure and as hopeful as they are in their hearts, you can never fully displace worry. North Carolina’s Electoral Collage votes flip red a little after 11pm and Frank sits up straight, saying, “Oh no. No no no.” It’s the first time tonight the lion’s share of votes is for Trump.

CNN calls the election at 11:48pm, after Georgia calls its votes. Gerard thinks he’s crying, but he’s numb. He’s always numb. He should have known this would happen. Frank is staring at the TV like he can’t believe it.

Frank moves like a ghost into the kitchen and reaches into the empty freezer for the remaining bottle of Grant’s liquor. Gerard hears him slosh liquid into two somethings and then Frank reappears with a few fingers in the bottom of two of their coffee mugs. He grimaces as Wolf Blitzer’s face and hands a mug to Gerard.

“I’m going the fuck to bed and hoping this isn’t goddamn real.”

Gerard turns off the TV in time to see Frank knock back his portion. Gerard doesn’t have to say that’s a bad idea, but Frank’s got a sharp brittleness in his expression and Gerard suspects Frank knows it’s a bad idea and that’s the exact appeal.

Can’t say he doesn’t see it. Gerard slugs his back as well and can’t help hacking at the burn. Frank takes the mug back and his cell phone rings.

It’s Jamia.

Frank picks it up and doesn’t say anything. Jamia’s sob warbles through the line and Frank’s shoulders crumple.

“Yeah. Yeah, Jai. I know.” Frank hisses a breath, setting the mugs in the sink and leaning heavily on the counter. Gerard carefully stands up.

“We watched it. Yeah. I- I don’t know either. Survive? Fight? Rough it out?”

Frank thinks of the AIDS crisis he was no more than a kid during and turns to Gerard. Gerard shakes his head in a tiny motion and Frank feels something in his chest slip loose and crumble.

Gerard pulls him into a hug and takes the phone. “Jamia, we’ll survive. I’m good at that, and you and Frank are strong. If we have to go to ground, you’ll be right with us.”

Frank distantly hears her protest that she doesn’t want to, and Gerard smiles a little, one arm around
Frank and the other holding the phone. “I know. I don’t either, and trust me, Frank’s loath to do it. But we put ourselves first.”

Frank hears her hitch a sob and can’t hold back his own, head against Gerard’s shoulder.

Gerard rubs his back, trying to delay by willpower the rapid swell of alcohol through him. It’s sort of working. Frank’s near-silent breaths have the sloppy, wet quality of a good drunk cry now against Gerard’s collar. They both need to get to bed.

Gerard disentangles himself from the phone call with Jamia, makes Frank drink a mug of water, does the same himself, and herds them both to bed.

The silence of their house buzzes in the 1am quiet. Gerard can’t sleep. Frank doesn’t look like he really is either, but he looks like he’s trying, at least. Frank had cried himself out and then mostly dozed off, a little too viscerally unsettled to really sleep. Something about this feels personal.

—

School the next day is awful. All the kids are on tenterhooks, but the worst are the children of proud Trump supports, who silently exude gloating machismo. Frank has never wanted to hit a student, ever, but the lone senior he sees in the hall during lunch is smirking and it’s tempting, Frank has to admit.

Gerard’s students are an awful, beaten quiet that he’d do anything to change. Both parties know that they’re beyond any help that could be offered.

A full third of his ESL 10th grade class is missing and Gerard spends a little while with them going over legal immigration rights.

Frank teaches as though not a single thing has changed, if noticeably quicker to dole out punishment for the few kids acting out. The ones he has pegged as closeted or more liberal are quiet anyway, probably equally upset.

—

It takes a few weeks for equilibrium to return to their lives. As the New Year comes around, Jamia moves from Rhode Island to LA, out for a new job and a new girlfriend. Frank and Gerard promise to visit in the summer when they’re free and meet Alicia and see Jamia and Sharon again.

As a result of the time difference between Frank and his best friend, he gets closer to Matteo and Lorenzo. By summer, Frank is almost a decent shot, according to Lorenzo. Gerard excuses himself from the practice by nailing a target ten times in half as many seconds. Lorenzo shrugs and lets him take his leave.

—

They spend the rest of the summer of 2017 mostly becoming nocturnal. They visit LA, burn to crisps, come home and hunt in New York, then flip their sleep schedules. This pays off in July and August, when it’s coolest at night. Frank didn’t overheat like this before Gerard turned him, but he
supposed needing to run cooler makes sort of sense.

With them awake during Italy’s day, Gerard and Antonio become closer friends as well, calling each other on the phone and talking about dogs, about the English classes Antonio is taking and Gerard is teaching, and about their other friends. Antonio is candid and surprisingly perceptive about Frank, including about Gerard’s deep-seated, unshakable and mostly unvoiced concern that Frank will find Grant’s ways appealing and hurt Gerard. Antonio is closer to Matteo and Julian, who both became what they needed to be to survive Grant, and he assures Gerard that any of Frank’s shifts would not take him quite so far.

It eases a fear that Gerard couldn’t quite tamp down before, the one that still shirks every time Frank flicks his eyes bright in the cool darkness of their house or says, “Hey, Gee, I’m hungry, can we hunt tomorrow?”

They get through 2017 like that, reading each other the news with headshakes in their empty kitchen, grading late into the night and finally falling into bed together as dawn approaches.

Their sex life finally recovers from Grant as well. Frank watches some porn or reads some article and opens a conversation with Gerard with the unique mix of hopefulguilty that means the conversation must be about sex. Gerard braces himself.

“So. I read this article.”

Gerard nods.

Frank gathers himself, “And it was about, uh, role-play and kink. Anditwasreallyhot, but like, approachable?”

“Yeah?”

“Would you mind if I, uh, sent it to you?”

“…Sure? Do you wanna just tell me about what you wanna try?”

“Sure?” Frank plops into the other chair, “Well. Half of it wasn’t relevant, like, ‘change your birth control’ or ‘make sure your partner sees you putting on lingerie in the morning and then send it to their office in the middle of the day’ because uh, we’re both men and that’d get us fired. But there was one good one. Basically take roleplay outside of the bedroom? Like pretend it’s a first date and make up who you wanna be and go out and have a date and fake hook up.”

“Does the character have to be someone else? I feel like I’d be too worried about trying to remember my fake persona.”

“Could just be like, I dunno. An idealized self. Like, I could be me if I actually enjoyed first dates and trying to get laid. And like, I dunno. Had a more fun job. Like, I could say I’m a private security guy for a Saudi prince.”

“Pulling on your day off, huh?” Gerard grins and leans back. “I’d be down to try it. Say next Saturday? Don’t tell me who you’re gonna be, but we need to figure out who’s house this is.”

Frank grins, “Yeah, we can decide. I wanna think of a good persona, so we can decide when we know who it would fit more.”

“Yeah. I think that’s a suitable amount of kink for us.”
“Yeah. Non-violent and shit.”

—

Saturday night, Frank makes Gerard stay in the back room while he changes and takes an Uber out to the casual restaurant they’ve decided on. Gerard changes as soon as he’s gone and forces himself not to snoop to find out what clothes Frank is wearing. He’ll see soon enough.

Gerard drives out and juggles his car keys as he crosses the lot. Frank texted, “Got a table. Left of hostess,” and Gerard appreciates both the message and the dedication to changing his usual texting style. He sends back a thumbs-up emoji and walks in.

Gerard has decided to become a divorced father, no custody rights, and a financial advisor at a law firm. It means he’s wearing nicer shoes, well-cut chinos - courtesy of a weekend with Lorenzo- and a dark button-down.

In a total contrast, Frank is in a t-shirt and faded jeans, thrift-store bomber jacket slung over his chair. Gerard shakes his hand over the table and holds Frank’s arm an extra moment to look at the tattoos decorating his arm. Frank’s smile holds some heat.

All they’ve hashed out is that they met at a bar two weeks ago and each thought the other was hot, so they know nothing about each other. Frank orders a beer and Gerard a glass of wine and they both settle into the game.

“So, what do you do for a living?”

Frank grins with all his teeth. “Well, to pay the bills I write for an advice column published in Seattle, but I’m a musician.”

“Oh? Rock music, I can assume?” Gerard raises an arch eyebrow.

Frank takes the challenge. “And what do you listen to?”

“The same hair rock of my youth that you do.”

“That works for me. And your daily grind?”

“Legal advice. I’m no lawyer, just a financial advisor.”

“Shit.” Frank whistles through his teeth. “You might be too clean-cut for me.”

“That’s a hard judgement for a man whose ex-wife walked in on him in bed with two other men.”

Frank blinks. “Or maybe not. Damn, though, I can’t imagine.”

Gerard shrugs, dangerous and elegant. “I wasn’t ready for fatherhood, it got rid of her.”

Frank sits back with a sharp smile. The waiter comes and takes their orders, both given with barely any attention to him, and finally licks his lips and says, “So now you’ve turned to picking up conquests like me?”

“Maybe I just never wanted to stop.”

“Can’t say I mind getting picked up by tall dark and handsome. You top, or…”
“You scream, or..?” Gerard shoots back. He’s having more fun than he thought he would, having picked a very devil-may-care persona and knowing there will be no consequences to their interaction tonight.

Frank’s smile turns dark. “Might if you play the same game you talk.”

“Oh, I do.”

They force the conversation lighter, and both enjoy their food, filling each other in on made-up details. Frank makes up a Scottish hookup he had who was really into BDSM and rope play, and Gerard is almost irrationally jealous. To get back at Frank, he talks about his wild, fake affairs.

They leave both running a little hot, and Frank pushes Gerard up against his car to kiss the shit out of him. Gerard gropes for his ass and hisses in his ear, “You moan like a musician too?”

Frank does moan quietly at that, a little weak-kneed at this persona Gerard’s created, and gets a muttered explicative for the sound. They both break to hurry into the car, then Gerard drives exactly five over the speed limit all the way home. Gerard fumbles the key in the lock, distracted by Frank pressed against his back and undoing his shirt buttons. He has a moment of disassociation in the hallway when Frank finally gets his shirt off and he turns with an almost violent snarl to peel Frank out of the tight, tempting t-shirt he’d been wearing. Who is this other, more violent Gerard?

Frank doesn’t seem to care, pulling him in for a clashing kiss and fighting with the button-fly on Gerard’s jeans.

They’re both totally nude by the time they fall into bed- Gerard’s bed, if the personas are kept.

Frank remembers long enough to get lube out and then ask, “This the bed the wife walked in on?”

“Mhmm. And if I had you between me and a friend it’d be just the same.”

Frank swears at the idea and turns huge, bright eyes on Gerard. “Would let you if your friends are the same type of fuckin’ asshole you are.”

“Oh, I’m an asshole?”

“You’re an asshole and you know it. But that’s a good thing. You’ll need that.”

“Why?” Gerard nudges Frank’s knees a little further apart and knee walks into the space.

“Because I like getting fucked by people who mean it when they say ‘fuck you’.”

“That was irredeemably awful. I’d like to fuck the attitude out of you, but I suspect that’s impossible.”

“Spank me.” Frank offers, and rolls his hips back.

Gerard snorts and sticks with just fucking him tonight.

They’re both sweaty and totally a mess afterward, and Frank offers Gerard a hand to get up.

“Shower?”

“Laundry?”

“Both? If we shower together we’ll have hot water for both.”
“Works for me.”

—

It becomes a thing, varied and mutable. They use the kink as a crutch sometimes, often don’t, and rarely put as much time or effort in as the first time. Half the time it’s just a change of clothes and a ‘meeting’ at the front door. It’s fun in a way neither of them really thought married sex would be.

The lack of Grant-ness in Frank is reassuring every month that goes by, and it feels like they’ve barely been in the Newark house for a month when they realize it’s been a full two years.

Frank pauses that summer and asks, “Hey, when do we need to at least switch jobs around the county?”

Gerard considers. “Next year?”

Frank nods and signs his renewal contract for the private school, gladly taking a salary increase. Gerard’s public school gets a little more crowded, and he shakes his head at Frank when he offers help.

Frank ends up taking on leading the history club at a tiny, severely underfunded public school between his work and the house. It’s good work, and Frank loves the kids even as they all struggle with parents and a school system that doesn’t value them.

Gerard just lets Frank rant about the state of public education in New York and New Jersey, knowing that Frank will do the same when Gerard has complaints or is just plain too overworked for anything else.

They both find other ways to blow off steam. Gerard goes as off the grid as he feels he responsibly can, painting with the door locked and music playing in the spare bedroom. Frank never bothers him, just leaves a note at eye level across the hallway from the door if he goes out.

Frank does other work to take his mind off school, looks over spreadsheets at coffee shops and helps create and coordinate itineraries for moving goods when Matteo is too busy to do it. It’s really low-level criminal involvement, but Matteo is more than happy to throw him work, clearly more than alright with Frank working behind Gerard’s back. Frank is happy to feel that he’s not super responsible for things, but that he can accomplish helping.

—

It’s Lorenzo who calls Matteo out for it, seeing Matteo’s phone ping an email from Frank with the subject “Train shipments- 10-16-17 to 11-23-17” displayed.

“Is he working, now?”

Matteo looks over and sees what Lorenzo is talking about. “Small pieces.”

“Didn’t know he was in.”

“He’s not.”

“Looks like he’s a consultant.”
“Lorenzo, why do you sound upset? We told him he inherited, they moved closer, I reached out and offered and he took it. Then asked for more.”

“Does Gerard know?”

“Haven’t asked.”

“So no. Did Frank tell you Gerard was bound into service? He told me fuckin’ suit shopping three years ago he’d never because it’d be betrayal.”

“I didn’t know that, no.” Matteo pauses, purses his lips for moment, then adds, “I’ll ask about it. That’s a low thing if he is.”

“Yeah. I didn’t think you’d condone that.”

“I don’t think I would.”
Nothing simple can last forever, and just when Frank and Gerard are about to switch schools around, a little too unmoving for too long, Linda has a heart attack. There’s two weeks to the end of Frank’s school year, but he begs off, and given that he’s already told them he’s quitting, they don’t care that he hastily packs up his classroom and drives home to meet Linda in the hospital and take her home.

Gerard calls every day and comes out two weeks later, bringing a trunk full of his and Frank’s clothes for a longer stay. He sort of expects them to be out here with Linda a while.

She’s doing alright by then, at home with a new aspirin regimen. The heart attack and the hospital stay have taken a lot out of her, though, and Gerard is a little shocked to see she looks like she’s aged a decade since the winter. She still kisses his cheek, and Frank helps him unpack into their old room.

A week later, Gerard pulls Frank aside, out to the back porch. “Are you planning to stay here?”

Frank sighs, “Maybe? I don’t want to leave her, but we have the house, too.”

“How about we apply for jobs out here, and I can drive back out to Newark for a couple weeks and arrange to rent the house. Or sell it, honestly.”

“We’ve only had it for a few years, though. We shouldn’t sell it, should we?”

Gerard shrugs, “I mean, we always can. But I can put it up for rent while you’re here with your Mom.”

“Okay.” Frank takes a deep breath. “Yeah. I think I’d like to stay out here.”

“Okay. I sort of expected that you would.”

“Yeah?”
“Mhmm. You’re predictable like that,” Gerard pulls him close and lets Frank sag close to him for a moment.

—

Gerard is the one who brings the whole deal up to Linda as well, and she nods.

“Well, you know what…,” she pauses to take a deep breath, and Gerard waits. “I could move down stairs into the guest room. The stairs are getting to be a pain anyway, and you and Frankie should take the master suite. Then his old room can be the guest room, or a studio for you two, whatever you want.”

Gerard is a little taken aback by the offer. “I mean, if you want to, we can shuffle around the house. We’d never kick you out of your room, though.”

Linda waves a hand, “I’m a single woman, I don’t need a master suite. And you and Frankie are doing so much here for me already.”

“You wanna talk your son into that, then?”

Linda laughs. “Why? You not able to bring him around?”

“Nope,” Gerard cheerfully admits defeat as Linda laughs at him from the barstool.

—

Frank gets a job at his old high school and Gerard gets an offer at the local community college teaching Art History 101. By the end of the summer, they’ve moved everyone around the house, and Linda has an armchair and a new, second TV in her room so she can watch her soaps from bed.

Frank takes over the bills with a finality Linda can’t really argue with, and accepts his gentle push to retire from the diner and take it slower. With Frank and Gerard both working and the extra money they’ve seemed to have since they got engaged, she really can’t say she needs a job to bring in income.

Gerard goes back to Newark to rent the house, and Matteo offers to rent it for the cost of the mortgage and utilities so they can use it as an undercover house for some of their agents. Gerard isn’t thrilled with that idea, but he has to admit it is easy.

Lorenzo gives Matteo quite a bit of shit for not asking Gerard about Frank’s work. Matteo eventually snaps, “It’s Frank’s marriage, his responsibility.”

“And ours as his friends to raise the question. Or you could just not give Frank work.”

“He’s become a little bit indispensable, honestly.”

“Really?”

“Yes. He’s practically running all the drug trading we’re doing. I’m just managing the in-person relationships.”

“Damn.” Lorenzo whistles between his teeth. “Well. If you’re gonna keep being a bastard about it,
good luck.”

“Thank you for your unending support.”

Lorenzo grins, and Matteo grins back. They can forgive each other other people’s bad decisions, at the end of the day. Hopefully Frank comes clean, and if not, it won’t be Matteo and Lorenzo that suffer anyway.

—

They’ve been living at Linda’s for nearly a whole year when Gerard finds out about Frank’s mob side-work. And when he does, it’s roundabout.

Jamia visited Disney, and is texting Frank all about it now that she’s home. Gerard asks about a billion questions and Frank, laughing, tosses his phone to Gerard saying, “Ask her yourself!”

Gerard is doing that, leaning into the side of the couch and texting back and forth, and an email notification pops up. This one is from Matteo, and is headed ‘Re: Wild Wild West’ which is fucking weird, so Gerard swipes the email into a larger preview, wondering if Frank is planning to theme his birthday party or something.

It’s not about his birthday. It’s about trafficking 3-D printed and CNC milled guns. Frank has been-suggesting some pretty insidious ways to provide the mob extra firepower and even commission designers for particular models. The ‘wild west’ subject is in reference to the absolute lack of regulation with regards to these guns. Gerard reads the whole thread with a lot of dawning concern.

He almost can’t help but search Frank’s inboxes for other threads with Matteo. He finds a lot, some CC’ing other people with similarly inscrutable business emails. Gerard suspects mob for all of them.

Frank wanders back in and must see something on Gerard’s face, because he cheerfully asks, “Yo, what? Did Jai get food poisoning and vom all over a kid or something?”

Gerard shakes his head, “No. Dunno. Don’t think so. Have you been working for Matteo?”

“How like, serious? Like, Excel shit, why?”

“Mob Excel shit?”

“Accounting shit. I don’t really ask.”

“Uh-huh.” Frank is lying to his face, and Gerard is probably about to really freak out on him for it. His voice is very flat when he says, “Well, ‘teo’s emailed about about the trafficking the guns thing.”

“Oh.” Frank doesn’t say anything else for a moment, then stares at his knee and says defensively, “Well, he asked. He picks my brain sometimes, I don’t carry out any mob shit. I wouldn’t do that to you.”

“Do you not count helping plan mob shit as being involved?”

“Not really? No? I’m not on their payroll, and nobody knows me. I just help out Matteo with random shit.”

“Frank.” Gerard sets the phone down in between them. Frank, guilty, doesn’t reach for it. “Do you want to? Join properly?”
Frank grimaces. “I- I don’t know. I don’t know if I can. Because of you. And Mom. I’m named after
her dad, and I never got to meet- hell, you knew him and I didn’t. Because of the mob. Because he
got fucking killed. You’d hate it, she’d hate it. It’s not fair of me no matter what I want.”

“I’d let you.” Frank’s shoulders collapse, and Gerard barrels on. “I know that sometimes- If it’s what
it took to make you happy.”

“That’s bullshit- I can be happy-“

“You know what I mean. If it could scratch that itch. Because, clearly, you want to. You sort of
always did.”

“I can’t, though.”

“You could. If you let yourself.”

“Would you divorce me?”

“Not unless you turned on me like Grant. Or expected me to participate.”

“I would never-“

“Good. Don’t.” Gerard cuts him off.

Frank starts again, on a different topic, “I still don’t think I should. Besides like, stop lying to you
about this.”

“I’d appreciate that.”

“I’m sorry.”

Gerard dips his head to acknowledge it, but doesn’t grant Frank forgiveness yet. “We’re alive a long
time. Maybe after this phase of our lives, we’ll do something else.”

Frank nods. “Do you want me to stop?”

“Don’t think it’s my place to ask you to. It’s kind of jarring, the way you can talk about gun
trafficking and lives like that with Matteo, because I didn’t know that side of you. But I guess I’m
not- surprised? That you could or do or will. But I’m more upset you hid it from me.”

“Yeah. That’s on me. But it honestly started with Matteo asking me if I knew how to run a
computation he wanted for something in Excel and I did and told him I could set it up and did it,
didn’t even know or ask what it was about or for, and I didn’t consider that work. Just a favor to a
friend. Then it became a habit and I got a little more involved with the why and the what and then I
realized what I was doing and got guilty and started hiding it.”

Gerard sighs. “Is there anything else, like this, that you’ve been hiding?”

Frank shakes his head, thinks for a second and says, “I kind of want to buy my own gun? Does that
count?”

“I don’t think that counts in America, but why?”

“I sort of miss the pistol range with Lorenzo. It was like, a great way to take a break from everything
else for a couple hours.”
“Would your mom be okay with you owning a gun?”

“She’d probably okay one, as long as I was a responsible adult and got the gun safe and kept any ammo on the other side of the house. Dunno. Don’t even know what kind I’d get yet.”

“Well, maybe if you get a pistol I’ll get some kind of rifle and get my own aim back. I used to be really good.”

“You’re a fucking weapon with a pistol already, how good were you?”

Gerard makes a face. “Good enough to be very deadly.”

Frank snorts out air. “Fair enough. Maybe for Christmas we’ll get each other guns or something.”

“How very American of us.” Gerard says drily.

Frank swats at his leg. “Hey now, some of us are Americans here.”

Gerard smiles, reaching out to tug Frank closer, “Please don’t go behind my back like that again?”

“Safe to say I’ve learned my lesson, yeah. I won’t. And I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have abused your trust like that.”

“No, you shouldn’t have. I’ll be able to forgive you for it, well, in a little while, but I appreciate you coming clean and apologizing.”

Frank nods. He doesn’t really expect to be forgiven anytime soon. Maybe in the next couple months.

—

Matteo calls two days later, asking about a plan Frank had devised a while ago. Frank is sitting at the kitchen table grading and cuts him off with “Wait, wait, I’m grading, give me a second to put this down.” He marks his spot and goes to flop on the couch next to Gerard, putting his legs in Gerard’s lap. Gerard makes a face at him, but he wasn’t working anyway, so Frank just makes one back.

“Okay, ‘teo, go on?”

Gerard give him an interested look. Frank knows full well that Gerard can clearly hear Matteo’s side of the conversation. This must be his method of transparency. Matteo continues talking about imports with the new tariffs proposed. Frank takes the phone away from his ear and starts looking at things online, not putting the phone on speaker. Better to keep this from Linda’s ears, at least.

“Mm, yeah, I think ducking the G8 on this could work. But is there supply we can get to? How fuckin’ expensive is it gonna be to build that relationship with them?”

“If we can undersell NAFTA, easy.”

“Can we? That seems, uh, like asking for a loss.”

“Invested capital. If it gets product into people’s hands we’ll be driving supply and can start charging whatever.”

Frank makes an interested noise. “If you’re gonna cut in a monopoly, make sure everybody is on board. Can’t have Chicago sending in their own shit for cheap when you start driving prices.”
“I’ll look into it. Have you made a decision on that Atlantic City boardwalk?”

“I don’t wanna own that, there’s so much competition out here. They’re opening up the gambling laws, it’s all online e-sport betting now. Unless we start offering live versions of that and cash payout, it’ll go under.”

“We always could. Just enough cash.”

“God, just open your own bank.”

Matteo laughs. “I’ll get Julian on it, we already trade currency like a bunch of criminals.”

“Wow, almost like you are.”

Matteo snorts another laugh. “Almost, almost. Well, I’ll let you get back to grading. Look into that e-sports stuff and get back to me if you think it’s feasible? I’ll put together something for the Coalition.”

“Can do. Probably just be annotations, I’m mid-term.”

“No rush.”

“Cheers. Talk to you later.”

“Have a good rest of your day, Frank. Give Gerard my best?”

Frank looks up and sure enough, Gerard dips his head in acknowledgement. “He’s right here, he heard you.”

“Oh. Has he been?”

“Yeah.”

“Hm. I hope for your sake that was on purpose.”

“It was. I’m not totally in the doghouse.” Frank’s tone is cheerful, and Gerard snorts. Not totally is a good way to put it.

“Always a good thing. I’ll talk to you later?”

“Yup. Bye.” Frank taps the call off and leans back against the couch, making a face at Gerard and googling ‘e-sports betting New Jersey.’

Gerard hums. “This is the plan for transparency?”

“It’s my current one. I won’t bother you if you’re working, though.”

“You don’t have to be this transparent, but I appreciate it.”

Frank shrugs, “Better more than less.”

“True.”

Linda comes in, holding an empty tea mug. “Frankie, were you on the phone?”

“teo called. He says hello.” Matteo had done nothing of the sort, but it frames the call as social, and Gerard holds back the eyebrow raise that would give him away.
“Oh, how are they doing? How’s that brownstone they were fixing up?”

“He says it’s beautiful. We’ll have to go into the city some weekend and see it.”

“That’d be nice.” Linda smiles and heads through to the kitchen.

Gerard lets loose the eyebrow raise he’d been holding back. Frank grimaces helplessly. Gerard dips his chin to say “well, alright” and hits play on the movie he’d paused.

Frank flips around on the couch to snuggle up against his side, and when Linda has her cup of tea ready, she joins them.

—

It’s become their quiet, three part life over the last year and Frank sort of wishes it could last forever. It doesn’t occur to them that it could until the yearly back to school flu sweeps the school and Frank doesn’t so much as sniffle.

Gerard could turn Linda, hell, Frank could if Gerard told him how, and they could really keep their little family together and peaceful forever. Like Tuck Everlasting.

He asks Linda that night, sitting with her during dinner while Gerard paints in the upstairs room.

“Hey Mom? Have you ever thought about being like us?”

Linda swallows her food and gives him a serious look, “Are you asking about dating again and finding a partner, or about your—she sort of hand waves the word—other condition?”

“Mostly the second, but if you want to date, it certainly won’t bother me.”

“I very briefly thought about what it must be like, a few years ago when you first came clean. You went home with Gerard and I spent the next few weeks thinking about what it must be like for you to be inhuman. I think I oversold the changes in my imagination, now that I live with the two of you, but yes, I did think about it.”

“Would you want to be turned?”

“No. Oh, no.” Linda shakes her head immediately.

Frank is a little taken aback. “Why not?”

“Frankie, darling, you might think you’re old at your very young-looking thirty-nine, but I’m old. We don’t want to live forever. I’m quite happy with this, and I’ll cherish it as long as He lets me, but I’m ready to move on when it’s my time. I came to peace with that two years ago after that heart attack.”

“But- Mom,” Frank takes a breath to come up with some sort of argument.

“But nothing, dear. My life is the Lord’s, and He knows He’ll take me when it’s my time, I don’t intend to cheat. Besides, I’ve enjoyed growing old with my friends, I don’t want to leave them behind and have to hide away because they’d see I’m not getting more wrinkles.”

“What about me?” It’s selfish and Frank knows it even as he says it, but he can’t imagine his very long life without his mother.
“Oh, darling.” She covers his hand on the table with her own. “I will always, always be with you. Pick up a rosary, and Ms. Mary and I will be there.”

“Mom…” Frank squeezes her hand.

Linda smiles at him. “I wouldn’t have said yes anytime after John fucked off, Frankie. You’re several years too late in the asking.”

“If you say so.”

“I do. I’m alright with my mortality.”

“I’ll miss you.”

“You had better.” She grins at him, and Frank is helpless to grin back.

“I’ll just, I’ll miss you. I wanted to ask.”

“I understand. I might even be a little disappointed you didn’t think to ask before this.”

“I thought you’d be mad!”

“In the last two years? No. Before then, maybe.”

“Exactly!”

Linda laughs and stands to kiss Frank’s forehead, “Sometimes, son of mine, you are absolutely ridiculous.”

“Maybe just a little. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

—

For Linda and Gerard’s birthdays next spring, they host all the neighborhood ladies for a backyard barbecue, many bringing children and grandchildren. Frank knows several from school himself, and they sort of dance around each other. It had been plenty jarring to see last names he recognized when he came back to teach three years ago, and he and his peers don’t really socialize. But their mothers do, and this sort of block party celebration brings everyone.

The few kids that know Frank as Mr. Iero their English teacher, do a half-dance of avoidance and attempts to chum up. The parents mostly wrong-foot and cringe every time they try to reminisce and put their feet in their mouths.

One of the women, bottle-blondie now and a cheerleader back in the day, tells Frank he looks very good for his age, and her husband sort of cringes. Frank just grins, winks, and tells them that grading all the time keeps him out of the sun. It’s sort of fun to ignore all their discomfort, the old blows softened with time.

Gerard sidles up to him and slips a beer into Frank’s hand. Frank leans back against him after catching a quick kiss and rounds him into the conversation about their high school days. Gerard ‘confesses’ to high school in Italy, then has to out himself as Italian and say it’s really nothing special when you’re Italian going to school in your native country. They pout and allow him that answer.
Gerard bemoans the very concept of marrying ones high school sweetheart that night, and Frank just snorts. “Maybe it works if you’re straight?”

“Probably not. They probably hate each other deep down.” Gerard sighs, rolling over.

Frank pokes him. “Only have sex with the lights off.”

“Nothing wrong with sex with the lights off.”

“They can’t see like we can, dumbass. Makes a difference.”

“I still like the light on, anyway. I like looking at you.”

Frank snorts at him. “Charmer, you are.”

“Do you wanna be charmed?”

“Maybe I already am.” Frank slides his hand to Gerard’s ass.

Gerard leans forward to catch him in a kiss with a fond smile.

Frank switches to teaching writing at the middle school over the summer of 2021, and Gerard accepts a language arts opening there as well. There’s an especially large class of 6th graders coming in and a few teachers retiring, so it’s likely that next year they’ll be moved with the class and have the same kids again.

After so many years of high-schoolers, Frank is a little surprised by how young the sixth graders are, and has to adjust his discipline tactics quite a bit. Gerard has an even bigger shock. The only bright spot is that they’re finally working at the same school again.

Their co-workers find out that Frank moved home to support his mother, and that they got engaged in Italy, and he and Gerard become the couple to be among the faculty. Gerard gets cooed at a frankly alarming amount and eventually asks one of the teachers in the staff room what’s so special about proposing on vacation.

“Well, it’s Italy! That’s so romantic!” She puts her elbows on the table and leans forward.

“It was in my hometown. I’m from Italy. So is Frank’s family.”

“Oh, that’s even sweeter. Like, making sure that it was the families getting married and not just you two!”

“I guess. I just wanted to marry him, and I’d already met Linda, so I took him to where my parents are buried and proposed after. Then the trip turned into a shitshow, but he still married me.”

“Really?”

“Awful. Like, I proposed and twenty minutes later everything pretty much fell apart and left us
scrambling. I’m very grateful we both speak fluent Italian.”

“Oh, yeah, I can’t imagine being stuck somewhere you can’t communicate.”

“Mhmm.” Gerard’s smile is only a little forced. Frank interrupts, walking in with another teacher and glancing aside to tell Gerard, “Today has been so awful only you railing me though the bed tonight can save it,” in Italian and a cheerful, casual tone.

Gerard can’t help a smile and dips his head replying in a similarly opaque tone, “I’d be happy to.”

Frank just grins at him and switches back to English to continue debating end-of-term review techniques with his coworker.

They get coffee and settle down, Frank sliding an extra cup to Gerard. The woman Gerard was talking to misconstrues their Italian exchange and the coffee and exclaims, “See! It’s so sweet, all the little Italian endearments and the coffee and things! I wish my husband would!”

Frank’s coffee goes down the wrong way and he hacks, “I wasn’t talking about coffee. He just inhales the shit, so I get him a cup on auto.”

“Oh. What did you say?”

Frank shakes his head.

The man Frank walked in with puts it together first and says, “Are we lucky none of us speak Italian?”

“I’ll just say if you did I wouldn’t say what I did in front of you.”

He laughs, and the woman turns red. Gerard manages fondness and embarrassment at once. “You’re awful.”

Frank just raises an eyebrow at him and sends the man into peals of laughter. “God, my wife does the same, whispers in my ear at the grocery store and I’ve gotta keep a straight face.”

Frank nods. “Evil, but too fun to give up.”

“I haven’t gotten too mad either, she always follows through.”

“You’ve got a good woman.”

“She’s amazing.” He forces himself serious again and takes a sip of coffee, still smiling a bit.

Their third coworker sits back and rearranges her skirt, “Well. It’s still sweet you two get coffee for each other and are so fond of each other.”

“Are we especially fond?” Frank glances at an email on his phone, then clicks it off and continues, “What about Jim and Sarah?”

“They don’t count.”

“Why not?”

“They’re not as cute!”

“That smacks of fetishization.”
“What?”

“Are we cute because we’re gay, or because we get each other coffee? And be honest.”

“Well, both.” She looks confused.

Frank shakes his head, “Not good enough, see. That others us. If you didn’t know Gee, if he didn’t work here, you’d consider me just the same as Ned here. Married and otherwise unremarkable. And if I was straight and my wife worked here, I’d be like Jim, again, married but unremarkable. But because I’m married to another man, my marriage becomes a thing. We’re not exciting. But because we’re gay, you fixate and think we’re completely different.”

“It’s just different!”

“It’s not that different. You’ve got a husband, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Does he do little shit at home that bothers you? Like leaving stubble in the sink, or keys laying in the middle of the bed?”

“Yeah.”

“Same shit if you’re gay.”

“Except that Frank is the one that leaves toenail clippings in small disgusting piles.” Gerard refuses to allow Frank to impinge him for the stubble without one volley back.

Frank rolls his eyes. “It’s a relationship, Cathy. We bicker, we annoy each other, we have sex, we watch movies on the couch late at night. We’re very largely unremarkable.”

Ned nods. “I think I see your point? Like, it shouldn’t be different because your spouse is the same sex?”

“Yeah. At least to me, by the way, you haven’t been weird about it. Because you ask about Gerard and tell me about your wife, so it feels fair. Equivalent, at least. Most you asked is if my mom ever gave a shit.”

“Sorry.”

Frank shrugs. “You dropped it when I said she liked Gerard when she met him, so.”

Cathy huffs. “I think it’s a little bit dramatic to be upset we think you’re cute.”

“Nothing wrong with thinking it’s sweet we get each other coffee before it’s asked for, but thinking we’re adorable is sort of over the line.”

Cathy still doesn’t look convinced, but she gathers her laptop and mouse and heads out. Frank rolls his eyes at Gerard across the table.

Gerard sighs back. “Not a good day, huh?”

Frank shakes his head. “Terry Johnson’s daddy is coming in tonight for a parent teacher conference because his spawn won’t write more than three sentences for any assignment and it’s earning him failing grades. And I’m not exactly looking forward to getting to sit down behind closed doors with Chris Johnson.”
Gerard makes a sympathetic face while Ned looks confused and asks, “The kids a shit, yeah, I’ve got him too, but what’s up with the father?”

“Did I ever tell you I went to high school here? At least for the first two years?”

“No.”

“Well, I did. And Chris Johnson was here while I was and made my life hell. And if I haven’t forgotten, I doubt he has.”

“Oh. Shit.”

Frank nods. “So. Today’s been shit. Handed the kid another failed paper today and he just sneered at me.”

Ned gives him a serious toast. “Good luck.”

Frank grants him a tired grin.

—

Frank is a little surprised when he gets Mr. Johnson from the office. The man looks old. Much older than Frank does, at least. Frank does a quick bit of mental math and realizes that while he stopped aging just past thirty, and looked younger even then, Chris has crept past forty. His thirties must not have been the kindest, because his hair is thinning up top and he’s put on a beer gut. Frank just holds out a hand to shake and leads him back to his quiet classroom, Terry’s papers and their accompanying rubrics laid out on one of the desks already.

He indicates a seat at a desk for Chris and sits at the desk across from him. It’s always easier to talk to a parent from outside the teacher’s desk.

Chris sits gingerly and opens with a careful, “I’m surprised to see you back here.”

Frank meets his gaze cooly, “Not so odd. Mom’s still here, and she’s getting old. Easier for me to move back then drag her someplace.”

“But teaching here?”

“To be fair, none of the reasons I left the school were permanent fixtures.”

“I wouldn’t have come back.”

“You and I are different people.”

“I wouldn’t have felt welcome.”

Frank lays the papers he was about to hand over flat on the desk and asks, “Was I meant to feel unwelcome? I’m willing to move past my own time as a student here and do my best as a teacher. Including putting aside any prejudice I would have against certain families and doing my best to teach their children.”

Chris sneers the same way Terry is learning to. “ Doesn’t look like you’ve done the last bit successfully.”
Frank hands over the first stapled set of papers, first bullet of the rubric highlighted just for this.
“Personal narrative. Write a page.” He flips the sheet to Terry’s submission, barely a third of the page long, and gives Chris a pointed look.

Chris looks up and says, “Then why don’t you coach him to write more? He doesn’t know how to fill a page.”

Frank sighs. “Yes, he does.” And pulls out a thicker sheaf from the bottom of the pile. “We did this one with their history class. Pick a topic, make an outline, then write the paper. His outline is fine, great even.” Frank shows him a full outline for a five paragraph essay, completed with the template provided. Frank flips the page and says, “We wrote the essay in class. He had plenty of time to do it. He chose to turn in this—” he shows a paragraph and a half, barely brushing the points on the outline—“Halfway through the class period. I can’t think he’s running out of time or incapable of writing when I routinely offer students extra time on in-class writing and he does fine on the worksheets and outlines. I’ve asked him if he’s struggling with finding things to talk about or wondering how he should meet the length requirements, and he tells me no.”

“Have you worked with him one-on-one?” Chris flips through a few of the other failed papers.

“I scheduled him a study period with me, and he no-showed. I scheduled him a lunch with me and he no-showed. I can’t take disciplinary action for those no-shows because there’s a school policy that teachers cannot enforce attendance for those periods. He won’t take responsibility, he has denied help, and I can only imagine he doesn’t care. I’ve had plenty of students who didn’t care. I’ve failed them. I’m okay with doing that.”

“Seems harsh.”

“I’ve mostly taught high-schoolers.”

“I don’t want you to fail my son.”

“Then let’s make a plan to get his work up to speed and you can help me enforce it. At this point I can’t give him much higher than a C+ for this term, but he could bounce back and earn a B for the year if he starts meeting length requirements.”

“That’s not my job to teach him.”

“I want you to make sure he has time at home to do this work, and sit with him, ask if he needs or wants help. He could be struggling to do it for some reason he hasn’t shared with me and would share with you. It’s up to you if you want to ground him or limit his free time until his work is done, I know all parents are different about that.”

“I’m not home until late.”

Frank glances at his wedding ring. “Can you ask your spouse to?”

“She’s busy making dinner.”

“Can he sit at the kitchen counter with his work so she can keep an eye on him?”

“That’s not up to me.”

“Would you like to have me schedule this meeting with your wife, then?”

“No.”
“Then what can we do?”

“You should stop failing him.”

“If his work fails my rubric, I’ll fail him. He’s the only one in all my classes who’s failing. My assignments are not too difficult for their level. I only have three other students getting below a B-, and that’s for similar disregard for the homework.”

Chris’ face tightens. “I don’t think the community would be very happy to know you’re the one teaching their students.”

Frank raises an eyebrow. “You’re the only parent here who was my classmate in school. My husband teaches here with me. If that’s a threat, it’s a weak one. It’s not exactly groundbreaking to have been sexually active in high school, if you think you want to air my dirty laundry.”

“And the school is okay with your proclivities?”

“Yes. It’s 2022, Chris. It’s not the AIDS crisis anymore. Gay people aren’t persona non grata.”

Chris snorts. “I’m going to look into taking my son out of your class.”

“Be my guest. Email his sub-school coordinator, she’ll tell you you have to have an exceptional reason, as I’m the only writing teacher for this grade, but we can have that meeting.”

“We will be.”

Frank just nods, recollects his papers, and stands to let Chris out.

Frank goes home and faceplants into the couch. He’s pretty sure he deserves it. Linda shuffles by and pauses, then goes on. There’s a murmur upstairs, and Gerard comes down to perch on the end of the couch by Frank’s feet.

“Meeting went as expected?”

“Mmmrrgpth.”

Gerard sighs fondly and starts unlacing Frank’s shoes for him, gently asking, “If you still think the day can only be salvaged by what you asked for at lunch, we can. Or I can run you a bath.”

Frank lifts his head a little to consider, absently toeing off his other shoe. “Maybe a little less railing, more bubbles?” There’s a hopeful lilt in his question.

Gerard ‘hmms’ and counters, “Bubbles or hand job, how about?”

“You drive a hard fuckin’ bargain.” Frank lifts himself up off the couch, leaning down to kiss Gerard hello. “I’ll take the second option.”

“Ohkay.” Gerard smiles, forever glad this sort of fond ridiculousness is the overall tone of their relationship, and his immortal marriage. Frank smiles back, tucks a stray lock of Gerard’s hair back behind his ear, and heads upstairs.

Sure enough, Gerard has started running a bath for him by the time Frank has pulled off his button-
down and socks and pulled out loungewear. Frank pauses in the doorway, watching Gerard test the water temperature with a hand. “I love you so much.”

Gerard turns and smiles, and Frank can’t help but smile back. “Seriously. So much. You’re so incredible to me.”

“Only what you deserve.” Gerard stands, brushing a kiss against Frank’s cheek as he goes to leave. Frank catches his wrist to keep him in the bathroom.

“You’re amazing. Not every guy would move in with his husband’s mom.”

“Not every husband is nearly 400 and knows that the time we have with family is really quite short.”

“Still.”

“Still. And I love Linda too. Do you wanna be alone, or can I bring my book in?”

“Not gonna squeeze in the tub with me?”

Gerard gives the tub a dubious look over Frank’s shoulder. “I think that may be pushing the limits of the tub.”

“Fair enough.”

Gerard slips out and Frank strips and settles into his bath, unwinding some tension as soon as he sinks into the hot water.

Gerard comes back not long after, and ends up kicking off his lounge pants to perch on the edge of the tub with his feet in, first telling Frank about the book he’s test-reading for class, then reading out loud. Frank basks, only half listening to the words and mostly listening to the familiar elastic of Gerard’s North Jersey vowels, and under that, the rolling stress patterns of his native Italian.

—

2022 slips in in a quiet, happy haze. Julian and Antonio invite Frank, Gerard and Linda out to Rome, saying they’ve rented a villa up the coast for a summer holiday. Linda hesitates, and Frank wins her over with, “Mom. You can say you summered with your son in Italy and make everyone else jealous. And you’ve wanted to go forever. We can take an extra week and go be tourists.”

“Would you let me do that?”

“Yes. And if you wanted, we can stuff Gee back on the plane with Matteo and Lorenzo and go just us.”

“Would he let you do that?”

Frank just rolls his eyes. “We did Italy together, remember? And we can stand a week apart, we’re not that codependent.”

“Oh, alright. Maybe.”

Frank floats the plan to Gerard and he nods. “You know, if you’re making it a three-week trip, I might not fly back after two. I could spend a week in Rome and Florence happily.”
“Art?”

Gerard nods. “Sabbatical of a sort?”

Frank dips a shoulder in a shrug. “More power to ya. Mom was worried you wouldn’t let us vacation alone.” He adds a dramatic pout.

Gerard half-laughs. “Don’t go staying in strange men’s villas, now.”

“Little late for that warning, don’t you think?”

“True.”

“What are you two on about?” Linda buts in.

“It’s a joke.” Frank shakes his head, dismissing it.

Linda gives him a look, but drops it. “Well. If you two wouldn’t mind me joining your vacation first…”

Gerard smiles. “You were invited. Julian said he’d love to spend more time with you.”

Frank flips to Italian and says, “Well, we’ve got a few weeks. Mom, we’ve gotta brush up your Italian so you can talk to Antonio.”

Linda frowns for a second, then says, “But you said he spoke English?”

“A bit. Enough to cover any gaps you have, but I think your Italian might be better than his English.”

“Well, sounds like I’ll be speaking Italian until we get home, then.” She folds her hands on the table and adds, “You’ll have to tell me about the weather so I’ll know what to pack.”

“Yeah, I’ll look at the villa itself, and we can plan the rest of our trip.”
Temperance

Chapter Notes

Did the math and have written like... 2 pages a day on average on this fic. Obscene. Have broken 400 pages, will probably wrap this fic up just over 500 (about 4 more chapters?) and then take some pressure off myself and write the rest of this 'verse in shorter, choppier one-shot bits? There's a lot of really fun content in there (Vampire Clans? Parallel timelines? BP!Gerard as a mobster? The introduction of LGJ, Brendon Urie, Lindsey Way and Derek Zanetti, anyone?) that I want to share.. but I do not have the patience or time to give this level of attention to another 200 years of timeline.

Also.. this chap is A Big One. Lots of important content, real groundwork laying for future characterization. Shit's gonna pick up after this.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They all drive into Newark, park at Frank and Gerard’s house, and take the train into New York to spend one night with Matteo and Lorenzo before flying out.

Matteo and Frank hole up for two hours after Linda has gone to bed, hammering out mob work that’s faster to do in person. Matteo holds off asking the question that’s burning at him until they’re done and rejoining Gerard and Lorenzo.

Frank plops in next to and mostly onto Gerard in a lounge chair, and Gerard accepts him with a quiet huff, putting his arms around Frank. Lorenzo proffers him a beer and he takes it with a quiet “Thanks,” and pops it open.

Matteo leans on the back of the couch and finally asks, “So when are you going full-time with us?”

Frank sighs, rolling his eyes a little. “That’s ‘if’ not ‘when,’ ‘teo.”

“Really?” Lorenzo sounds surprised. “You’ve been like, working your way in, though.”

Frank points down the hall, effectively saying ‘not while I’m looking after Mom’ and gives Lorenzo a look.

Matteo sees what Frank’s not saying and raises one dark brow at Gerard. Gerard shrugs and softly intones, “L’amore copre moltitudine di peccati.”

Lorenzo’s eyebrows go up. “Is that Peter?”

Gerard nods. “Book one, chapter four, verse eight.”

Frank blushes as deeply as a vampire can, both a little floored that Gerard would defend him even while hating what he would do, and a little embarrassed that he can take comfort in the half-verse Gerard is quoting.

The other vampires politely ignore the way Frank is struck dumb, and Matteo turns the subject to the villa Julian and Antonio secured.
None of them really sleep, just doze in rounds as they drift in and out of the conversation, all sort of half watching a Naruto marathon on Cartoon Network. By the time Linda gets up in the morning, they’re crowded into the kitchen, nursing coffee and making more breakfast than strictly needed. Linda tuts as Frank slides her a full plate as soon as she sits down.

“You all. Is the coffee necessary or is it habitual?”

There’s a guilty off-tempo chorus of “Habitual.”

She gives them all a hum that says more than any words could, and Gerard slides the coffee back into the cupboard instead of making a third pot.

Linda eats, and Gerard and Lorenzo sit with her. Matteo and Frank vanish again, and Linda, always sharper than she looks, starts gently prodding Lorenzo as to what he and Matteo do.

It’s a difficult question to dodge, when the truth is that Lorenzo is a mob enforcer. Linda gets him to admit as far as “private security” and nods, fixing Gerard with a look. “My father’s work, then?”

Gerard opens his mouth to deny it and gets as far as, “Oh. Uh…” before Linda nods to herself and turns back to Lorenzo.

“Matteo too? Or do you protect him?”

“I, uh, more the second, I guess. Your father’s work?”

Linda ignores the question. “You take good care of my son when I’m gone, you hear?”

“Your son isn’t in our industry.”

Linda looks down the hall and says, “Bullshit.” firmly.

Gerard blinks. It’s the first time he’s ever heard Linda swear in English.

Lorenzo looks at Gerard for guidance. Gerard is giving him the same imploring look. Lorenzo sighs and braves answering Linda himself. “Ma’am, he’s family. I’d do whatever I could for him.”

“Good. And I want to hear no more of it again. Gerard, you hear? I didn’t want this for Frankie.”

“He’s really not a part of it. Not like Matteo and Lorenzo are. He’s helped ‘teo out with a few things, but that’s it.”

“And how did you two fall in with men- with you and Matteo- who do this work?” She looks at them both for answers.

Lorenzo shrugs and simply says, “Grant. It was his work, and we were his, so we did it. Grant’s dead, we’d rather not get shot in the back when the power vacuum collapses. So we made it ours and kept it.”

“Who is this Grant?”

“Vampire from Sicily. He turned me. And Matteo. And Gerard, way back. And Julian and Antonio, for that matter. He’s- I don’t think I should be the one to tell you about him, okay?” Lorenzo looks at
Gerard, trying to judge if he should tell Linda her son killed Grant. Gerard shakes his head, a tiny motion of dissent.

Linda pushes herself up and announces, “I’m going to go brush my teeth and flush the two hideaways out, then. And we can figure out what we’re doing today.”

She leaves, and Lorenzo turns to Gerard. “How fucked are the two of you?”

“Me, only a little. Frank, maybe pretty bad. But she forgives him quickly, at least.”

“Okay, good. I didn’t wanna blurt out that Frank killed Grant with a fuckin’ chair leg at the breakfast table.”

Gerard gives him a tight nod. “Revealing that her son can commit cold-blooded murder is probably best done away from food.”

“Good life rule, that.” Lorenzo gets up to wash Linda’s plate. Gerard grabs his and Frank’s bags and heads back down the hall. Frank and Matteo are out of the office and crowding the hallway with Linda when he comes back.

Gerard just hands Frank his bag and says, “You’re in trouble,” with a smile, indicating Linda.

“Uh-oh,” Matteo says, and slips away with Gerard.

Behind them, Frank goes, “Am I really?”

“No. Should you be?” Linda challenges.

Frank shakes his head fast and she laughs. “Of course not, you’ve never been in any trouble in your life, have you?”

Frank drops the Italian they’ve been speaking for the last week to pop the “P” in “Nope!” cueing a laugh from Linda and Gerard.

Frank grins at them both and helps Lorenzo load the car. They all squeeze in, Frank in the middle back between his Mom and husband, and head out.

—

The flight is unremarkable. Boring, in the way most flights are as soon as they’re underway. Gerard sleeps, Frank grades, Linda reads for a while then sleeps, Matteo reads, Lorenzo plays solitaire on his phone.

They all muddle through customs and find Julian and Antonio at the airport, both holding signs, Antonio beaming like mad. Lorenzo crushes him into a hug when he sees him, and Matteo and Julian don’t let go of each other for a while either. Frank just puts an arm around Linda and waits his turn.

He and Gerard both get their hugs eventually, then Linda. They split into two cars to drive up the country, Linda’s eyebrows going up at the two very nice cars parked by the curb.

Lorenzo only smiles and quietly says, “You know our work pays well,” as he loads her suitcase into Julian’s car. They end up split up a little strangely, Frank, Gerard and Antonio in one car, and Linda with the three mobsters. Almost as soon as they pull away Frank realizes the mistake and swears,
turning to look behind them at the other dark car, Matteo only a little bit visible in the passenger seat.

From up front, Gerard asks, “What?”

“Mom’s with all the mob guys.”

“Oh. She’ll be fine.” Gerard sounds a little blasé about it, and Frank makes a disbelieving sound from the backseat. Gerard turns to elaborate, “She grew up around mob guys. And she knows they’re mob guys, she’s not gonna be intimidated by them. Plus, it’s not like we can’t trust them around her.”

“I still don’t like it.”

“Sorry. We can make her switch when we stop, but she already interrogated Lorenzo about it.”

“When?”

“When you and ‘teo holed up and she asked if you were in the mob.”

Frank scowls and Gerard purses his lips a little in response.

Frank’s eyebrows crease. “Wait, did you tell my mom I was in the mob or something?”

“No. But she extracted a promise from Lorenzo to protect you. And he said you were family and he would, and I think he meant in the brother sense from Grant, but I’m pretty sure Linda heard capital-F Family.”

“Fuck.” Frank thunks his head back against the seat.

—

In the second car, Linda is indeed doing some interrogating of her own. It’s almost alarming how quickly they all let it slip that they’re in that sort of work, but they’re not really accustomed to lying to old ladies determined to know the truth. Carefully, quietly, she pulls out the scope of what Frank has done, then casually asks what he’s being paid for it.

Matteo stumbles and ends up taking the fall for that one. “I uh, he’s not on our payroll.”

“He sounded rather… involved. Why wouldn’t he be?”

“He didn’t want to be. At first, at least.”

“And now?”

“I think some of it was for your sake? To not alarm you.”

“Gerard has always had more money than a teacher should, that’s what tipped me off the first time I met him. But they’ve both had cash to spend after they met you, I don’t see what’s the fuss.”

“I think you and Frank were maintaining a polite illusion of ignorance, there.”

Linda snorts. “Not completely.”

“Oh?” Lorenzo turns with an eyebrow raised.
“He and Gerard brought each other guns last Christmas. They go and practice together.”

“Really?” Lorenzo looks excited about that. “That’s actually me, I asked them to keep in practice. Just in case.”

Linda gives him a withering look and Lorenzo wipes his grin off his face. He’s pretty sure Julian is laughing at him up front, his eyes are suspiciously crinkled in the rearview mirror.

With Linda now well-appraised of the fact that Frank at least has his toes in mob work. Matteo nudges Frank as they all claim rooms upstairs in the villa’s eight upstairs rooms. “Linda isn’t, ah, unaware of your work with me. She rather interrogated Lorenzo until he cracked last night and then came for Julian and I today.”

“And I was worried about you with her, I should’ve been worried about you all with her. Sorry.”

“It’s alright. I just wanted you to be appraised of it.”

“Gee told me about last night already, but thank you.”

“Alright. And I’m meant to pay you better.”

Frank waves a hand at that. “You don’t need to. You and Jay set us up to be more than well-off. And we’re teachers, we don’t need to like, look like we have money. You and Lorenzo arguably do need to at least wear power.”

“Don’t teachers too, to some extent?” Matteo gently teases.

Frank grins. “I could keep kids in line in a tshirt and jeans. And I have.”

Matteo grins back and mimes cracking a whip. Frank nods and repeats the gesture, adding a “ka-chow” sound effect for good measure. They split for their rooms, Frank dropping his bag on his customary side of his and Gerard’s bed.

Gerard takes the time to pull him into a hug, which Frank is more than happy to lean into and hang on. “I think I’m actually tired from that flight.”

Frank’s comment effectively stifles Gerard’s waning attempt to say anything about the mob work Frank is doing possibly waxing into something more. Instead they hug for a moment longer, then Frank gently breaks away and sits on the bed, pulling Gerard down. “You feel up for a nap or do you wanna explore the house?”

“I’d like to take a lap and explore, I think.”

“Okay. I’ll do my lap with you after dinner and you can point out all the cool things you saw first, kay?”

Gerard smiles. The few moments alone will be nice. Frank is really good at giving Gerard enough time fully to himself during the day, and he appreciates him extending it to vacation as well, where it will be harder for Gerard to be alone.

Frank settles in for a nap and Gerard heads out, nodding hello to Julian and Lorenzo in the breakfast nook, then going outside to take a quick turn in the waning sun. The villa has an old kitchen garden that still has some lower-maintenance plants growing in it, and Gerard wanders through it, then back out to the decorative gardens, basking in memories of when these types of garden were common. The villa itself is younger than he is, but only by a couple hundred years, and is probably older than
Matteo. It’s old enough to be considered ‘old’, at least.

Gerard settles in the grass, shaded by the villa but dirt still warm under him. It’s peaceful, and Gerard knows he’ll be painting out here in a day. For the moment the quiet and the sound of the crickets and the occasional dry flutter of an early bat is plenty.

It feels and sounds like home, in that unidentifiable sense-memory way. Gerard wonders if interstellar travelers will someday be able to identify their home planet blind, just by sitting down on the ground. Human senses are funny like that, and memories funnier. He rolls that idea around for a while and gets back to wondering if he and Frank will ever live in Italy. It’s possible. Gerard is self-aware enough to know he never returned because he was running from Grant and the ghosts of his past, but Frank is bull-headed enough to perhaps sway Gerard to brave the ghosts and return. Maybe this time it’ll even be okay.

Gerard digs his toe into the dirt and wonders what on earth he’s gotten himself into now. This wasn’t part of his twenty-year plan. Granted, he didn’t have any kind of plan at the beginning of 2011 besides continue to scrape out a living unless it became too much trouble. He always assumed he’d get tripped up eventually and finally find his time to die. Without Frank’s intervention, Bert probably would’ve been it, nine years ago. Strange to think of that now, six years into a marriage that was only possible thanks to Bert’s actions in the first place. And had they really let their five-year anniversary slip by like that?

He and Frank had celebrated, of course, but it wasn’t anything fancy. They’d just cooked dinner together and opened a nicer bottle of wine and enjoyed each other’s company. No grading, no schoolwork. Just each other. It had been nice, but five years means something to humans, and Frank is still very human. Gerard makes a mental note to for sure do something for the tenth year. That will matter. A whole decade isn’t totally insignificant even to Gerard, who is staring down four hundred.

Satisfied with that, Gerard’s thoughts wander off to painting techniques. He’s thinking about something he saw online, oil or acrylic thickened with a medium and applied with a extruder of some sort, when his husband calls down, “Gee!”

Gerard looks up, and sure enough, he’d been under their window, and Frank is leaning out to grin at him. “Dinner in five?”

Gerard levers himself up. “I’ll come in.”

“’kay.” Frank’s head and shoulders vanish back inside.

Dinner at the villa is casual, mostly just charcuterie and whatever Linda feels that she wants. The vampires just nibble to enjoy the quality of the food, and Antonio fills the conversation with easy chatter about the trip he and Linda took into the town’s market. His doberman, Louis, lounges underneath his chair with silent regality.

Frank complements him on the perfect training, and Antonio grins. “I think I have found my calling. At least with big working dogs.”

“Awesome. Antonio the dog-whisperer.”

They set the tone for the week, everyone unplugged and reading, drawing, and writing to fill their days. Linda comes into the study one day to find Matteo sprawled half-out of a chair, Julian folded entirely into one, and Frank nearly upside down on the couch, all lazily debating economic theory. She just shakes her head. “Bunch of romantic scholars, you are.”

Frank snorts and Julian parses weather or not that’s an insult, then decides to make it a joke, making his voice more nasally and saying, “Everyone sees what you appear to be, few experience what you really are. And thus, we live in the shadows, and man knows no more of us than what we tell him.”

Matteo gives Julian a long-suffering look and Frank says absently, “Yeah, What We Do In The Shadows was a great movie.”

Linda gives them up as a lost cause and goes back to wiping the floor with Lorenzo at poker.

Gerard paints through a whole sketchbook in a week, more prolific than he’s been in the last century at least. Lorenzo mostly reads, sitting across the solar from Gerard. Their Sicilian accents are familiar to each other, and whenever one of them breaks the silence, it’s comfortable. The whole week is comfortable, really. Everyone just relaxes, takes time to themselves, and on the second to last night, Lorenzo pulls out a bottle of rum. Julian pulls a face. “Are we about to all get really drunk?”

Lorenzo smiles a shark’s grin. “How else are we meant to bond, Jay?”

Julian sighs and reaches into the cupboard for the glasses, gesturing with one to Linda. She shakes her head. “I’ll let you boys at it.”

“Linda, I’m your age,” Antonio says, reaching out a hand. “You’re a peer. You’re not breaking into any of our time.”

“I’m no peer of yours.”

“Yes, you are. All but Frank here remember the Cold War, so. Peers. It’s no intrusion.”

“Maybe for a little while.”

“That’s the spirit of it.” Antonio keeps a gentle hold on her hand and offers a glass. Linda takes it and everyone looks expectantly at her for the first toast.

She looks at them all and rolls her eyes. “To the brothers and sons and family I never expected to have.”

“Hear, hear!” Everyone takes a generous sip of their drinks. Linda retires early, and the vampires stay up until the wee hours, everyone quite pleasantly drunk, a little maudlin and a little depressed in turns until they all pass out in their chairs, slumped and piled onto each other.

Their hangovers protest the dawn, and everyone groans and drags themselves up to close the blinds and start coffee. No-one speaks. It’s not worth triggering each other’s headaches.

Linda, with the finesse and practice only the mothers of high school delinquents have, clatters downstairs casually and triggers a chorus of painful groans and looks begging for sympathy. She just rattles out coffee and gives Frank a bland look. Frank manages a dull glower back and lights a cigarette. Julian stifles a groans and makes a dull grabbing motion at it. Frank shakes him out a second one and lights it off his own to pass over. Julian takes it, uncaring of the intimacy that has Linda raising a mental eyebrow and starting to wonder under what exact circumstances Frank and Gerard met these men.
Any burgeoning worry is stifled when Gerard drags himself to the table and takes Frank’s cigarette right out of his mouth to take a drag. Frank makes a disgruntled sound and takes it right back. Gerard lets him have the last drag and then steals a kiss while Frank stubs it out in the ashtray. Frank twitches a smile and sits back to kiss him back.

Matteo manages to make his stagger in look fluidly graceful, and Gerard catches Lorenzo dragging his eyes up to the table and off of Matteo’s ass as he follows him in. Gerard hides his grin in his coffee. Linda catches his eye and smiles back. Frank’s eyebrows go worried at them, and Gerard squeezes his knee until they smooth back out.

Linda tortures them until their hangovers have faded and everyone is packed. They head into town for their last dinner and camp out at a table for three hours, eating until they’re all stuffed and telling stories from their childhoods.

After a quiet last morning, everyone splits up. Frank picks up a rental car for himself and Linda, and Gerard heads back into the city to catch a train north. He kisses Frank goodbye in the sunny driveway to wolf-whistles from the other four. Frank flips them off, and Gerard dips him with a smile, playing it up. Frank ruins the attempt by laughing and ends the goodbye with a short, fond kiss, flipping his new keys around his finger.

“See you in a week?”

“Yep. Be safe.”

“You too. Don’t forget to eat.”

“I won’t.”

“Okay. Love you.”

“Love you too, codependent husband of mine.” Gerard smiles even as he says it. Frank makes a face and breaks away.

“Yeah, yeah. Good seeing you guys again! I’ll miss you!!” He calls to the rest of the group, who all wave back, then slides into the driver’s seat of the rental, Linda waiting for him with the radio set.

Frank gives her a blinding smile and pulls out after the other two cars.

Frank and Linda start their vacation in Rome, and Linda watches Frank slather himself in sunscreen and jam a hat on his head, then asks, “Are you sure you’re going to be alright?”

“Yeah. I know my limits. And if it’s sunnier than I thought, I’ll go bar hopping tonight and get my energy up.”

“‘Bar hopping’ as in bar hopping or ‘bar hopping’ as in code for something else?”

Frank drops his hands. “More the second.”
“Just making sure.”

“Gee and I don’t even usually call it hunting. It’s like, unspoken? Saying hunting feels weird. Villainous.”

“A little. But I’d allow you that.”

“You allow me a ton, Mom.”

She drops it for a while and they wander Rome’s monuments, pointing out things to each other and enjoying the company. Linda calls a halt for lunch, and Frank gets a salad, back to being vegetarian again. He pays, too, and as they leave, Linda bring back the earlier conversation. “You know, I have savings and a 401K, I can buy my own lunch sometimes.”

“Buy why? Gee and I work, and trust me, the bills on the house are minimal. All three cars are paid off. We’re cheap as hell. And you grocery shop at home, too. So I should treat you.”

“You’re teachers, not millionaires. Unless whatever you do with Matteo is actually paid now.”

“Gee had money when I married him, we haven’t touched it.”

“Then where’s the money from, Frankie? You don’t make that much teaching.”

“Julian gave it to us.”

“Was it his to give?”

Frank looks pained. “Technically, it was mine to take.”

“Oh? From who?”

“Posthumously.” Frank avoids saying who.

“Frankie. What happened in Italy when you met the rest of your group?”

“Mom, please? Not here?”

“When?”

“Never?”

“Frank Anthony…” She’s got the warning tone back in her voice. Even at forty, Frank grimaces.

“Mom, please? I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Was it bad?”

“Yes. Very. It was fucking awful, okay? I went back to therapy for years, and Gee went too. I’m not exactly eager to share it again.”

“I’d like to know the gist of it. As your mother.”

“I know. I’ll… let me figure out what I want to say about it. Maybe when we’re further south?”

“You want a couple days?”

“Please?”
“Alright.” And that’s the end of it for a while, Rome and Florence and the Italian countryside plenty distracting.

—

They’re in Sicily before she asks again. “So. The mystery of your engagement and new friends.”

Frank sighs and says, “I actually planned to show you. We’re gonna drive inland, Grant’s where Gee’s from. Castelbuono.”

“Alright,” Linda says it gently, and Frank almost flinches. It’s too much like the kid gloves are back on, and he sort of hates it. He hated it when the therapists did it, and he bullied Gerard out of it really quickly. If anyone had needed kid gloves anyway, it had been Gerard.

Linda hides a frown. Sometimes it’s like she knows her son too well, and this sort of thing is too much like high school. “Frankie, don’t flinch at this. I want to know. And I trust you to tell me what you can.”

“You know, sometimes I hate you came to therapy with me those few times in college. Because you pull out that language and I know I’ve been played.” Frank sounds mad, but there’s a smile lurking around his mouth. “But yeah, I’ll keep out the gory details and give you the clean version.”

Linda shrugs, “Works for me. Are we gonna drive in today, then?”

“Was gonna give you one more day on the beach in Palermo, go in tomorrow, if that’s okay?”

“It is. I could stand to lounge on the beach a little bit more.” Linda leans against her son with a smile. He wraps an arm around her and snorts.

—

Frank is sort of unreasonably nervous as he drives his mother into Gerard’s hometown the next morning. They pull up at the hostel, and she watches people go into the church and goes, “Oh, Frankie! It’s Sunday! We need to go to Mass!”

“Shit, shit, okay. Yeah, I’m coming.” Frank gets her handbag out of the trunk and hands it over, turning to ask the host if the car is alright where it is. He gets a charmed smile and says, “If God calls, the car can wait. It’s fine, sir. We’ll see you after Mass.”

Frank escorts Linda across the square and calls, “Thank you!” behind him.

They settle in the back and enjoy a much less opulent service than the one they’d all gone to in Rome. The priest shakes everyone’s hands at the doors as they leave, and picks out Frank and Linda’s foreign accents.

“Oh, thank you! We don’t get many tourists here, I’m glad you enjoyed the service. What brings you out here?”

Frank takes the question. “I was here several years ago, actually. I came with a friend of mine when someone we knew died. And my partner is from here.”

“Oh.” The priest squints at him, then exclaims, “Oh! Yes, with the boy who worked up the hill! I
remember you! Is this your mother?”

“Yes, Father, this is Linda.”

Linda accepts the air kiss greeting and blessing he offers, and then the compliment of Frank. Frank is glad he doesn’t really blush anymore.

They check into the hostel properly and Frank sighs, sitting on his bed. “Well, no point putting it off. The house is still ours, just closed up. I’ve got keys, but I don’t really care to go in. But we can go up.”

Linda just nods and follows him out. They wind up into the hills and park down in the carport, one turn away from the house and walk the rest of the way. As they head up, Frank shakes out a cigarette and offers one to Linda, who waves it off, a little out of breath from the climb already. Frank slows to her pace and lights up, taking a thoughtful drag before he starts.

“Well. Gee’s from this town. And when he was twenty-seven, he uh, got kidnapped, I guess you could say. By Grant. Grant brought him up here, to this property and turned him. And kept him there. For like, decades. Gee ran for centuries. Ended up in Rhode Island and met me. Never came back here, because he knew Grant’d be looking for him.”

They round the last turn and Frank has to pause. “But he wanted to propose to me here, introduce me to his family, ‘cus they’re buried over the hill back on the east side of town. And on the way back down, we were rounding up kids, and Grant was talking to David, I think- which is far more insidious than I thought at the time- and I came up to get him and he saw the ring and asked if ‘Mr. Way’ had proposed, and I said ‘yeah,’ and Grant asked Gerard’s first name, and I told him because Gee never told me much about Grant- he doesn’t like to talk about it either- and then came back with David and I to see Gerard, because they were old friends. Gee sort of flipped, but Grant told Gerard he had to come back with him and stay. I think he said ‘come home,’ actually. And insinuated I was useless, but he couldn’t take me because people would notice I was missing. So I said screw that, you can get both of us for two weeks and then we’re out, because I’m not abandoning Gee.’”

Linda sort of sighs at him. That sounds exactly like her son, unfortunately.

Frank looks over and grimaces, understanding her sound completely, then continues. “He separated us. Took Gerard’s phone and texted me as him. Wanted to break our trust, make me trust him and stay. Wanted to punish Gerard, too. By watching me pick Grant over him.” Frank pauses, clicks his fangs down and traces his tongue over his teeth, then hides them again. “Grant asked for- demanded- monstrosity. Gee and I never- can never walk around all vamped out. But I had to. And had to kill. We can feed-eat- whatever without killing just fine. Just gotta do it a little more often. And even with a smaller portion, blood is headier than any food. And drinking a gallon and a half of blood at once- killing somebody- it kinda puts you outta your head. Like being drunk or high.” Frank tilts his head and considers. “More like drunk. Or crossfaded with bad weed and shitty whiskey. Like you’re trying to be sober and can’t.”

Linda makes a face, something off niggling at her. “Did he take advantage?”

“Oh did he ever.” Frank says bitterly. “I repressed the shit out of it for months, it’s part of why I put my foot down on putting off getting married. I wanted to be able to actually consummate my damn marriage.”

Linda purses her lips up at the house in lieu of any other visible reaction. She’s pretty sure if this man was still alive she’d kill him herself. But seeing her anger won’t help her son at all. “Where do the others fit in?”
“ Same as Gee. Were in town, got taken up there, weren’t allowed to leave. Grant likes his bed partners young. Of age, but Matteo and Julian knew the pattern. Youngest, newest warms his bed and when he gets tired of them or they break and can’t take it anymore he kills them or presses them into working for him. Which, as you pried out of Matteo, is criminal work. Mob stuff. ”

“ Ah, of course. How on earth did you all get out?”

“I killed Grant.” Frank says it coldly, simply.

Linda turns to stare at her son, who is determinedly looking up at a window of the house, still a good forty feet from the doors. “You murdered him?” She’s actually quite proud.

Frank nods and adds nothing more.

“You have become quite a man, it seems,” is all she says.

Frank twists a bitter smile and flicks the butt of his cigarette to the side. “You didn’t raise me to be a killer. I know. Grant made me kill three poor guys by draining them. I regret those so much. But killing him? I don’t regret that, and I don’t hate that I could. I’m glad I could or Gerard would be dead and I’d probably still be trapped here, desperately wanting to be dead. And you’ve lost a son and had no idea why.”

They both stand side by side for a moment, and Linda tries not to let a lump form in her throat. She can’t hate her son, especially for this. But she can regret that Miranda blood seems to come up immutable in the men of the family. She never wanted this path for him, and they both know it. All Linda finally says is, “I wish you had known your grandfather. The more I know of your life now, the more like him you appear to me.”

Frank finally looks at her, face crumpled. “I’m so sorry, Mom.”

She drags him into a fierce hug, and he clings back, needing her comfort after hiding this for years as much as she needs the reassurance her son is still her son, no matter what else he is. They stand there for a long moment, then both turn to head back down.

With the house shrinking as they walk away, Frank starts explaining again, “So there’s this- well, two things. First. You can enslave a vampire. Like on the soul level. Subsume their individual will with your own. There’s a ritual for it- you’ll forgive me for not sharing- and that’s how Grant kept his long-term assets. ‘teo, Jay, Lorenzo and Antonio were all bound to Grant when I killed him. And when he died, those bindings transferred to me. I felt all four of them, like, in my chest and in my head. And they could feel me. I freed them, but it proved how vampire inheritance works. It’s right of conquest, far as we can tell. And ‘teo, who’s sort of de facto in charge ‘cus he’s the oldest, he was willing to stick to that. And I asked right back what he wanted. And he’s a pragmatic fuck, didn’t want an underworld power vacuum, so he and Lorenzo brought the operation west, and Julian holds down the fort out here. ‘tonio never worked, he had only just got out of Grant’s bed when I came in to be the new project, so he wanted no part of that. And ‘teo and Jai didn’t want Gee and I leaving empty handed- hence the money you keep asking about. It’s all interest from investments. We could cash the investments, if we cared. But we don’t need to. We’re gonna sell this place sometime, soon as the market out here recovers and Julian finishes making sure there’s not vampire skeletons boarded up behind a wall anywhere.”

“Interesting.” Linda works through that for a second. “So if you left empty-handed, where does you working with Matteo come in?”

“Mom.” Frank rolls his eyes. “I’m not in the mob.”
“Are you going to be?”

“Gee thinks I should try it if I want. Like, he’d let me join and work with ‘teo full time. I told him no.”

“Why?”

“Because it killed the grandfather you just said you wished I could meet?”

“If it’s what you want, I won’t begrudge you working in the Family. It’s the home I was raised in. And you act like a good son anyway, paying for your old mother and throwing about mysterious income.”

“Mom!”

Linda snorts a laugh, then says, “I do feel safer with you out, but I’d rather know you’re going to be okay if you join.”

“I don’t think any of the guys, let alone the one I’m married to, would let me put myself in too much danger. Or become an awful person.”

“Probably not. Hopefully not. Just- if you’re going to be in the mob know that I will permit you exactly one pass at being an asshole to a civilian.”

“What?”

“If you see that awful county clerk-“ she shoots him a significant look, and Frank suddenly understands. He’s allowed to terrorize James Iero, apparently, “-Give him hell.”

“Will do, Mom. With pleasure, even.”

“That sounds more like my son.”

Frank laughs, and Linda smiles at him. Her boy will be all right, even if his life has completely turned over.

—

They rejoin Gerard to fly home, and Gerard confesses he may have already shipped a box of canvasses home to himself at an exorbitant price. Frank and Linda share a fond look and a laugh.

Back home, on the porch with glasses of wine, they agree that Italy was the best vacation they’ve ever taken. Gerard hangs up paintings and Frank actually applies for a concealed carry permit. He gets it easily, and even gets to pick it up from the county clerk.

Lorenzo is let in on the fact that Linda knows, and takes great pleasure dragging Frank to a custom shirt maker in New York he found to get Frank something casual enough for Linda’s small town but just enough of a mark of class to stand out to James.

Frank is sort of obscenely thrilled about getting to do this, even though it probably won’t be a showdown like he’s sort of expecting.
James, however, is the source of Frank’s instinct for drama and gives him a quick, disapproving once-over as Frank walks in. Frank leans against the desk and bares his teeth in a friendly grin. “Here to pick up a concealed carry license.”

James pulls it out, then puts his hand on it, not allowing Frank to pick it up. Frank gives him a cool look he’s seen Matteo pull out plenty of times. James’ jaw twitches. “I don’t know what you’re up to, but I don’t like it.”

“Don’t think it’s really your business, either way.”

“What does your mother say?”

Frank leans in close and drops his voice, sweetly dangerous. “She told me to give you hell. How’s that new little house you just moved into?”

James jerks back, then hisses, “What the fuck?”

“Behind that old field that serves as our range, really. Must be loud.”

“Yeah, I can hear ‘em. What does this have to do with you?”

Frank just shrugs and smiles, holding his hand out for the permit. “Don’t wanna be down-range of a bad shot, that’s all. Be safe.”

James passes it over, pale now.

Frank pulls it out of his hands and folds it in half neatly, implying nothing criminal at all.

After that, when Frank goes to practice, sometimes with a silencer on, sometimes with Gerard and his rifle next to him, they always go to the far end, closest to James’ property. Every time, they see him twitch the curtain aside to see who it is, and upon seeing Frank, his car always leaves shortly after.

Linda smugly approves of this behavior, immature as it may be. Gerard suffers it with a smile. It’s petty revenge, and all the sweeter for being such a small thing.

They settle into the 2022-2023 school year with ease, Gerard pulling out scarves again as soon as the weather dips below 50. Frank mocks him about it, like every year. Linda starts to put out the fall decorations and goes to church.

Frank lies about his year of birth to his students on Halloween, in a pair of shitty fake fangs and a cape with a tall collar. Gerard has already laughed until he cried about it.

Frank doesn’t think he’s ever been happier, and tells Jamia as much. She just smiles and says, “I’m gonna propose to my girlfriend.”
Frank lights up. “Okay, yeah, I’ve never been happier. Tell me all about it, now.”

She does, and proposes in late November, on the side of the road in Paseo Robles on the way home from Thanksgiving with Alicia’s parents. Frank and Gerard yell congratulations into the phone while Jamia and Alicia both cry with happiness on the other end. Linda calls Sharon and Frank hears similar tones of joy.

—

2023 dawns bright and cold and dry, and Frank peels himself up out of Gerard’s warm embrace to drive into the city. He and Matteo have a few calls to make while it’s still early. They pull on dark coats and head out into early meetings. It’s obscenely early to be up and working, but putting the pressure on is sometimes easier when their marks just want to agree to get back home to their families and their hangovers. Overall, it’s successful.

Frank is home by evening and kisses both husband and then mother in greeting, one on the lips and one on the cheek. Linda just looks at him and goes, “Miranda through and through, you are.”

Frank just smiles and unloads two gifts from the bag in his hand. Gerard gets a new cashmere scarf, and Linda a new coat, vicuna soft and easily worth a thousand dollars. “Am I really? A Miranda like granddad?”

She swings the coat over her shoulders and laughs, clear and happy, “Yes. You are. My son, too.”

Gerard’s smile softens, even knowing Frank has a gun holstered at the small of his back. “And my husband.”

Frank beams at him. “Does that mean I should’ve gotten you a coat too?”

“Nah. I’m still in my leather jacket phase, I think. But I love this. And I can wear them together.”

“That’s sort of what I thought. And Mom found a moth hole in her peacoat, so. Coat.”

“That’s the way of it.”

Later, privately, Gerard confesses to Frank he’s happier than he thought he’d be, with this mob work starting to become Frank’s more and more.

Frank smiles and replies, “I’m glad. I’m happy. It kind of feels like it’s letting Mom and I get closer.”

“Closer to her side of the family.”

“Yeah. To granddad. I looked at the pictures. I look a lot like him. Different hair, but yeah.”

“Mhmm. When I first met James, I remember being very glad you got Linda’s family’s face, and not his.”

“Really?”

“Really.” Gerard leans in for a kiss. “I like Linda, and I’m glad you look like her son and not James’.”

“I was too, after he left. I didn’t know you noticed.”
“I did.”

“Artistic eye, of course,” Frank teases, wrapping an arm around Gerard.

Gerard just smiles.

Frank and Gerard spend most of the summer in New York, taking over a smaller apartment Lorenzo has keys to, and Gerard just decides not to question. It’s kind of new and a little lonely for Frank to spend most of his workdays in offices holed up around the city with Matteo and other mobsters. But Frank comes home practically glowing every day, even when it’s a bad day at work, and sweeps Gerard out to see as much of New York’s smelly nightlife as they can.

That is the one advantage. New York gets nightlife, and Gerard and Frank can browse bookshops at 11pm when the heat of the day has broken, can go to concerts and awful poetry readings, and good poetry readings, and Shakespeare in the Park.

Frank considers it a fantastic summer. Gerard thinks it was alright, and would be happy to do it again. Maybe with a little more structure to what he’s doing, and less sleeping in and reaching across the bed for a Frank who’s at work two boroughs over.

Linda is more than happy to have them back, and Frank cooks dinner for everyone the day before school starts. Linda leans a little closer to Gerard, cataloguing all of Frank and Gerard’s little changes. Gerard is almost the same, but over the near-decade she’s known him, he’s slowly abandoned the ascetic style she’d first met him in and now wears comfortable, well-fitted sweaters and chinos. Same style, but up a class. Knowing the money they have, it makes sense.

Frank is the same way, with his increased comfort in button-downs really the only change. He’d always sort of lived up to some part of being gay and made some effort in how he dressed, but being willing to spend more means getting pants that don’t sag in the ass- and Linda is far from oblivious to Gerard noticing that as well- and button-downs that trim his waist in.

She approves. And can’t hate the few things he buys her either, small extravagances that wouldn’t look too out of place around town. The coat, a few pairs of shoes, and a set of earrings and necklace are all cherished. She’s also glad she raised him right enough to know how to gift fashion to a woman. Linda doesn’t hold the Smashing Pumpkins pajama set from last Christmas against him, as they’d both known it was mostly a joke. The pants, at least, are warm.

Gerard wraps an arm around her waist, and she leans into him, both watching Frank cook.

Frank turns, coos, and sweeps up his phone to take a photo. Gerard and Linda suffer the attention with good spirits.

The fall of 2023 starts the same as the last four years have. Normal, peaceful, and still summer-hot. In September, Linda has another heart attack.

They send her home the next day, and Frank gets a sub for Thursday and Friday and stays home with her. The doctors told Linda she’s likely to die of heart failure at this point, and given her history,
all they can do is add blood pressure medication to her aspirin regimen and try to prolong her time. Linda has accepted that, and adjusts to it by mostly sleeping her first two days.

Frank has never been more glad for his vampire hearing. While she sleeps, he reads and listens, secure in the slow, steady thrum of her heartbeat. Gerard joins him on the weekend, practically able to see how scared Frank is. Linda is his whole family, and while she might live another whole decade, it doesn’t look likely.

Next week, Linda goes to the local lawyer and makes sure he has a copy of her bank information, including passwords, her will, and her life insurance policy. Frank had told her to reduce it two years ago, but she never had. It’ll pay for her funeral and her plot, and Frank will get some money left over from it. And whatever’s left of her bank accounts. Nothing wrong with that.

Frank almost starts treating her differently, but she finally snaps at him, “It’s getting old, not cancer. Now give me one of those-“ and takes a cigarette from him. Frank has always smoked more when he’s stressed, and it’s been a while since he’s gone to light up at the table, and almost as long since Linda herself has. Frank hands over the one he’s given up on actually having, and she lights it, smoking with a sort of anger neither of them can pin down.

Gerard wanders in and then out, knowing instinctively that this is between mother and son.

Frank eventually says, “I don’t want to lose you.”

“You knew it would happen eventually.”

“When I do pass, don’t fly apart, okay? Lean on your husband if you have to. That’s part of his job.”

“Okay. I’m sorry I wasn’t always a good son.”

“Even when you were in trouble, you were always mine. And I don’t think you ever managed to hate me.”

Frank gives her a watery smile. “Not for more than a few hours, no.”

“Exactly.” She stubs out the cigarette and rounds the table to pull Frank’s head close and press a kiss into his hair. Frank smiles.

Death, it turns out, is compassionate sometimes. Linda’s heart stops while she sleeps the first day of fall reading days. Frank wakes up and can’t help but think it’s awful quiet.

A second later he bolts up and wakes Gerard, crashing down the stairs. It is too quiet. Linda is still in her bed, cool and pale and peaceful. Frank wails. It’s a sound best described as a wail, at least. It’s not really one. It’s just raw grief. Upstairs, Gerard’s heart falls. There’s only one reason for Frank to make that sound. He scoops up Frank’s bathrobe and calls the police non-emergency line, reporting a natural death at home. They dispatch an officer.

Downstairs, Frank sobs collapsed by the side of Linda’s bed. Gerard enters quietly and drapes
Frank’s robe around him, looking at Linda’s pale face and then wrapping his arms around Frank. Frank lists blindly into the embrace, soaking Gerard’s chest with wracking sobs.

When the officer knocks quietly, Gerard has managed to get Frank into a chair in the living room with coffee in his hand. He’s stopped sobbing, but there are still tears running freely down his face. Gerard opens the door and ushers the man in. He offers condolences, speaks quietly to Gerard for a moment about the circumstances of the death, copies down the information from Linda’s drivers license and fills out his paperwork. He also takes Gerard’s name and then asks, “Your, uh-“ a glance at Gerard’s hand “- husband’s mother?”

Gerard nods. “He’s the one who came downstairs first. Went to check on her and just let out this cry.”

“Do you think he can give a statement today? Just need to confirm he found her where she is and he didn’t see or hear anything abnormal that could contradict natural death.”

“Give me a moment and I’ll see.” Gerard ducks into the living room. Frank’s face is a mess, but he blows on his coffee and gives Gerard a small nod.

Frank gets through giving his statement mostly by nodding, and the officer takes it down. He ducks outside to wait for the medical unit to come collect the body. Frank goes back to raw sobbing on Gerard’s shoulder. He can’t even comprehend that she’s dead yet, really, all he can do is cry. Gerard holds him and knows his own tears will come later.

Gerard moves numbly through directing the medical unit through the house, and can almost pretend he doesn’t hear the awful sound Frank makes when the gurney is wheeled out past the living room. The door closes behind them, and just like that, Linda is gone.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, I cried too. I'm sorry yall. Frank is now unmoored from humanity. Wish him luck.
Two of Swords

Chapter Notes

Here we go baby. No foreboding threats this week.. we're in it now, no need. Next chapter- Tectonic Drift and I have no idea if I'm still even close to a two-week schedule because I'm just posting as I go at this point.

Frank cries the rest of the day, whole body numb with grief. Gerard makes him drink as much tea as he can stomach, knowing that all the tears and snot coming out of his face will leave him with a blinding headache later if he doesn’t. Frank drifts from room to room, trying to run from the empty space of Linda in every room and ends up in the master bedroom, sitting against the bed and staring at the windowsill.

Gerard cries his share of tears too, at the range waiting for the kettle to boil. He’ll miss her quiet intelligence, the fierce love that kept Frank upright though his teenage years, and the softer, warmer love she’d extended to Gerard as well. Linda had become family to him, filling a fissure in his heart that had gone empty for centuries. The last and only thing he can do for her is pray and give Frank the support he needs to grieve until he can get back on his feet.

Gerard sits next to Frank on the floor and passes him yet another mug of tea, setting his own down and pulling a rosary out of his pocket. Frank makes a sort of choked sound and rasps, “Can I pray it with you?”

“Of course. Do you want the beads, or shall I count?”

“You can.”

Gerard nods and takes a sip of his tea before starting in Latin, the way he learned.

Frank stumbles a bit, then starts in Italian, syllables falling in and out of cadence with each other.

By the time they finish, Frank looks a little less hollowed out and tips his head back against the bed. “I'll miss you, Mom.”

Gerard tucks the rosary away and takes his hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. Frank doesn’t look down yet, but he takes a slow breath and speaks again. “Mom told me, once. That if I ever missed her, I could pray and she and Mary’d be right with me. Think your Mom’d come too?”

Gerard rolls that over in his head for a minute. “I think she listens. I don’t know how closely, but she’s still alive in my memory, so her spirit can’t be totally gone.”

“Our dead are never dead to us, until we have forgotten them?”

“Something like that.”

“George Eliot.”

“She wrote Middlemarch, right?”
“Yeah.”
Gerard nods. “I remember when that came out. Haven’t read it in years.”
Frank smiles. “Of course you do. We’re such fuckin liberal arts teachers, aren’t we?”
“Seems so.” Gerard takes Frank’s hand and squeezes it.
Frank squeezes back and says, “I don’t know what to do now. She’s- Mom’s so much of me.”
“Well, I learned that human death is a ton of paperwork and calling people, so I’ll spare you that. You get to celebrate her life now, and then figure out how to go on.”
“Day by day?”
“Sure.”
“Can I get really drunk?”
“Now?”
“Yeah. I want today to be over.” Frank’s voice rasps again, so he finishes the tea, then looks to Gerard.
“I don’t think you really should.”
“Damn. I really fuckin’ want to.”
“I think it’s fair to want to. But. Alcoholism.”
“Yeah.” Frank takes a deep, shuddering breath. “I think I’m gonna go to bed.”
“Okay. I’ll be in in a minute.”
Frank nods, handing over his mug and pushing himself upright. It takes monumental effort to even get himself into bed. Gerard joins him a moment later and Frank curls into him, clinging without any shame.
Gerard holds him close and hums snatches of songs quietly. Frank finally slips off into a restless doze.

They get through the weekend in daze. Gerard orchestrates getting the death certificates, and Frank steps in and does the legal work of getting her bank accounts closed and her Social Security payments stopped. Most of it just requires physically mailing out the notarized death certificates. It’s deeply exhausting, and Frank knows he’s not giving teaching his all right now. When his kids notice and start asking, he just sits down and takes a deep breath. “You guys know this is my hometown, right? I grew up here with my mom?”

He gets a bunch of nods.
“She got sick a couple of years ago, so I moved back to help take care of her. And she passed away this weekend. Friday night, actually. So I’m dealing with that. And it’s pretty hard. I’m sorry if it seems like I’m not paying attention to you guys.”
Stunned faces. One quiet, “Is my Mom gonna die?”

Frank looks over at the student that asked, “Probably not until you’re old like me. Not while you’re a kid.”

“Oh. Okay. I don’t want my Mom to die.”

“Neither did I, buddy. Neither did I.” Frank pushes himself up out of the chair and accepts a hug from one of the girls, giving her a gentle squeeze. Kids will always be disarmingly sweet when they’re not being disarmingly adult.

—

A week to the day of Linda’s passing, Gerard asks, “Do you want to a full Catholic funeral, or something a little more modern?”

“She’d be mad if I didn’t give her a graveside service. But, can we do a memorial? Not a funeral deal?”

“Of course.”

“I really- it should be open casket, but I can’t.”

“I know. No one will contest you choosing that.”

Frank nods. “Should we invite James?”

“Up to you. Do you think he deserves to be there?”

“Yeah. Mom loved him, once.”

“Then feel free.”

“Kay. Uh, there’s a bunch of ladies from the diner, and old school friends. Might be better to just do the memorial really soon and put that in the obit in the paper and then invite everyone who comes there to the service?”

“That’d work. How about you call the church? Arrange a service graveside and see if the Father would come to the memorial?”

“Okay.” Frank is slow to get up and get the phone, but he hasn’t done anything without looking like his limbs weigh two tons since Linda’s passing. Gerard is going to have to get him to eat something this weekend.

The conversation is short, but Frank comes back looking a little lighter. “He’s at the church right now, said we were welcome to come down.”

Gerard rises and reaches for his keys on the mantle. “Shall I drive?”

“Yes please.”

It’s a short trip across town and the Father greets them with a quiet hello, laying a hand on Frank’s shoulder. Frank nods, throat tight still.

“Come inside. Let’s pray, then we can talk about honoring her immortal spirit.”
Gerard lays his hand on Frank’s back and they follow him in.

A few quiet prayers, and the Father’s kind words for Frank and Gerard later, they finally settle down to decide what the funeral will be.

It’s the Father’s suggestion that he not speak at the memorial service, even though he confesses he’ll attend if invited. It seems easier to allow the graveside service to be the funeral part, and the memorial afterwards more of a personal gathering for those she’s left behind.

—

Before Frank knows it, it’s the date of Linda’s service. It’s bright and cold and exactly the sort of day she’d have loved. It almost makes Frank feel better. He’s glad Linda’s got her good coat on with her, as Frank had irrationally not wanted her to be cold in death. He and Gerard dress carefully, Gerard switching Frank’s white shirt for a black one. His own is a cool grey. Frank looks at it and sort of snorts, closest he’s gotten to a positive emotion in days. “Dressing me up?”

“White shirt looked too normal for something like this.”

“Fair.”

Frank doesn’t often wear all-black, but today his coat and shoes and suit all match. A strange expression flicks by Gerard’s face, and Frank thinks that if it wasn’t for this occasion, Gerard might tell him the look is hot. Gerard certainly is striking, bearing the closest resemblance to the old old photo of himself, hair and suit dark, skin pale and smooth.

The other vampires and Jamia meet them at the house to drive over, Jamia escorting her mother, Sharon wrapped in her antique fur coat and eyeliner a little bit wobbly with grief. Lorenzo is in all-black as well, and Frank feels more than sees him send Gerard an approving look. Matteo and the rest are in classic white shirts, but not a spot of color anywhere else. They make a somber party, driving to the cemetery.

—

Frank is pretty sure he just sat in a daze during the service, staring at the dark wood and thinking again and again in a horrified loop that that was his mother in there, and she wasn’t ever coming back out.

James doesn’t speak, but Frank sees a glimpse of him before Julian wraps an arm around his shoulders and pulls him the other direction. In a moment of untethered lucidity he wonders how Julian knows who James is. They’ve certainly never met. But Frank is never alone, even as he does the requisite greeting and hand-shaking with everyone else, there’s always another vampire by his side, if not Gerard then one of the others filling the space.

By the end it sinks in that he’s not totally alone, and that somehow, in a single desperate act, he’s earned and kept some of the best, most loyal and powerful friends he ever could. Everyone else leaves after the service, but the vampires and Jamia all head to the diner to share a meal. It’s bittersweet, but even existing in a small ocean of utter stillness in the clamor of the diner is a balm. Jamia’s heartbeat even seems quieter for all the stillness around it.

It occurs to him for the first time sitting right there and he blurts in Italian, “Could we turn her?”

Everyone stares at him, and Julian seems to think he means Linda, because he just shakes his head. Gerard understands, and shakes his head back. “Not his mother, his friend.”
Frank nods, and Jamia looks bewildered as everyone turns to her. Matteo gives her a searching look, then shrugs. “It would be possible, yes. Has she expressed an interest?”

“Uh.” Frank looks at his best friend. “Jai, would you ever wanna be turned?”

“Oh, like you all?”

“Yeah.”

“Maybe? It’d depend on Alicia. She doesn’t even know about you guys being- well. She thinks it’s a little weird how young you look.”

“Oh, shit. It’d have to be soon, then. Probably. If you were interested.”

“I’d have to think about it. And it’d be a year, at least. To think about. Kinda permanent.”

“Okay. I just- I could lose you. And I don’t want to.”

“Thanks. But I can’t be a Linda replacement. Or stopper.”

“I know. I should’ve asked years ago.”

“Nah. It was your private carnage. Still kinda is.”

“Still. Open offer.”

“I’ll bring it up. You gonna keep teaching?”

“I’ll finish the year. Sucks too much for the kids if I dropped now. But, I don’t know. I haven’t had time to think. Well, I’ve had time. Haven’t been able.”

“Fair.”

“Forgive me if this is insensitive, but would you move back toward New York? You only moved out here for Linda’s sake, yes?” Matteo makes the question as gentle as possible.

Frank shrugs. “Be open to it. Have two houses, now, I guess. Depends on Gee, a little. Can’t all be my decision.”

“I’m tied to neither place, honestly. But we can talk about what we want to do after this spring later.”

Frank nods and leans against his husband. Gerard snakes an arm around him. The group dissipates later, Jamia leaving first to go to the hotel room before her mother falls asleep, and Julian and Antonio next to leave, still jet-lagged. It’s familiar and comfortable with Lorenzo and Matteo in a way Frank has never really appreciated before.

—

The memorial is easier, and this time it’s Gerard playing bouncer on Frank’s arm as they all mingle when James decides to approach. Gerard’s brow clouds, and Frank can see Matteo inventing a reason to come over and head him off over James’ shoulder, and he makes eye contact with Matteo and pulls out of Gerard’s arm. Some things he’s going to have to face himself eventually.

They both let him go, but neither look happy. Frank shakes James’ hand and opens with, “I’m sorry. I know you loved her once as well.”
James’ mouth thins. “I did. And she decided you were more important. Maybe she was right, too. ‘bout kids needing a parent more than adults needing each other.”

“All the science I’ve read does back that up. But I’ve never been able to decide if I wanted you to stay or not. Because I doubt staying would have bridged what was between us, and I don’t know if a single act of rejection is worse than a long resentment.”

James shrugs. “I dunno. Maybe if I’d been a different man, or if you’d come out about it to us first, it would’ve been different. I didn’t want to be known as the father to a kid like you were.”

“That’s fair. Though you know well as I do it wasn’t my choice to come out like I did. I hated it too.”

James just shrugs. “Wasn’t all that. The rest of sneaking around and the drinking. You were a fine delinquent, and then you topped it off with the cockwhoring. Always were more her kid than mine anyway. She was a wild kid. And her daddy was in the business.” The “like you” is sort of unspoken.

“Way to call Mom a slut,” Frank says drily.

“You know that’s not what I meant.” James pauses, sighs, then continues, “I really just meant to thank you for takin’ care of her. And lettin’ me come to this and the funeral. Takes some decency to do that.”

Frank sighs. “Seemed fair. She chose you once, and I forced her hand in unchoosing you.”

“Thank you. I’m sorry she passed. She was a damn fine woman.”

“She really was.” With a pat on the shoulder, Frank passes on over to some older ladies from her high school class.

Frank finds Lorenzo at his elbow not two minutes later and murmurs in Italian, “Are you all telepathic? This is getting a little bit ridiculous.”

“How’s you father?”

“Bound by social dignity. He was fine.”

“Alright. And to answer the first, no. We just care about you.”

“Thank you. I’m not sure what I did to deserve you, but I’m grateful for it.”

“You’re a good man. And you did us all a huge life-altering favor. Least we could do was stick around for a while. But then we got to liking you and Gee. You’re friends, family now.”

Frank smiles. It’s a small one, but Lorenzo is proud of getting it out of him anyway. Lorenzo lays an arm over his shoulder and sticks with him for the next lap of hosting, then puts him back in Gerard’s hands.

—

Grief is slow, creeping and impossible to fight. It washes over Frank at strange times, after hunts and in the middle of the night and a few times during class. He’s starting to think maybe he needs a break from teaching. At least with an office job of some sort he could take a moment to himself. In front of a class of 11-year-olds, he doesn’t have that luxury.
That’s how he frames it to Gerard, anyway, down at the field with their guns. He’s got the rifle today, even though he’s still a bit shit with it. “I don’t think I want to teach next year. Might ask Matteo to find me a desk job somewhere.”

“You want to do mob work full-time?”

“I don’t want to teach. And I don’t think I can keep living in her house, and I think the only office work I’m remotely qualified for is his.”

Gerard pauses, fires and watches a can fly off the rail and shrugs. “I’m okay with that, then. Back to Newark?”

“Sure. Or into the city.”

“Let’s start with Newark because I know the school system, and we have the house.”

“Works for me. Would you- could we move this summer?”

“Frank. I will always be ready to move before you are. Trust me, that habit hasn’t totally died.”

Frank gives him a fond look. “Okay. Thank you.”

“Of course.” Gerard pulls him close and kisses the side of his head. “I love you.”

“Love you too.”

They move that summer, closing up the house and cleaning it out. They’d managed to get Linda’s things down to a bookshelf worth of knick-knacks and a bin of personal items. Most of her things go to the town’s Goodwill.

They drive away with a U-Haul and Lorenzo’s help for the weekend to move. Some of their things in the Newark house are still how Linda had helped put them, when she moved them in years ago. Frank straightens them carefully and spends a moment lingering. Gerard makes himself scarce in his studio until Frank comes to find him, watching him hang paintings from Italy and studies from the time after.

“I love your paintings. All of them. Especially the one you got Mom for our first Christmas.”

“I noticed that one ended up over the fireplace.”

“Place of honor. Yeah. As it arguably deserves, considering it’s a painting by my wonderful husband and depicts my beautiful mother.”

“And you.”

“And me. But. My house. I’m allowed to hang up pictures of myself.”

“Very true.”

Gerard picks up the next canvas and holds it out to Frank. “Wanna help?”

Frank pushes himself out of the doorway to take it. “Sure.”
Frank doesn’t work for a while. It’s nicer to spend the summer off with Gerard, filling their days with
nothing but hobbies and each other. Frank fiddles with his guitar, reads the news and devours a
bookshelf full of novels.

—

Gerard gets a job at Frank’s old private school, and Frank snorts and tells him who to avoid. Gerard
will be teaching junior Italian, but this time it’s Frank’s replacement who is the more senior Italian
teacher. It’s a little funny how life works out like that. They make the easy decision to never tell
anyone there that Frank used to work there, or Gerard’s apparent youth will be dragged into
question. It’s a weird thing, Frank is learning, to have to hide parts of himself, to realize people two
decades younger than him expect him to have the same childhood memories.

He brings it up to Gerard, and Gerard just shrugs. “Yeah. That’s how it is. Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry, it’s just weird. Like, since Mom, I’ve been really aware that humanity moves really
fast.”

“They do. Sometimes it feels like you blink and you miss everything, but then sometimes you realize
you’re fighting the same political fight you fought decades ago.”

“That’s shitty.”

Gerard leans back into the couch. “Maybe. Not much to do but live with it.”

Frank’s expression takes on an edge. “Or do something about it.”

“Don’t go into politics. Too public. Too recorded.”

“Wasn’t talking about that.”

“Oh.” The other side of the law. “Are you going to go in?”

“ Probably. I was gonna sit down and talk to you about it when school was closer.”

“Wanna talk about it now?”

“Sure.” Frank folds himself into the other end of the couch, feet tangled in the middle. “I was sort of
planning to ask Matteo to find me some office-monkey job so I’m not sitting at home while you
work. Like, regular office hours, I’d be home probably an hour, hour and a half later than you
would. Probably leaving about the same time, maybe a few minutes later at most.”

Gerard nods. “Fine with me. I’d prefer if you weren’t doing odd-hours, front lines stuff, but I know
mob work can be at strange times, so as long as you’re mostly working normal work hours, I’m
happy. I like having the time to be together in the evening. And waking up together in the morning.”

“Yeah. Time to be a couple.” Frank wriggles his toes at Gerard.

Gerard moves a foot on top of Frank’s to stop the wiggle and nods. “Thank you for wanting to talk
to me about it.”

“You’re my husband.”

“I wasn’t gonna say no, you know. We did the trial run option three years ago.”

“Yeah, and you were vaguely unhappy the whole time. You never said anything, but you were.”
“You noticed?”

Frank levels a finger at him. “I know you. So yes. What was it?”

“I didn’t like waking up alone.”

“Okay, good, that’s something I can change.”

Gerard nods. “And something you’re willing to.”

“Of course I’m willing to.” Frank sounds indignant.

Gerard shrugs. “We all have things we can’t or won’t change.”

And with that, Frank joins Matteo’s payroll more officially.

—

Matteo puts him close to the top, mostly acting at CFO of a mid-size tax shelter in Staten Island. Frank still does the odd jobs he started with as well, coordinating black market shipments to bodegas and splitting up drug shipments and exports.

It ends up being a great job, and Frank learns financial laws with a natural instinct for subversion that most defense lawyers would kill for. Julian laughs at him when he expresses surprise at how well his ideas are received by Matteo and others. “You were a delinquent kid, and you went, if you’ll excuse me, rather the easy route in school. This is probably the first time you’ve intellectually flourished.”

Frank isn’t sure if that’s a compliment or an insult, frankly, and he tells Gerard about it two days later. “Julian is either dissing the hell out of me or really thinks I’m smart, and I’m too dumb to be able to tell which.”

“What’d he say?” Gerard is only half-listening, trying to figure out if this kid is writing in English or cuneiform.

“Something about how this is the first time I’ve ‘intellectually flourished.’”

Gerard pauses, parses that with a tilt of his head and slowly puts together his take on it, “Well. You took bullshit classes in college until after Bob, and you said bullshit yourself, that’s not me. And then teaching wasn’t really like, you pushing the limits of academia. Or, in this case, subverting processes. It was learning how to mange the kids well. Different kind of smart, but not like what you’re doing.”

“Feels like it is in some fuckin’ meetings. You figure compliment then?”

“Yeah. And I know you’re plenty intelligent.”

Frank throws an eraser at him. “You’re the worst, flatterer.”

Gerard turns a wide grin on him and blows a kiss.

—

That’s how they spend the rest of the year, Frank’s new salary jump and Gerard’s private school salary starting to make them wonder if they should make the jump to Manhattan. Matteo and Lorenzo practically beg them to do it, and now that Frank and Gerard are both in the sort of tax bracket that says bespoke shirts, they grit their teeth and do it over the summer.
“I thought we learned not to move in the summer? Last time? With all the sweating and hating each other?”

“Tha’t’s why we hired movers this time, Frankie.”

Frank just groans and leaves another pile of T-shirts out of a drawer and into a box. “But if they break our shit I’m gonna be pissed.”

“Frank, you’re getting rid of your car, we can’t move a whole house in my old-ass fucking Volvo.”

“Betcha we could.” Frank mutters under his breath. Gerard sighs expressively from across the room and Frank shuts up.

—

It’s an interesting new life they settle into. Gerard more than once joins a merry group of men for happy hours across Midtown and knows that while none of them question his presence, he’s the only one with truly legal work. Somehow that’s okay with him. They spend more and more time with Matteo and Lorenzo, moving as a quartet around the city. While Gerard teaches, the trio remaining have become a formidable force.

Frank was initially a little concerned by Lorenzo’s penchant for violence, some of it clearly Grant’s influence. Somewhere in the months, it slides into registering as nothing, and Frank’s sneer takes less and less aggravation to draw onto his face. With these changes, Frank slips into becoming something new. Similar, but with a difference slant. All his time with Matteo is starting to get Frank known among their circles as well, and people sometimes show up to beg favor at Frank’s office.

The first time that happens is a shock.

—

Frank is upstairs in the corner office he sorts of feels he doesn’t deserve, playing CFO and mostly just dropping tagged pins on a map of Manhattan to see where the price of an ounce of weed is lowest and where they can undercut. It’s sort of mindless work, but the result will be cool. And a live view, if they keep picking up this data.

The receptionist pages up to his room. It’s the desk number, so Frank just picks up with “Yeah, Emma?”

“There’s a Mr. Behrens here to see you, if you’re available?”

Frank blinks. Jack Behrens is a small time drug boss for them in Hell’s Kitchen. Frank closes the map he’s working on and says, “Well, tell him I’ve always got time for him. Send ‘im on up, I suppose.”

“Of course, Mr. Iero.” Emma, ever professional and the daughter of one of Lorenzo’s top hitmen, hangs up and tells Mr. Behrens, “Mr. Iero always has time for you. Please head on up to the fifth floor, then go left.”

“Thank you.”

Frank pulls up a deliberately useless spreadsheet and closes it as Jack comes in, pulling on a cheerful smile and standing to shake his hand. “Jack! What brings you all the way down to my neck of the woods?”
“I, uh, actually had a question for you.”

Frank gestures to the other chair and sits back down, inviting Jack to start speaking. Jack hesitates, clearly unsure how to start. Frank just waits him out.

Eventually, Jack says, “What do you think of Mr. Ricci’s plan to merge and standardize the distribution of our goods? And allow the union to form.”

Frank neglects to mention that it was his plan first, and Matteo was just the public face of it, and shrugs. “It’s bold.” He casts around for a second, “I’m fine with the prices, the new ceiling is near the top of our offering here, but the union deal asks a lot of smaller men for a lot of commitment.”

“Yes. The prices are the opposite for me, actually. And the unions will ask for benefits.”

“Of course. I was looking in Aetna for dental, they’ve got the best rate in NYC.”

Jack smiles tightly. “What if I don’t think I pull quite enough profit for it?”

“How much do you owe shareholders?” Frank grabs a pad of paper and a calculator. The shareholders are Matteo’s men, and they take their cut off of Jack’s profits themselves. Jack labors under the assumption Frank pays them as well.

“43.5% Then the fucking New York taxes I can’t dodge come in and take their share.”

“Average annual profit to you?”

“364 thousand. Are you going to do the math and find out how much I’m going to lose right in front of me?”

“I was going to find out what you’re taking now, and figure out how to keep you in the same tax bracket. Would you rather I not?”

“Sort of. I was hoping you’d advocate for the cause of men like me. We’d lose a significant chunk.”

‘And you can be replaced’ Frank thinks viciously, but he nods to Jack’s request, then says, “Let me see how bad you’re off, though, so I know how much we need to plead Ricci for.”

Jack waves a hand to let him on.

“Bet the union will ask about 20% back, give or take, so looking at .635…. Damn. Yeah. You drop to under 100k. To be fair, that also drops you about 15% in taxes. Not bad. You own your home?”

Jack nods.

Frank shrugs at him, “I’d accept the deal. Best corner would be to negotiate the shareholders down closer to 30% take. Hell’s Kitchen isn’t Fire Island, you’re not the biggest money maker, they should let you. Why the hell are you at forty three and a half, anyway?” Frank knows, but watching Jack squirm and cover his ass for his own mistakes is worth the useless question.

Jack grimaces. “I skimmed. Uh. Five years ago. Ricci jumped me up to 60%, nearly put me on the streets, and every year without infractions it drops.”

“So you can plead good behavior and ask for probation to keep you afloat with the unions.”

“Would you back that request?”
Frank shrugs, “Might. Dunno. It’s not really a problem for me, so I’m still not sure why you came all the way down here.”

“You’ve got Ricci’s ear. Come on. 26%? He favors you.”

“Yeah, and my 74% take still comes in under your take last year. So it’s really quite fair.”

“Still. Everyone knows you’re the key to the kingdom.”

Frank just raises an eyebrow. Jack slumps a little, then stands and straightens. “If you’d consider it, Mr. Iero, Hell’s Kitchen will always back you.”

Frank manages a cool nod, and stands as Jack takes his leave. The meeting has sort of left him reeling. He didn’t know other people knew about him, let alone knew he was closer to the top then it looked like.

He dials Matteo, and with the sort of awful new thinking he’s picked up working here, doesn’t greet him and just says in Italian, “Have you been gossiping about me?”

Matteo is taken aback for a second, then says, “No. Why?”

“Daredevil just came down and asked me for a favor.”

“Please don’t call Jack Behrens Daredevil.”

“Haven’t had a chance to make sure he didn’t leave anything in here.”

Frank can’t hear it, but he can see Matteo’s eye roll. “So?”

“So I think I might take the subway ‘round, buy some people drinks and chat. Play some chess, you know?”

“I knew someday you’d agree you should run this ship.”

Thank god Matteo can follow even the most obscure leaps of Frank’s logic. Matteo continues, “It would endear them to you, to be able to negotiate ‘my plan’ down. I would assume they want to lower shareholder take?”

“Yeah. Significantly, in some cases.”

“Behrens deserves the rate he has.”

“I know. But dropping it even a couple ticks is a gesture. He’s still the piece he is even with a favored move.”

“Still the first pawn to fall?”

“God, I can’t wait to watch that.”

Matteo chuckles. “If I may? When you take the helm with his support and keep me on board, I’ll stab him for treason.”

“That’s almost too perfect. I love it. I’ll raise him up too high and plant some shit, and you can prove your loyalty to the usurper by taking care of him.”

“I believe that Lorenzo would call that very Mirror-verse-Kirk of you.”
Frank laughs. “Yes, but probably more Mirror!verse Chekov.”

Matteo makes a ‘whatever’ sound and says, “That all?”

“Yeah. Fuckin’ weird chat. Talk to you later.” He ends the call and sits for a second, then gets up to sweep the room. No bugs.

—

At home that night, he tells Gerard. Can’t imagine not, really. They’re already in bed when he brings it up, but Frank just props his chin on Gerard’s chest and says, “Hey. Could you picture me running the mob? At least out here?”

“Probably a little too well. You’ve kinda taken to it like a duck to water.”

“Really?”

“Do you not enjoy it?”

“I do. I do a lot, and I don’t have to like, be violent yet. At all, and I’d have to be. So it’d be a change. And that didn’t make any sense, but.”

“No, I understand. You’d have to shoot people, if you had Matteo’s job. Or at least be standing there when Lorenzo pulled the trigger. And you wonder if I’d still like you if you did that.”

“Yeah.”

“I could. Assuming you didn’t enjoy doing it.”

“God, I’d hope you’d knock some sense into me if I started to think I did.”

Gerard snorts. “I’ll just drag you to Mass. Let the guilt work it’s magic.”

“Lethal. I learned my ruthlessness from you, clearly.” Frank digs his chin into Gerard’s rib, making Gerard flail a little and laugh.

“Of course, you had to get it somewhere. Wasn’t present at all before me.” Gerard retaliates by pinching down Frank’s sides.

Frank yelps. “Uncle, uncle! Yeah, yeah, okay. I didn’t get it all from you.”

“If you’re gonna run the mob you can’t fold like this.” Gerard pulls on a serious face and sits up over Frank.

Frank just pulls him down for a kiss. “Doesn’t count if it’s you. You’re on my side.”

Gerard folds down and wraps himself around Frank, nuzzling at him and saying, “Yeah. That’s true.”

“Thanks. I love you.” Frank wraps his arms around Gerard and smiles.

Gerard brushes another kiss against his cheek, then pulls back a little bit to settle into their usual cuddle, curled up facing each other with their feet tangled.

—
While Frank slides into and up the ladder of New York’s underground, Gerard takes care of the next generation. He’s moved to a closer private magnet school, and he takes care of the children of wealthy New Yorkers and their smarter, lower class peers the school pulls in to keep it’s public image up. As a child who couldn’t afford education himself, Gerard is possibly a little biased in which segment of his classes he favors. It earns him a bit of a reputation, really, as a kind-as-a-default teacher, and a ruthless distributor of detention to bullies.

His detentions are something to be feared, as well. At least the gossip inflates them to be. The upper-crust brats come into it feeling like they deserve a lenient punishment and are set a budgeting exercise. Most just write nonsense in or declare they can’t afford anything at the budget set. One just says, “I’m putting my child up for adoption. I can’t afford them.” To that student, Gerard had just said mildly, “What if your parents thought the same? Children are expensive, and you’re undoubtably more expensive than the child in this exercise.”

“But they make more money than this!”

“You’ve learned proportions. Imagine the lifestyle they could have had if they gave you up. And imagine where you would be.”

That had shut her up, and she’d actually apologized to the girl she was bullying for her off-brand shoes later that week. Gerard had only glimpsed it, so he was sure the apology was genuine and wasn’t for his benefit.

And thus, Mr. Way’s reputation for masterful student handling grew. Other teachers came to ask, and Gerard got invited to dinner—oh, and his husband was of course welcome as well—at a colleague’s house. Frank shrugged at him after work when he brought it up and said, “Sure, I’ll come be your arm-candy while they pry you for trade secrets.”

“Might have to dress down. Teacher-class shirt and slacks.”

“I can do that, you asshole. I do still own shirts from department stores.”

“Bloomingdales sells Versace, that doesn’t count.”

“Okay, no, but like, Men’s Warehouse. Brooks Brothers. That stuff.”

Gerard grins, hidden behind Frank’s back. It’s almost too fun to tease Frank for this kind of stuff, he’s become a little sensitive to it. “Sure. I think you’ve bought me a Brooks Brothers shirt before.”

Frank spins fast enough Gerard can’t wipe his grin off his face. “Oh my god, are you giving me shit? God, I hate you.”

Gerard bursts out laughing, “It’s probably mean, but it’s so easy to wind you up over how you dress…”

“Asshole.” Frank swats at his arm, “I’ve never had money like this! I don’t know what I’m doing, or how much is too much!”

Gerard calms himself to wraps his husband up in a hug. “You’re fine. You haven’t started wanted to live at the top of Trump Tower.” Frank snorts at that “- or buy status art just to show people up. You dress nicely for work. It’s not gaudy, it’s just nice. Some people are more sensitive to how much a dress shirt costs, though, and I’d hate to have to answer questions we didn’t want asked.”

“Oh.” Frank hugs him back. “I still hate you. I’ll get you back for this shit.”
“You do that. I fully expect to find you’ve bought me some absolutely hideous Gucci something and are giving me the puppy-dog eyes until I wear it.”

“See, it can’t be Gucci. Remember when Harry Styles was wearing all that shit? It looked good. I’d need to make you objectively look awful. Like, vintage Margiela, who the hell knows what it’s meant to be type of awful.”

Gerard laughs with Frank this time, and they flip on a movie in bed, cuddling up to watch it.

---

Dinner with the Murrays ends up being very nice indeed. They have a very affectionate cat, and Frank and Mr. Murray hit it off, both happy to talk about being a teacher’s husband and taking all their vacation days in the summer to spend time with their spouses. Ms. Murray mostly just cheerfully picks Gerard’s brains for teaching tips over a lovely salad. He’s happy to give them, and they end up offering a reciprocal dinner at their apartment.

The Murrays accept, and two weeks later, Gerard and Nancy are bemoaning midterms while Frank and Dale compare music collections. It’s sort of nice to have human friends like this, distant though they may be.

---

They keep the dinners up throughout the end of the year, and Nancy gets pregnant and extracts a promise that Frank and Gerard will teach the kid Italian before their neuroplasticity fades. Frank moves around Manhattan and finds that dropping the shareholder take overall can be offset by raising the price ceiling about $4, and will keep most everyone happy to some extent. At one of the monthly ‘board’ meetings, Frank lazily challenges Matteo in front of everyone else. He cites the numbers he’s gathered, and in the face of all the nods and quiet agreement from the rest of the table, Matteo folds.

The calculated power play works, and Frank is now identified as a leader of sorts among the men of his level. His career goals will be supported from below. Matteo begins to search for someone to relieve some of his duties, and Frank’s bid is supported. He might be new, but he’s popular, and the men like that he’s coming from their work, not being born into power. Some of the older men try to ask where he gets his high ideas from, and Frank comes up with pictures of his grandfather.

Gerard doesn’t let Frank bring in the one with him in it. Frank sort of thinks it’d be hilarious.

---

Their 10th anniversary comes around this time, about six months before Frank is going to start making overtures towards running the whole shebang. Gerard is starting to angle for department chair. They’re both smugly happy with where they are, sort of of letting the reins out and living a little faster and closer to the edge than either of them are used to. That air of ‘why the hell not’? Prompts Gerard to rent them a beautiful house in Palm Springs for a week. It’ll be sunny, but knowing them, they’ll be inside.

Frank loves it, takes a picture of Gerard in the beautiful mid-century entryway, then uses the timer function to get a photo of both of them. Gerard pulls him in for a kiss when the timer gets close to zero, and they end up with a little bit blurry shot of them kissing, smiles clearly visible.

In the future, that picture will become the third installment in a triptych Gerard hangs in the front room of the apartment. The first is a selfie Frank had grabbed of them, on one of their first dates, both of them a little hopeful and a little awkward. The second is Jon’s second photo of them, after the
wedding leaning against each other, Gerard’s jacket open and Frank’s missing. This third photo will finish telling a story of a near-perfect couple moving from slightly anxious dating to just married and a little starstruck to a decade-married and completely content.

Neither of them look at the photo as they take it, just checking to make sure nobody’s face is cut off, and then exploring the house. It’s quite beautiful, and there’s a huge couch and an even bigger TV. Frank leans into Gerard, opening his mouth to comment. Gerard beats him to it. “Are we gonna have sex on the couch? Is that what you were about to ask me?”

Frank nods. “Got it in one. Damn, it’s almost like you know me. And we’ve been married forever, or something.”

“I don’t know about forever. But a decade matters. And yes, we can. Possibly without our feet hanging off the end.”

“That was once.”

“Once too many.”

Frank makes a disparaging sound and continues into the kitchen, giving a low whistle of appreciation. “Shit, Gee. Look at this. Imagine if we actually cooked, holy SHIT.”

Gerard follows him though the doorway and stops. “Is this an industrial kitchen?”

“I dunno. But I’m pretty sure this island is big enough to serve like, an entire roast boar.” Frank scoots his ass onto the stainless steel island and lays down. His feet don’t even reach the end. “Or roast human. Whatever you’re into.”

“Boar are bigger than you are, but I think you could fit one on there.”

“I love that you know that.” Frank sits up and scoots off. “While I would usually be for sex on every possible surface, a) I’m old and past that and b) I think industrial kitchen Hannibal Lecter shit isn’t really a kink of mine.”

“Can’t say it’s mine either. Let’s go find the bedroom.”

“Man after my own heart, you are.”

“Hmm, wonder why we got married, then.” Gerard reaches out to take Frank’s hand.

Frank beams at him and follows him into the bedroom, making an appreciative sound at the California King and linen sheets that greet them. “Now that’s a bed. Can we get one?”

“Okay, one, we sleep tucked up next to each other so close we could comfortably share a double bed. And two, where the hell would we even fit that?”

“No idea. Fair points. But shit, that is. A. Bed.”

Gerard can’t help but agree. With the fortuitous start they’ve had to their anniversary trip, the rest can do nothing else but follow wonderfully. Gerard is glad that even for all their combined efforts bruises still heal quickly enough a shower is enough to hide any evidence of their week in what Frank is affectionately calling their ‘sex den.’ And maybe if Frank is walking with just a tinge of extra care out of the airport in New York, well. That’s for Gerard to be unreasonably smug about and no one else to notice.
Hello dear lingerers after that.... unplanned month long hiatus. My deepest apologies. Capital-L Life happened. As such, this chapter is un-betaed and any wack shit is my own doing entirely. The next chapter (Heartwood Rot, for those keeping score) is over half-written, so it probably won't be another whole month before I can update(Probably.)

But know that I am still writing and I am desperately trying to wrap this shit up so I can write all the fun codas. This shit is now in the dark until the very end. RIP you guys, RIP several other things and people, etc.

All my love to those who have stuck around, and if you're a new reader, hello hello!

Gerard gets the director position easily and Frank brings home a bottle of wine in celebration, pulling Gerard into a kiss as soon as he hears. “I’m happy for you! I know you’d get it, but…”

“Mhmm? But what?”

“But you’re such a pessimist I couldn’t say it.” Frank sets the bottle on the counter and opens it with a smirk.

Gerard snorts at him. “Okay, but it keeps me alive.”

“Does it? Or did you need me to put a foot up your ass and move you out of a basement apartment and into like.. actually living.”

“Frank, really? I was fine.”

Frank hears the start of Gerard’s tone and brings his sass back to a knowing, fond look at his husband. Gerard deflates and pulls out wine glasses.

Frank pours and slides a glass to him, raising his own. “I’m proud of you. Cheers to your promotion, and to your impeccable instincts with kids.”

Gerard smiles and raises his glass back. “Thank you.”

They clink glasses over the kitchen island and take sips, then settle on the couch.

“teo is talking a big game about retirement.”

“Is he? He and I talk about pretty much everything but your work.”

Frank nods, “As if I wouldn’t need him around to help me not like, go off the deep end.”

“You’d take it over?” Gerard sounds surprised.

Frank nods. “That’s the plan. Lorenzo, he’s not… leadership material? Not in a bad way, he’s fantastic at what he does, and he manages a bunch of people really really well, they love him, but
he’s not. I dunno, he’s not pushy and inquisitive and hungry like ‘teo and I are. And he’s sure he doesn’t want what we do. He likes where he is, and he’s the guy who says, ‘maybe not quite that because people we need will get killed.’”

“Would the existing New York Families accept you? I know some are still around from the very original Lucky Luciano commission.”

“Yeah. And a Miranda was a consigliere for a Genovese when Luciano brought them in. I can claim New York blue blood just as well as the rest, and if they bitch about the lesser statue of the Mirandas at the time, I just ask if any of them are stepping up to better.” Frank sounds bitter. “And inevitably, they’re not.”

“So yes?”

“Yeah. And those that won’t? That’s why mobsters have guns, mostly.”

Gerard grimaces. “Great. Don’t tell me about that, yeah?”

“You don’t even want me to allude to it?”

“No. I don’t.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“Sorry- it’s just. After Grant. I can’t picture you doing that sort of thing without nightmares.”

“Wait, shit Gee. Nightmares? Are you sure you’re okay with me doing this? I don’t want you to have nightmares.”

“I’ll live. And you like the work, so.”

“I don’t like it if it’s hurting you.”

“It’s not. Frank, go take over.” Gerard’s tone is final, and Frank’s lips thin for a second, but he doesn’t press it.

Instead, he deflects. “Alright. I’ll take over while you take over Overland Pines’ language department. Then the school.”

“And then the world, I suppose.”

Frank grins, “Oh, only if you want it, of course.”

“You wouldn’t give it to me?”

“If you wanted, I’d get you the galaxy.”

Gerard perfects a single eyebrow raise. “The galaxy? I thought the next step was solar system.”

“Uninhabited. Too easy. All we have to do is assert that it’s ours. I mean to give you something meaningful.”

“Ah. Galaxy it is, then.” Gerard raises his glass in a toast. “Thank you.”

Frank clinks glasses with him. “You’re very welcome.”
It takes 17 buyouts, 3 assassinations and 2 incidents of arson to win Frank control of New York.

Two bullets, quick and silent take care of two, and the third is poisoned at a bar. All too easy to do when Frank knew his particular order of bourbon, and the quantities he drank in. Sure, some other people would get sick, but that deflected the crime, and the target would be dead. One of his men sat with him while he drank the first two, then patted him on the back and joined other friends at the bar, conspicuously not touching a single other one of his drinks.

The variety is called inspired when it’s not being called irredeemable. After those first few quick and merciless kills, Frank goes almost curiously unopposed. Matteo comes clean a few months later. “Most of them are old enough to remember Grant, and they never met him. They also uh, didn’t all know him as Grant. I may have implied you were the source of their terror years ago.”

“That’s actually really fuckin’ devious, ‘teo.”

“I am aware.” Matteo’s lips almost twitch a smile. Frank raises an eyebrow, pleased and knowing Matteo knows it too.

They make a good team. Maybe it’s fucked up, and Frank privately knows it’s really fucked up, or he’d have told Gerard about this by now, but he and Matteo both reacted to Grant’s trauma by twisting, ending up warped and tempered into new shapes by the force of his actions. Frank’s capacity for realizing violence is growing by the day, and some days it feels like this is something he always should have been doing, the way his blood sings and his unnaturally still body coils to pounce on unsuspecting enemies.

Lorenzo buries himself in sensible violence, proud of what he can plan and even-keeled and assured by his own ability to go toe to toe with any man. Matteo digs until he finds gems and loopholes to exploit, finding toeholds like a rock climber scaling El Capitan blind. Frank looks forward from the prow and guides them all into opportunity, high on the thrill of charting uncharted territory and with just enough good luck and intuition to guide them true.

Gerard doesn’t ever tell Frank, but the three of them have shifted in the last couple of months, from people Gerard was never afraid to be around to friends he knows hide their dark shadows from him. It usually doesn’t bother him, and Frank is either better at hiding the shadows alone or truly lacks the depth of violence Matteo and Lorenzo wear like cloaks, but Gerard isn’t afraid of him. Never has been. Frank gently telling him he’ll be in late for a couple nights one week in the cold new year’s dead of winter changes that.

Frank has now been in the mob a full calendar year. Gerard was just settling into their new reality and starting to feel comfortable with the balance of their lives.

Frank promises he’ll come home and spend the evening, and at first, Gerard is happy. That sours as soon as they’re both at home. Frank is curiously blank, like he’s afraid any emotional reaction will set Gerard off against this, so he just displays none. It’s awkward, and almost serves to highlight the way Frank won’t be coming to bed with Gerard.

It’s a few too many tense hours, and finally it’s late enough Gerard can give up and go get changed for bed. Frank pulls on a dark shirt and shrugs his suit jacket back on over a shoulder hostler. Gerard
turns his back and pulls on sweatpants. Frank turns and pauses, looking at the corner of the bed and not Gerard. “Um.”

Gerard pauses, one leg in bed, “Yeah?”

“Goodnight?” Frank takes a hesitant step forward, like he wants to kiss Gerard goodnight. Gerard isn’t quite able to meet him in the middle and start the kiss himself, but he manages a half-aborted gesture that Frank correctly interprets as permission to come over.

They share possibly the most awkward kiss of their entire 15 years of knowing each other and Frank stands. “Sleep well?”

“I probably won’t fall asleep until you’re back.”

Frank nods. “I’ll try to come in quietly, just in case.”

Gerard nods, and ‘I wish you wouldn’t go’ sticks in his throat and goes unvoiced.

Frank slips out into the night and the house falls silent. Gerard curls up tightly, body unused to sleeping alone anymore, and yanks the sheet up to his chin to wait.

Trying not to picture Frank in the shadows of the men he used to know is a useless pastime, and Gerard knows too well the sort of business that gets done at these kinds of meetings. He’ll just have to figure out how to reconcile this new aspect of them.

—

Frank meets Lorenzo at his brownstone in Harlem, giving Matteo a brief nod when he moves the curtain aside to watch Lorenzo leave.

Once they’re well away from the house, walking quietly down the street back to the Metro, Frank quietly asks, “Sharing a house, sharing this work… you sharing a bed yet too?”

Lorenzo’s skin doesn’t show any sort of blush, but the color of embarrassment is clear in his voice. “No, Frank. We’re not. He’s not interested.”

“Does he date? Didn’t think he did.”

“No. Neither of us do.”

“So? He’s not not interested.”

“He’s not interested in being with anybody. Least of all somebody who reminds him of Grant.”

“If he was so worried about that, he wouldn’t live with you and carry on his work to give to me. Don’t be an idiot, Lorenzo, you’re smarter than this.”

“He’s not someone I care to convince. Keep your head out of it, boss.” Venom seeps into the second half of his statement, and Frank raises a placating hand.

They’re silent the rest of the way to their destination. At the man’s door, Lorenzo steps back and settles into shadow, Frank’s awareness of him dimming to a surety of presence than any visible cue.

Their target, an associate of the newly-discovered mole Beheren’s, opens the door to Frank’s sharpest, coldest smile. He pales. “Mr. Iero.”
“Mr. Norman. May we step inside, or should we conduct our business on your steps?”

“Uhm.” He casts a fearful glance up and down the street, then steps back, “Come in.” Frank steps inside. Lorenzo stays invisible at the front, guarding the street against any retaliatory attempt.

Mr. Norman is old, at least a decade older than Frank really is, and he’s been in the business since he was a young man. He knows what this visit is. He stalls what Frank is about to say with a raised hand and says simply, “Let us together make sure my affairs are in order, please. I do not believe we are under any illusions of your purpose here, sir.”

Frank shifts his posture to something a little less stiff. “I don’t believe we are, Mr. Norman. Please, as you will.”

Norman unlocks a hidden safe and begins laying out papers on his dining room table, sorting them into stacks. “From my business with Jack, from my work otherwise, and to my next of kin, my goddaughter, please.”

“We’ll have to look through those personal documents.”

“Yes. But I thought you a more respectable man than to use my bank account passwords to empty my accounts of the money that I’ve saved for her.”

Frank bristles, “Your first assumption about me was correct. Your money will be passed to those you’ve willed it to.”

Norman levels him with a look that somehow manages to make Frank feel both very young and very inadequate. “Did you ever wonder at why I am loyal to who I am?”

“Not really. You’re loyal to those you’ve always been loyal to. And I can find no fault with that.”

“You wouldn’t expect a man like me to switch sides?”

“Not without a compelling reason. I’m not quite arrogant enough to think I’ve made a case to win the men of the old families. I’m just carving out my space by might, and right now, I’m not losing.”

“Perhaps you’re more self-aware than your youth indicates.”

“I have a young face, Mr. Norman.”

Norman shrugs. “Regardless, do not think that you can kill off the entire old guard and stand. We know things about these streets and this work you do not.”

“I will learn, I think. And hopefully, not all of your generation will play handler to a mole. Then my hand will not be rushed like this, and I will establish reasons for the rest of you to consider your loyalties.”

Norman closes the safe and sets down the last folder in the ‘work’ pile to stand up before Frank, straightening up and folding his hands behind his back. “Have you ever read Of Mice and Men?”

“Yes.”

“I keep no rabbits, but I would rather my death be quick and simple.”

“Under the stars, then, sir?”

“Please.”
“Lead the way.” Frank follows him quietly outside, checking that his silencer is affixed correctly before stepping out into the open. This could yet be a trap.

The night is silent, no heartbeats where they shouldn’t be, and Frank watches Mr. Norman lean against the tall balcony, looking out at the city lights around them. Frank steps to the side, out of the slash of light of the door, then raises the gun and shoots.

The muffled pop is lost in the passing of an aboveground stop of the Metro. Norman slumps down. Frank pulls two disposable gloves out of his pocket and pulls them on, walking back though the house. He flips through the ‘personal’ stack, then leaves it for the police to find. The other two he picks up and exits again, brushing past Lorenzo, who falls into step with him, shivering back into visibility.

They take an Uber home, Frank taking off the gloves before their driver arrives. They get dropped five blocks from from where they started, and walk the rest of the way. Frank picks up a few paper folders and tucks Norman’s documents inside, then heads home.

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The house is dark, and Frank hesitates outside. This is the closest he’s yet to bring his mob work and his life with Gerard, and stepping inside feels like it’s going to break something tenuous and sacred. Frank shoves his key in the door and slips inside, silently shattering whatever delicate barrier was there.

Mindful of the fact Gerard might be asleep, he’s quiet as he slips off his jacket, cleans his gun and locks it away, and stacks the folders in his briefcase for tomorrow. As ready as he can be before facing Gerard, he eases open the door.

Gerard is awake, he can tell that much. They might both be totally still, but they’ve been married long enough to know each other that well.

“Gee?”

Gerard sounds muffled and his voice is flat, “Done?”

“Done. Did you sleep?”

“No. I’m never going to be able to sleep while you’re out doing that.”

“I’ll keep it minimal, then.”

Gerard’s eyes appear, bright in the darkness. Frank isn’t sure he means them to be. “Can you?”

“That’s why I have people working for me, right?”

Gerard makes a face, but he can’t disagree. “Are you coming to bed, or are you gonna stay up and work?”

“Coming to bed?”

“Okay.” Gerard shifts the sheets around to make room for Frank. Frank finally moves out of the doorway and undresses for bed, sliding in next to Gerard.

Gerard wraps an arm around his waist. “I hope you never come home bloody. Or don’t come home.”

“If I don’t come home, ‘teo and Lorenzo better come tell you in person.”
“Do they know that?”

“Yes? That’s like.. minimum decency.”

“Oh. Okay. I wasn’t sure what policy was.”

“I’m making it up as I go, but if somebody gets killed, I think their boss ought to go pass on the news personally. ‘teo’s closest to you, and closest to my like sort of rank.”

“Okay. I hope they never do.”

“So do I.” Frank pauses. “I dunno how else I’d die, though. We’re not so susceptible to stupid accidents, and I’ve been depressed as shit, but never suicidal. And I can’t just get old and expire anymore.”

Gerard sighs into his neck. “That’s true. I keep waiting for something to up and kill me, or wondering when I’m gonna actually do it myself.”

Frank turns over, “Gee, please don’t.”

“You bullied me onto those awful anti-depressants. I’m not going to kill myself anytime soon. They do kind of actually do what they’re meant to.”

“Okay. Good.”

“I really didn’t expect to survive Bert, though. I was really ready to die, I think.”

“Really?”

“Survival instinct won when you put your arm in my mouth.”

“Pretty sure that’s what it’s supposed to do, babe.”

Gerard snorts, tucking his nose into Frank’s neck. “Awful.”

“Hey.” Frank pokes his side. “I’m a fan of it.”

“You would be.” Gerard flicks a fang out and digs it into Frank’s neck. Frank makes a funny sound and Gerard realized a second later what that means. “You liked that.”

Frank wiggles away. “You bit me! Of course I was kinda into it.”

“I thought that went away?”

“Uh, no.” Frank’s face would be flaming if it could be. “Or, well, not totally?”

“Oh.” Gerard clicks his fangs up and down absently.

Frank sighs at him. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry, I just didn’t know. I thought that went away with- the thing.”

“I think it got buried. I didn’t like it because it scared me, but you weren’t walking around with it.”

“Makes sense, I guess.”

“Regardless, you’re not obligated.”
“I know that.” Gerard leans in to kiss Frank and nips at his lip. “But I do like making you happy.”

“You make me very happy.”

“I try.”

Frank tugs Gerard down for a second kiss. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

They settle down to sleep, and Frank’s first hit is otherwise unremarked upon, setting the tone for the next four, spread out over the next two months.

Gerard keeps everyone happy in his position as language department director, and he and Frank still sometimes have dinner with the Murrays. Frank is no longer pretending to be a Staten Island CFO, saying he’s moved to a C-suite in Manhattan, and twice only getting home after everyone else has been gathered for a while, and ducking in to plant a kiss on Gerard and off to change out of his suit.

It’s a strange balance, one that works only most of the time. Frank wanders outside when Matteo calls after Gerard overhears one of their conversations and nearly screams at Frank. Frank makes sure he’s not too wrapped up in work when he comes home, consciously shifting gears and taking only the most minimal supplies home. As an administrator, Gerard doesn’t grade anymore, and they find their evenings to themselves for the first time in a while.

The dates that come up out of this are interesting. Gerard almost gets used to them going out in their work suits to dark bars, taking a corner table and watching Frank take note of everyone who comes in, still holding a conversation about Star Trek with Gerard. It’s strange when people come up, though, as some of them are clearly finding out Frank has a husband, not a wife, for the first time.

They never do say anything, but the surprise is clear in their eyes and in their stammers. Gerard and Frank share a look every time, and Frank’s icy look stops any untoward statements. Some of them go the other way exactly, instantly scraping for Gerard’s favor. Exactly none win it, and by the time they’re two years into this routine, he’s become far more ruthless about denying them.

One crisp, finally chilly November night finds the Iero’s at the same bar as usual, one deep in Frank’s territory, filled with his men. Gerard and Frank usually go unbothered here, the regulars used enough to them all they get are a few respectful nods and a raised glass or two as they walk in. Tonight must have some of a new crowd over, though, because Frank and Gerard are barely settled into their corner debating a new study on high school education and good responses to it when three young men walk over brazenly.

Frank notices the rest of the bar drop a few decibels as people turn to watch. There goes any illusion of privacy. The first and clearly boldest sticks out his hand to Gerard. “Mr. Iero? I’m Ian Peterson.”

Gerard gives him and the hand a disdainful look, not bothering to move his fingers from his cocktail. “Mr. Iero? I’m Ian Peterson.”

Gerard gives him and the hand a disdainful look, not bothering to move his fingers from his cocktail. “Mr. Iero is my husband.”

Ian recovers rather quickly, “My apologies, then, sir, what may I call you?”

“I prefer you didn’t call me.”
“It’s a figure of speech, sir.”

Ian is also apparently immune to the growing look of veiled annoyance and disdain on Frank’s face. Gerard can tell from the slope of his shoulders that Frank isn’t really that annoyed, but his face is starting to verge toward thunderous, and it’s making Ian’s friend’s nervous. One of them tries to run interference, blurring, “Oh, sir, I got some new information about that account, I ran into an old friend of mine today.”

“I’ll assume your report is sitting in my inbox then, and I’ll read it tomorrow.” Frank summarily dismisses him.

Gerard’s total lack of response finally sends Ian’s hand back down to his side, and the third friend nudges them both and says, “We’ll, uh, we’ll be on our way, sirs, enjoy your night.” And tugs them both away.

Frank looks back at Gerard, “So? Teacher/aide ratios and homework assistance?”

Gerard shakes himself back to their conversation. “Yeah. So they found that you’d need at least two in a class of twenty-four to really split into manageable sections.”

“Really? I would have assumed far less.”

“So did I, but I’ve taught hundred-student lectures.” Gerard pauses. “Do those young men work for you?”

Frank nods.

Gerard’s makes a subtle face at Frank, saying he doesn’t think too highly of them. Behind a sip of his beer, Frank’s face agrees. “They had family connections. Some respect is granted from those, still.”

“I sense that coming to an end.”

“It’s a waning factor in my decisions. Unless they have compelling knowledge.”

Gerard sends a sly smile across the table, for a moment caught in the dangerous spell of the mob. Frank smiles back, a little heat lurking in it.

Gerard finishes his cocktail and tilts his head toward the exit. Frank leans closer and manages to make “Shall we make the rounds first?” Sound absolutely filthy.

Gerard’s smile curls. “Let’s.”

Frank slides out from the table and offers Gerard his arm. Gerard mostly tunes out the social niceties Frank trots out for the regulars, more concerned with the very small amount of Frank’s body heat he can feel through his shirt. They leave absolutely no one with any misconceptions about their relationship, and quite a few thinking Frank has secured quite an attractive husband. Frank would agree, Gerard cuts a very fine figure in a suit.

They head home, both running a little hot with anticipation and the wait. Frank strips Gerard out of his suit and reaches for his waist, drawing him close for a kiss. Gerard kisses back, then works his hands from Frank’s jaw to his chest to start opening his shirt. Frank shrugs out of it a moment later. Gerard palms his cock and Frank makes a throaty noise.

“Frankie, do you want to fuck me tonight?”
“Fuck. Yes, Gee, you want me to?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I want to feel you.”

“Okay, okay, yeah, we can. Bed. Pants?” Frank’s babbling now, gone from aroused to desperate in a flash and shoving at Gerard a little. Gerard almost snorts at him and takes over getting them both ready.

Gerard settles up over Frank on his knees and discovers all over again how wonderful it is to have his husband spread out under him like this. Tattoos crawl up his arms now, bracketing them both in black, grey and red. Working the mob, he’s shed the few extra pounds he used to have around his middle, and he’s faintly flushed all the way down his chest right now.

Frank pushes himself up on one elbow to drag Gerard down for a kiss. “I love you so much. Every day, every night I get to spend with you…I fuckin love you.”

Gerard smiles. Frank may be the sort of husband Gerard never would have imagined himself with, but these sorts of moments urge him to stay close.

Like most nights, they doze a few hours and wake up curled around each other tightly. Frank slips up when they do and pulls out his computer, writing a few emails to send later in the morning.

Gerard makes a very disparaging sound at the light and tries to bat it out of Frank’s hand without waking up fully.

Frank catches his hands and gently tucks them up away from his work, shushing Gerard a little. Gerard won’t have it and pulls away, peeling his eyes open. “Why aren’t you asleep?”

“Slept plenty. Just knocking out some emails so I’m not rushed between meetings today.”

“Can’t you work later? We were asleep.”

“I know. I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“Frank. If you’re gonna just work you should get up.”

“You want me to?” Frank sounds a little surprised.

“No point doing it in bed like I’m forcing you to be here.”

“I want to be here. With you. I just couldn’t sleep, and you were pretty asleep and I didn’t want to wake you up just because I was up, so I pulled out some work.”

Gerard is a little too tired to put together a whole argument, but Frank didn’t used to pull out work when he couldn’t sleep like this. It used to be novels. Gerard kind of misses when it was.

Frank visits Jamia for her 7th anniversary and is a little shocked by how deep the lines on her face are. Her wife, Alicia, has known about Frank for years now, but Frank still pulls Jamia aside alone on his third day.

“Can I please turn you? And Alicia, if you- and she- wants? I don’t- Jai, you’re getting old!”
“I know. It’s not too bad, I guess. But I dunno. You don’t think I missed my window by a bit, huh?”

“No. I don’t really care how old you look. And we were both young, and it was a lot to take in when I told you.”

Jamia pauses and considers. “Are you going to ask us to do what you do? And don’t play coy, I talk to your husband too.”

“No! You talk to Gee, you know what he does. You can do whatever. I’d be terrified of you if you worked with me, anyway.”

Jamia grins at him for that. “Okay. I’d be down. Lemme ask ‘licia tonight, then?”

“However you want. I can turn you now, I’ve got enough days here to get you settled.”

“Cool. Yeah. That’d be handy, or we’d have to take time off and go out east.”

“Yeah. And it’s a good season, at least it’s not spring or summer.”

“Oh, yeah, god. Did we tell you about that wildfire that dumped ash in our yard? Shit got real, the evac line was like.. miles from here.”

“No. Holy shit, yeah. I remember you texting me about that.” Frank nods, following her back into the hallway. “But not the ash thing, damn.”

“You were already on the verge of coming out here to kidnap us east just in case, I felt it was an acceptable omission.”

“Ready for the true lesbian death by stake burning, huh?”

Jamia laughs so hard she snorts at that. “Oh yeah. And from what I hear you’re looking at a career as somebody’s prison bitch?”

“Hole in one.” Frank grins back.

“Hole in..? Hole in one! I hate you so so so fucking much, oh god.” Jamia shakes her head, rolling her eyes at Frank and miming gagging. Frank cracks up, nearly doubled over at his own joke while Jamia shakes her head.

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Surprisingly, Alicia is down to be turned into a vampire, and Frank suddenly has to plan to be able to drink two full people in a day and a half. If he spends the interim time cloaking in daylight and goes for a run or five, he should be alright and not incoherently high after the second.

Jamia declares she’s going first, and Alicia and Frank have known her long enough to not question that at all. But first, Frank has to learn how to do it.

He has to beg for fifteen minutes on the phone with Gerard, but Gerard does finally, grudgingly tell him. It’s all done with the very distinct air that Frank is in the wrong and that this is greedy and selfish, but if mob work has taught Frank anything, it’s how to ignore other people’s disapproval. So he gets the ritual out of Gerard and cheerfully hangs up with a “Thanks, babe. I love you!”

Gerard opens his mouth to beg him not to fuck up, but it’s too late, and the line is dead. He stands still for a moment with the phone in his hand. As much as Gerard understands wanting to have your friends with you forever, Frank and Jamia have grown apart in the last decade.
Jamia and Alicia also wont have the support of any other, older vampires to talk to as they reconcile the changes. Or at least no one close.

Lowering the phone, and with a very bad feeling in his gut, Gerard sends one text to Frank. “Be careful. Alicia will never forgive you if you kill her.”

All he gets back is an uncharacteristically serious “i know. i won’t”

Gerard sighs and settles in to wait to hear if it worked or not.

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Across the country, Frank writes out the ritual, just in case, and takes a deep breath. “licia, I understand if you don’t want to be in here-“

Alicia cuts him off. “Oh no. I’m gonna be. This is like, the one and only medical procedure the spouse can be there the whole time. You bet your ass I’m gonna be.”

“It’s kind of nasty.”

“So? You think I’m a wimp?”

“No.” Frank knows better than to call anyone Jamia associates with a wimp. “Alright, lets go, then.”

“Wait, right now?”

Frank glances at his watch. “Yeah. You’ll be up and kicking at just about the right time to take you out.”

“Out for what?”

“Jai, you’re gonna need some fuckin’ nutrition. I’ll have just killed you. Your first hunt.

“Fuck, wait, you gotta eat right after?”

“You’re gonna want to, yeah.”

“Okay. Okie dokie, bloodlust in t-minus two hours.”

“It’s not bloodlust, fuckin’ chill. I have never in my life felt that.”

“You? Never felt bloodlust? Bitch, I knew you in highschool and you were out for blood even then.”

“Vampire-related. Vampire related bloodlust.”

“I’ll let you have that. Maybe.” Jamia claps once. “Okay. Couch, because damned if I’m gonna get killed in the bed I sleep in.”

“I got turned on a couch, we can make it tradition.”

Alicia nods, looking a little pale, but very determined. Frank flips his fangs down. “Aight, Jai. Any last words?”

“Don’t you fuckin dare ‘any last words me,’ you’re bringing me back. And god help you if you fuck up. Al, I love you, I’ll see you on the other side.” She flips her wife a peace sign that Alicia reflexively returns.
Frank snorts at them both. “All right, you two fucks. Let’s go.”

Jamia rolls her eyes and tilts her jaw up. Frank gently takes her jaw and says, “Hey, it’s the closest our mouths are ever gonna get to each other’s bodies.”

Jamia giggles, Frank bites, and her giggle trails off into blissful unconsciousness. Frank keeps drinking, huge deep gulps that send memories of Grant rushing back. Frank knows his eyes are brightbrightbright, so he avoids looking at Alicia as he lays Jamia out and flips open his pocketknife.

Jamia has always gone along with Frank’s schemes, and her temporary corpse is equally cooperative to drinking a little of Frank’s blood. Frank says the ritual words, then sits back and pats the other couch next to him. Alicia flops into it.

“That’s it?”

“Yeah. Give’er like twenty, thirty minutes. It’s gotta like, go though and reanimate all that shit. She’s gotta grow fangs and get super strength.”

“Yeah? Am I coming on this hunt, by the way?”

“Uh, ideally probably not. Because you kinda gotta bite and run, and she’s gonna be way faster than you when she wakes up. We kinda don’t want to get arrested.”

“Okay. So you and I will go when you turn me, or will I go with her?”

“I’ll go with you. It’s kinda- well, it’s kinda a lot. So your first couple times are gonna be a little touch and go.”

“Why?”

“Bloodlust isn’t like, real. But it’s a high. So I don’t want you going berserk and her freaking out because she doesn’t know what to do with you.”

“Is it dangerous?”

Frank sits back on the couch. “Probably, yeah. Just as dangerous as any drug addiction, with more consequences for other people. I dunno. We do what we do, we try not to kill people. It’s a price.”

“Fair enough, I guess.” Alicia sits back next to him and they wait.

Jamia sits up like she’s in a hospital drama, all at once and bolt upright. Then she dry heaves. Alicia gets there first, and takes her hands. “You okay?”

“I feel like I got fuckin’ roofied, but considering I got killed, that seems about right.”

“Yeah. I felt like I got hit by a truck.”

“Semi or pickup?” Jamia slowly swings her legs to the floor, about to test her weight.

“Semi.”

“Okay, I’m in normal parameters.”

“Good.” Frank stands and offers her a hand. “Bathroom, let’s teach you the good shit.”

In his head, he’s a little astounded by how easy this is. He killed her, then he brought her back. In a
selfish way, it’s difficult to imagine how Gerard could ever be afraid of this. It’s easy. And maybe it’s the rush of blood, but it feels a little powerful. Jamia is feeling better already, and she strides into the bathroom with something like eagerness.

Frank follows her in and Alicia slips in to sit on the toilet. Frank starts by flipping his fangs down, then eyes bright and dark again, then into shadow for a second, then back to visible and tucks his fangs up.

Jamia blinks at the display. “Okay. So that’s the whole special?”

“Pretty much. We’re gonna start with fangs. They’re there, they grew in while you were out.” Frank flips up his lip with a finger and taps the extra bulge in his upper gums.

Jamia watches, then copies it. “Oh. Yeah, they’re there.”

“Yeah. Now push them down. Kind of like pursing your lips.”

Jamia does it, then opens her mouth. “That’s easy.”

“Yeah. Nothing about this is hard, really. It comes fast.”

“Handy, if you’re in a pinch.”

“Very.” Frank grins at her. He remembers a similar conversation with Gerard, but Gerard had hedged him, guilty for even daring to turn Frank. This is a much better iteration of it. Jamia grins back, and the joy flares her eyes bright.

Maybe it’s the fact Grant’s house only held men, but Jamia fully vamp’d-out doesn’t perk Frank’s senses the way even Gerard still does. Instead, he flicks his bright too and gestures her to look in the mirror.

“They’re gold!”

“It doesn’t change the color of your eyes, just like you shone a light through them. Also, uh, if you have your eyes bright in a photo you get some really creepy eye-flash. Like a cat or dog.”

“But not when they’re not bright?”

“No. And they don’t quite glow, but it’s bright. Doesn’t really affect your sight. Best I can figure is it’s an extra change that sort of freezes a human. Like, you walk by somebody in the alley and their eyes flash, you sort of want to pause and look twice? Because it’s off from the normal and you freeze to make sure it’s not a threat. Of course, that’s when we pounce. But. Hey, human instincts aren’t perfect.”

From the toilet, Alicia pipes up. “That’s fucked up, dude.”

Frank shrugs. “It’s a fantastic persuasive factor. Just a flash and people get nervous. Do anything you want.”

“Huh.” Jamia looks in the mirror again, then reaches for the light switch. With just the hall light on, her round cheeks vanish into shadow and her eyes and cheekbones pop. She smiles at her reflection, and Alicia gasps.

Vampires don’t look particularly inhuman until you catch them at the right time, at the right angle. But when you do, it’s very unsettling, because the old, instinctive part of human brains know that
this is not a peer, it’s a predator. Alicia’s gasp isn’t outside the norm at all.

Frank pulls a little of the shadow around him, outline wavering, and meets Jamia’s bright eyes in the mirror. He lets his cold mob smile out, fangs just peeking out. Jamia isn’t scared, and her grin sharpens with him. Alicia’s heart rate jumps, and Jamia’s head tilts.

“Hey, I can hear you.”

Frank nods. “Alicia, we’re spooking you.” He reaches over and flips the light on, returning his appearance to human.

“It wasn’t scary until you both smiled like that.”

Frank nods, and a tiny frown line appears between Jamia’s eyes. “Well, I’m not gonna hurt you, and Frank’ll turn you in two days. I don’t wanna scare you.”

“You didn’t except for a second. And like Frank was saying, it was like, primal. Not rational fear, I know you guys aren’t gonna like, grab me.”

Jamia’s eyes have faded back, and she pauses to look over. “Hey. My eyes went back.”

“Yeah. They really only come out when you’re feeling.. predatory? Gerard explained it to me differently, but he’s also got a very different turning than either of us did.”

“Grant, right?”

Frank nods. Alicia asks, “Does this mean Grant is still alive? Vampires don’t like, die.”

“Correct on the second, but on the first, no. I killed him. He was.. fucking awful. Traumatized the shit outta Gee.”

Jamia permits the deceptive answer, aware of Frank’s tendency to hide and minimize his own trauma. She’s leaning toward the mirror, practicing flicking her eyes bright and dark. Frank leans back and watches her get the hang of it.

“Nice. Okay, last special shit after you’ve eaten. Where is there shit around here? Someplace somebody asleep in the street wouldn’t be crazy.”

“Frankie, this is San Francisco. Anywhere?”

Frank sighs, checks his wallet and says, “Okay, yeah, I’ve got apology cash. I always feel bad leaving some homeless guy so I leave them with like an extra hundred or two hundred bucks. And I’ve got smaller bills so it wont be weird. Cool.”

“How else do you hunt?”

“Gee and I go hold hands in shitty areas and wait to get harassed, then bite those assholes. Doesn’t matter too much, you can’t get sick off people, we’re like, sterile? Gee isn’t sure if we’re carriers or not, but it shouldn’t matter.”

“Cool.” Jamia nods, then looks at her wife and does a happy wriggle that has Alicia laughing.

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She and Frank leave not long after, and with the two of them and Jamia’s average fearlessness, her first hunt goes smoothly. She pulls back easily when Frank taps her to be done. Frank explains the
reason, and she nods, recentering herself after the bloodrush.

Frank grins and offers her his arm, cash duly deposited and blanket pulled over the man. Jamia takes it, and they start the long walk home. “I didn’t want to tell you, but it does feel good, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, in the very absolute power way.”

“Which, of course, corrupts absolutely.”

“If one is unprepared for it. I don’t aspire to rule the world. Do you?”

Frank feigns excess modesty. “Only New York.”

Jamia laughs and squeezes his arm. “And you’ll be a benevolent ruler, I’m sure.”

“I will do my utmost.” They grin at each other and Jamia sighs, looking around.

“It’s like, unreal out here. So beautiful.”

They pass a park, and Frank tugs her toward it. “At the risk of being excessively Twilight, you’ve gotta run. Like, go off trail.”

“Really?” She peers off to the left of the tree. “Wait, shit, I can totally see.”

“And you’re totally wicked fast, too. And we can avoid people. Listen.” They stop walking, and Frank tilts his head. “One other person, 2 o’clock, probably about 150 yards.”

“I can hear them. How do you know 150 yards?”

“Practice. I mean, you have to like, try to attain that skill. But start with getting good at picking out and following individuals in a crowd, then practice distance somewhere measurable. Then you can estimate like that.”

“Cool. So, shall I take off.”

“Please.” Frank gestures to the woods.

Jamia takes the offer and leaps the trail marker, cutting across 50 feet of forest in a matter of seconds to catch the trail again. Frank is only a moment behind.

“How fast can I go?”

“Dunno. You’re pretty fast, and you run out here, so fucking scary fast, I bet.”

“Can you keep up?”

“Yeah. But I can’t find you like I could find that guy. So don’t go off in the woods and dead stop, or I’ll have a hell of a time.”

“Because I’m silent?”

“Yeah. Though, standing really silently in the woods takes practice and shit, so I probably could. But Adam says I’m the least quiet woodsman he’s ever met, so.”

“Who’s Adam?”

“Guy who works for me. He’s big into quiet spaces, and he invited me with him once. Then
complained I walked too loudly.”

“Oh. That’s funny, actually. Okay. Running.” Jamia sets her feet pointing off the trail.

“Oh. That’s funny, actually. Okay. Running.” Jamia sets her feet pointing off the trail.

“On your mark. Get set. Go!” At Frank’s shout, Jamia takes off, probably coming close to Usain Bolt’s 100m record and tearing onward. Frank sets off after her on the trail.

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They get home both a little windswept and laughing, and two days later, the house is exclusively vampires. Alicia takes to it with a regal sort of grace both Jamia and Frank envy a bit, and they plan a Christmas trip to meet the rest of their little group.

Frank goes home happy as a cat that got the canary.
Alright- Happy almost holiday's 2018!!! We've nearly made it through this whole hell-ass year!! Incredible. Tell me something good that happened to you this year- I've made some really good career strides and I'm really excited to be starting 2019 with what I'll be doing.

Thank you all for like,,, still clicking on this. It's been kind of incredible to write and explore this early part of this universe again and in so much depth. <3 Sorry it took a month to upload, I finally went back and knocked out half this chapter to streamline the story. I've given up on a happy ending, because there's no way to not shoehorn it in, and I'd love to be able to smack "complete" on this work. But when I upload the last chapter, I'll try to upload the first chapter of the sequel, so there's no lingering too long on angst.

Gerard meets him at the door with a sort of grim expression. Frank’s wide grin fades. “What’s wrong?”

“Are they okay?”

“Of course they are, I would have called you days ago if they weren’t.” Frank pushes past Gerard into the hallway, a little irked that this is his greeting. “They’re coming out for Christmas with us, you’ll see for yourself.”

“That’s almost six months.”

“And?”

“Plenty of time for things to go badly.”

“Gee, have a little faith. Jai is smart, Alicia has been nothing but brilliant, and neither of them are dealing with anything like trauma in their turnings. Mine was a little rushed and I suffered for not being fully ready, I think. Yours was traumatic and frankly fucking awful all around. Theirs was planned for. And fine.”

“Seemed a little rushed.”

“They’d been thinking about it for years, or they wouldn’t have just said yes when I brought it up.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Yes, Gee. Why?”

“Because I know how you are when you want something, and sometimes you’re not great at listening to other people’s hesitations.”

Frank stops dead and turns to look at Gerard, weekender still in his hand. “What is this really about?”
“It’s not about anything but you turning them.” Gerard stops a little ways away down the hallway and leans against the wall, arms crossed.

“It doesn’t sound like it’s just about that.”

Gerard just looks coolly at him, and Frank raises his eyebrows. They’re both very able to hold these sort of silences for an incredibly long time, and it’s a battle of wills between them today. Frank has plenty of time to craft a verbal projectile while Gerard waits for him to put together what he should be guilty of. Frank fires, “Well, when you’re ready to fight about whatever you’re really upset about, you know where I am.” And spins to enter the bedroom and unpack.

They don’t talk a lot the rest of the weekend. Gerard puts together slides for an administrator’s retreat he’s attending and presenting at at the end of the month, and Frank spends more time than strictly necessary going through resumes to plug a few gaps in shell companies.

---

Jamia forwards them both her travel plans in August, and Gerard is flying out to Michigan the next day, so he picks up his phone and goes to find his husband. Frank is in his study- and really, how naive was Gerard to think that two studies was a reasonable way to conduct a marriage?- and pushes the door open, surprising the hell out of Frank.


Gerard shakes his head and steps into the office, refusing to sit with Frank’s desk between them. He stays in the doorway. “I got Jamia and Alicia’s travel plans.”

“Oh, they sent them?” Frank glances back to his computer, swipes three things aside and scans the email. “Cool. I can pick them up, and thank god they’re landing before rush hour.”

“That’s not my concern.”

“Oh.” Frank takes a proper look at Gerard’s face, then shoves his chair back away from his work and folds his hands in his lap, looking at Gerard. “You’re still upset I turned them. Was it because you weren’t there?”

“Not really.”

“Then what? Because the offer to turn them has been in the air for years, and you had plenty of opportunity to tell me I should retract it.”

“You first made the offer when your mother died, I didn’t honestly think it was serious then. But that aside, I don’t think we ought to be making more vampires. Ever.”

“Why not?”

“Because that’s taking away someone’s life.”

“It’s- okay, sure, it’s taking, but then it’s giving right back a longer, healthier one.”

“At the cost of more life.”

“We don’t kill people. And no-one we’d turn would either.”

“You’ve killed people.”
“That’s independent of the vampirism. As you well know.” Frank bristles.

“Do I? Because ever since I turned you and you woke up to tell me vampires were made to hunt people you’ve gotten steadily more callous about human life.”

“What the fuck?” Frank spits out, real anger bubbling up. “That’s not a fair accusation to make, at all. Fair to say since the mob, because, yes, that’s probably true. But since 2013? No.”

“No? Can you prove it?”

“To prove it? I can’t prove my thoughts to you. But you’ll notice the only people I harmed were people I was forced to, in Grant’s house, or in self-defense, which if you call killing Grant anything but that we’re going to have to agree to disagree.”

“And recently?”

“Probably.” Frank doesn’t hesitate in answering.

Gerard leans against the doorframe. “And recently we’ve had a problem. It’s wrong and unlike you, and if you think I will grow to tolerate it you are very mistaken. I have left more for less.”

“We both know that’s a lie. But sure, you won’t tolerate it.”

Gerard’s expression closes off. “Frank. You are not the only one here capable of making or unmaking one of us.”

“I thought I was the only one with practical experience in the second.”

“You are. But I am not young and wilting. And I will not stand you to be a killer.”

“Then unmake the killer and leave the man you love.”

“I don’t know how.”

Frank makes a sweeping gesture and an inviting face that Gerard reads as both invitation to try and a distancing from the issue. Gerard continues. “I’d rather not have to fight you for the parts of you I fell in love with. But I know you’re happy with your work now. I’m asking you to find a balance.”

“Where’s the fulcrum here? Because I turned Jai because I can’t imagine myself without her and Mom. One I could lose, and I knew, rationally, my entire adult life, that someday I’d lose Mom. But Jamia and I were supposed to share a lifespan. Then I left her behind.”

“Fine. Then just- don’t use it as a tool. To make people more useful to you.”

“Never. It’s too heavy a burden to give somebody like that, somebody who was only a tool.”

“And I’d rather you didn’t regard people as only tools to you.”

“I try not to, but your statement precluded me doing just that.”

“It wouldn’t be out of line for the man you’re becoming. Don’t blame me as the genesis of all your sins.”

Frank snorts. “I won’t. And if I have been, I’ll try not to in the future.”

“Thank you.”
Frank just offers Gerard a tight smile. “Am I still dropping you off tomorrow?”

“Please.”

“Of course. Just wanted to make sure.” Frank turns for a second toward his computer again, squints at something, then dismisses it. “You done working for the night?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Wanna go out? There’s a new late-night coffee shop on 17th that I only ever see closed in the morning. We could go try it out.”

Gerard is nearly blindsided by the offer of a date. That part of their marriage has fallen by the wayside in the last months, gradually enough neither of them commented on it. Their sex has become quick and selfish, and their conversations acerbic more often than not. “Sure. You’re done?”

“Can be. They’re all fucking idiots. Or untrustworthy. Or both.”

“Ah.”

“Yeah.” Frank shuffles papers aside and unearths his phone. “So?”

“Now?”

“Why not? You got more work to do?”

“Alright. Am I dressed all right?”

“’s a coffee shop, can’t be that fancy. I’m gonna throw on a jacket, but not a suit jacket.”

“I probably will too.” Gerard follows him from the office.

They make it out and sit quietly together over large, mellow lattes, watching the flow of late night workers drift in and out. It’s peaceful, and it’s genuinely nice to sit next to each other without feeling like anything is between them.

—

Frank is bored without Gerard. It’s reassuring at least that he still wants to spend all his free time with his husband even when they edge around fights more often than not. That fact still seems strange, because as soon as they’re apart it smooths out. Frank lounges on the couch, waiting for Gerard’s flight to get in and absentely poking around his phone.

He finds a half-finished list, once meant to be for an anniversary card, of all the reasons Frank loves Gerard. Re-reading them now they seem a little pathetic.

1. You make me smile.
2. You’ve never given up on me.
3. You’re patient with everyone.
4. You accepted my family without question.
5. You loved me even when I pushed you.
6.

Frank frowns at them. They’re all about him, even if on the surface they’re about Gerard. He goes through them one by one and deletes and rewrites them.
1. You never give up, even when others would.
2. You always see the best in people.
3. You’re patient with everyone, which makes you an amazing teacher and mentor.
4. You never hold grudges, even when a family might deserve them.
5. You’ve found it in your heart to forgive me.
6. You’re the strongest man I know, and I look up to you endlessly.
7. You see the world with beauty and nuance, and your art shares it with the rest of us.

Frank fills in more lines this time, then smiles to himself and adds one last joking entry to the list.

1. You think Doom Patrol is the best comic ever.

He’s looking over his creation, thinking about nothing in particular when his phone buzzes and Gerard’s call pops up.

“Hey Gee.”

“Hello Frank. We just touched down.”

“I’ll head out, meet you at door ten?”

“Yes, please.”

“Ciao.” Frank hangs up and heaves himself up off the couch, gathering keys and wallet with him.

Gerard is tense on the way home, and Frank knows he only has himself to blame. But the tension ratchets his shoulders up no matter how illogical he knows that is. At home, Frank holds the door. Gerard brushes past him and heads for the bedroom, bag in hand and suit jacket draped over his arm. Frank catches him in the hallway, scoops the jacket out of his hands and leans in to drop a kiss on Gerard’s cheek.

“Want help unpacking?”

Gerard softens a fraction. “No thanks. Just dumping all the clothes in the hamper, honestly. I’m beat, and I think I’m hungry.”

Frank nods. “Going out tonight, then?”

“Should. I assume you have work?”

“There’s always things I could work on.”

“Then I’ll see you when I’m back?”

“If that’s what you want.” Frank hesitates, unsure how to invite himself along. Gerard has probably been surrounded by people for the last four days and wants to be alone.

“If you’re busy, I don’t care.” Back to Frank, Gerard’s shoulders shift for a second. “Hunted on my own plenty.”

“I’m not busy. If you’ll have me, I’ll come. I haven’t seen you in four days, and you’ve got stories from the conference, I’m sure.”

“Alright. If you want.” Gerard turns back with his dopp kit in hand, expression strangely judgmental.
and brushes past Frank to the bathroom.

Frank doesn’t turn to follow him. “If you’d like to go out by yourself, I won’t begrudge you it. I know you sometimes don’t want company.”

“I don’t want your company? Are you projecting?”

Frank spins, confused by the way Gerard snaps at him. “No? You’ve literally gotten up and left the living room while we’re sitting in it, and when I’ve made to find you after you’ve made it pretty clear you don’t want company? I just thought you wanted privacy. Space to think or whatever. Nobody wants company every hour of every day.”

“I leave because we just fight. I can’t say anything, I can’t do anything without stepping on your toes. And I fucking hate that, I hate how it feels and I was so goddamn glad to be away from it for a few days and now you don’t know if you want to come hunt or not. Make your choice, I’ll make my peace with it.”

“You could’ve fucking shared that it was that bad, I had no idea! Jesus Christ!” Frank shakes his head, looking away from Gerard and gathering himself, consciously tamping down the anger and hurt to calm his voice to add. “Okay, I don’t want that to be the vibe of our marriage. That’s shitty, and in the future, I’d appreciate it if you told me when it felt shitty to be with me, and I will pay attention and do my utmost to change what I’m doing. Tonight, I’d love your company for a while, and I’d like to hear about your conference. You’d like to hunt, so do that for sure. If you don’t want to spend any more time with me tonight, that’s okay. You go out, I’ll go to bed and I won’t disturb you when you come back. If you’re willing to give me a chance tonight at anytime, let me know how or when, okay? Please?”

Gerard stares at him. “I’d like to hunt. And I’ll decide when I come back. I’m tired and I’m hungry and I’m in no mood to carry on this fight.”

“Okay.” Frank puts his hands up. “I’ll be home when you get home, then. It’s good to see you back, regardless.” He leaves the room and almost goes to his study, then pauses. Julian’s advice. So he crosses into the living room and scoops up a book.

Gerard leaves five minutes later and Frank loses the thread of the book trying to not watch him go and doesn’t turn a page for another five minutes after the door closes.

—

Gerard takes an extra half an hour on his hunt, just walking. He’s probably being a little too harsh on Frank, all told. But sometimes, sometimes the mob boss bleeds though to the husband, and a smile is a hair too sharp, a dark joke just not enough of a joke, and Gerard is put on edge. He can’t shake those instances so easily, either.

The worst part is that he still likes Frank. As a conceptual person, as the teacher Gerard met and fell in love with, Gerard is still head over heels. Frank had strode right into his life and upset the balance, then caught Gerard and pulled until they were both back on firm footing. If not for the mob, they wouldn’t be fighting. Gerard stops, orders a coffee and spends a few minutes sitting with it. If Frank was still in the mob in a hundred years, what would they look like?

—

In Gerard’s fantasy, Frank arrives home, dropping a briefcase and looking somehow like every other commuter. Gerard indulges for a second and imagines them in the suburbs, backyard stretching out
to woods. Dogs bounding outside when he lets them out after work. Sitting on the porch until Frank gets home, bringing two glasses of wine and wearing a smile. Them trading stories of the day, Frank complaining about some benefit luncheon and interminable speeches and Gerard offering sympathy in the form of sarcastically bemoaning free food until Frank is laughing.

Eventually, they’d just sit, fingers intertwined between them, ring fingers comfortably heavy with over a century of marriage and a vow renewal or two. The vision is clear, Frank’s hands dark with more tattoos, their two wolfy dogs running back and forth and the air crisp with a northeastern fall.

Gerard can live with that. In his mind, Frank smooths over with age like a river stone, and from what Frank’s said tonight he still cares for Gerard.

Gerard heads home, mind made up. So long as Frank loves him and respects that he will hold no share and no stake in the mob, Gerard will stay and cherish the Frank he knows and loves best.

Frank meets him at home and they curl up on the couch, legs tangled in the middle, and Gerard tells his stories from the retreat. It’s another incremental shift in the fulcrum of their relationship, and the change is becoming apparent to both of them.

Frank still goes out to bars in his territories, takes Gerard with him and sometimes holds half an impromptu meeting over pints. Gerard adjusts, and Frank pays him back for it with unwavering devotion and love. He demonstrates it carefully, avoiding falling into the traps and trappings a man of his new status might default to. Instead, their dates and anniversaries are filled with art, comics, bookstores and small, cosy restaurants. One memorable birthday, Frank gets them both train tickets and they spend a day in DC, lingering in a wing of previously unexhibited paintings.

The new balance works, and Gerard comes to know more about the mob and it’s workings while he and Frank are strategically seen. Frank comes to depend on Gerard sometimes for the very softest of work, entertaining a new contact for a matter of minutes while Frank has a hurried, crucial conversation with a colleague around the corner.

They move through the 2040’s with only two moves- from apartment to apartment in upscale neighborhoods, and Gerard from private school district to another. It’s a decade of spending to get police forces turned over to more friendly men, political buyouts and growing the kind of community presence and loyalty required to operate with true freedom. It’s rewarding when it’s not hellishly stressful, and Gerard has noticed the toll as they expand. It puts more and more on Frank’s plate. He’s ambitious, and Gerard wonders when he’ll be satisfied some days.

Regardless of how busy it gets at work, Frank is still married to Gerard, and one or three explosive fights aside, they’re as even-keeled as they get. It’s still a tenuous balance, Frank having to consciously carve out time for Gerard, and Gerard having to accept that some things about Frank will not change fully. They both accept that their marriage will take work, and near-constant work at that.

Sometimes, at home alone while Frank is out late, or after a short call from him at work, Gerard slides off his engagement ring and twists it under the light, reading the inscription. Forever means forever means forever, indeed. Sometimes the nights alone seem long.

It’s the flash of Frank’s small diamond that reminds him. He’ll reach across the desk for something.
pick up a piece of something in a warehouse to inspect it- and that glimmer will remind him he’s due at home, and due to take some time off.

This Christmas, Frank is going to have to really take some time off. Everyone is coming out, Jamia and Alicia from the other end of the country, Julian and Antonio from Rome. Frank is scheduled to start taking days off in two days, finally at a sort-of stalemate with one of his biggest rivals.

These are all old-fashioned, old-money, old-power types that Frank has just gently hounded out of the spotlight, and they begrudge him the loss of territory and waning influence something fierce. Their leader, Adam Lazarra, has spent a lot of time abroad, meaning that Julian’s Sicilians- bred into loyalty to Grant’s empire- have been scrambling, struggling to keep Eastern Europe under control and the Russian mob friendly. It’s a verifiable political minefield, and Frank is kept up by waking nightmares of the headlines and exposure if they knew that it was all for control of Queens.

It’s too early to tell who will win, but it’s shaping up to being something nasty. A few of Russia’s sticky oligarchs have essentially thrown their glove into Adam’s side, and Frank gathers tax data on them to freeze assets before they can be liquidized. Meanwhile, his people are getting killed left and right, and god help them if they spend any time east of the new Iron Curtain.

—

Frank and Gerard find themselves at a bar frequented by Frank’s officers the night Christmas holidays start up in earnest. Frank comes back from the bar with two glasses of mulled wine, head tilted in and kind teacher smile on his face while he talks with the woman walking with him. Gerard smiles at them and Frank introduces her as “Ms. Christa, she’s with our tax department.”

She’s clearly surprised to be introduced and stammers out a “Lovely to meet you!” As she shakes Gerard’s hand. Frank slips back into his and Gerard’s booth and wraps an arm around Gerard’s waist, wishing her a happy holiday. Christa is attuned to the hint and returns the sentiment, then takes her leave.

Gerard leans in to Frank and says quietly, “Either you’re making efforts to be nicer, or she’s absolutely invaluable.”

“Both? And thank you for being able to rule out flirting.”

“Please, I’ve seen you with women.”

Frank snorts. “They can always tell. Unlike how some school administrators I could name never get left alone.”

“Well, don’t forget, I’m not gay like you are.”

“Hm, true. I guess they do have a chance.” Frank gives Gerard an affectionate squeeze and takes a sip of his drink. Frank and Gerard watch the bar get more raucous, keeping their corner quiet and much more sober. It’s almost fun to watch the hugs and the way people start to lean into each other and get louder.

They stay late, and Gerard finally looks at his watch and says, “I’ve gotta be at the pep rally tomorrow, we should go.”

“Sure. Lemme go close our tab, I think we can just slip out.”

Gerard nods assent, and Frank slides off and vanishes into the fray. He’s a bit delayed on the way back by a large cohort of his office staff, wanting him to stay and party. Gerard can hear himself
being used as an excuse and goes off to rescue Frank.

They tell Frank they’re willing to let the Ieros take their leave if and only if Frank takes a shot with them, and Frank sighs, handing Gerard their car keys while Gerard laughs at him. Frank turns back, toasts the bar and their work, and knocks the shot back. Everyone else raises their glasses as a raucous cheer goes up.

As they walk up the steps to their brownstone, Frank leans his head on Gerard’s shoulder and says, “Merry almost-Christmas, babe.”

Gerard snorts lightly. “Thanks. How’s that shot going down?”

“Swimmingly. As in everything is swimming a little.” Frank lets out a punch-drunk giggle at his own joke. Gerard figured as much and just makes sure he makes it to bed and drinks a glass of water.

Frank is always cuddly, and never more so than when he’s touched alcohol, so Gerard settles into bed with him and turns on a comedy show his coworkers can’t shut up about. Frank is asleep by the end of the episode, face bathed in the flickering glow of the TV. Gerard turns the show off two episodes later and settles the covers again. He’s getting over his irrational fear of the upcoming Christmas, mostly because it feels like the holidays now that Frank is disconnected from work, and the last time they all spent the holidays together was more than a decade ago when he married Frank. Now, they’ve added Alicia and lost Linda.

Gerard gets a migraine at the pep rally, but as soon as he makes it home, Frank appears out of his study and they waste the afternoon doing absolutely nothing. It’s been a while since they’ve been able to spend a lot of time like this, and Gerard risks asking about Frank’s work, one hand idly running through Frank’s hair.

Frank “mmrphs” to the question, then turns his head a little bit to answer properly. “I think after Christmas it’s gonna blow up. Lazarra’s son comes of age in January, and we’ve got every indication he’s gonna come after me big time. And they’ve made much better gains in Eastern Europe. So we’re gonna be fucking scrambling.”

Frank turns his face up and gently taps Gerard’s jaw. “It’s gonna be rough year, babe. Maybe a rough decade.”

“Are we gonna be able to keep this balance?”

“I hope so. I just- there’s only so many hours in the day. And I might end up spending even less of them with you when this shit gets rough. Is it too much to ask you to not be afraid to come demand your time back?”

“I guess not. As long as you don’t guilt me for it.”

“I’ll be sure not to. It’s just too easy to find things that need doing.”

“I know. But I like having time with you as my husband. We didn’t get married to only see each other for five minutes in the morning.”

“Yeah. I know.” Frank sits up and steals a kiss, “And I love you for asserting that, and also letting me do this work.”

“Just don’t get lost in it. And don’t die.”
“I won’t. And I won’t lose myself to it.”

“Okay.”

Frank smiles, tired and worn in and full of love.

—

They pick up Jamia and Alicia the next day, and when Julian and Antonio fly in, Antonio drives himself down to the Iero’s and tells Frank he’s due up in Harlem with everyone else. Gerard’s lips thin a little as Frank catches the keys Antonio tosses, but the women are cooing at Antonio’s new dog, and there’s nothing he can say Frank doesn’t already know.

All the mob men arrive together later that night, looking a little rumpled, shirts untucked and ties loose. Gerard and Antonio share a look behind their backs at the late hour, and everyone settles in. Julian eagerly catches up with Jamia and then leaving everyone else behind in book talk.

Frank accepts a drink from Alicia and flops down next to Gerard, letting out a long sigh. Gerard settles an arm over his shoulder. Frank kisses his cheek, and Gerard knows that that’s an apology for the lost time. He squeezes Frank for a quarter second, and Frank’s cheeks lift for a before he asks Alicia how she’s been.

—

Everyone ends up crashing with Frank and Gerard when opening the door reveals snow piling up quickly. That requires some creative bedding solutions, but they’ve got two couches and an ancient air mattress. Matteo takes the couch while cheerfully telling Gerard, “If I’m too lazy to trek fifty short blocks up the island, I get what I get. And Frank tells me you’ve both fallen asleep on your couches before, I assume you have appropriately high standards.”

Gerard laughs at the statement and hands over the blankets without further argument. The house goes quiet a few minutes later, vampires dropping off to silent sleep. Gerard curls around Frank and whispers, “When’s the last time we fell asleep on the couch together?”

“Dunno.” Frank mumbles back, more concerned with getting his pillow into the right angle between Gerard’s shoulder and neck than the question. “Why?”

“’teo mentioned it, and I realized it’s been a while.”

“Huh.” Frank gives up on the pillow and rolls over. “Movie night soon, then, because it sounds like you miss the crick in your neck?”

Gerard smiles a little at the gentle rib and nods. “A movie night would be nice.”

“Kay. You pick the movie, I’ll bring home the good popcorn.” Frank catches Gerard’s hand and pulls it over him as he turns back over to settle down for good.

Gerard lays down as well, resettling his arm over Frank a little and pressing a kiss to the back of his husband’s neck before closing his eyes.

—

The dawn of Christmas Eve is a winter wonderland, and pretty much every blanket is in use, wrapped around shoulders as the eight of them sip coffee in the living room. Julian laughs at them all for not being Muslim and appropriates Frank’s study to work. He calls Frank and Matteo in around
two, and after getting a roast in the oven, they go to join him. Gerard yells after them “Only an hour! It’s Christmas!” At Julian.

Julian laughs and makes no promises. At 3:15 they all troop out of the study, looking grim. It’s become a normal look for any of them leaving work. Lorenzo’s shoulders draw in a little and he and Matteo have a conversation entirely in microexpressions. Frank pours himself a glass of wine, then leans heavily on the kitchen counter and stares unseeing at the fireplace. Gerard knows the expression is one of Frank thinking furiously and slips behind him silently to get the oven when the timer beeps.

Frank rouses himself to help serve, and Jamia and Alicia take up enforcing normality by refusing to let the conversational topics get too deep. They all spend a while reminiscing on the best Christmas presents they’ve ever gotten—both Antonio and Matteo cite their first Christmas after Grant as their best. That nearly makes Gerard tear up. When it’s clear they all need to be rescued from a hell of their own sappy making, Alicia raises her glass and says, “Well at least we still get Christmas because we haven’t been blown up yet, and the orange bastard is dead.”

“God fuckin bless.” Frank replies, clinking glasses with her.

Julian laughs, “I am somehow always surprised at the depth of American’s political feelings.”

Matteo levels his fork at Julian. “Try living here. I’m invested now. And thank god I got citizenship because if I couldn’t vote I would have killed a man in anger.”

Julian puts his hands up. “Okay, okay, I get it. Imagine you on the warpath.”

“You’ve seen me on the warpath.”

“I don’t intend to ever be in the peripheral of it again either, thank you.”

Frank swallows his food and says, “Wait, spill!”

“Back in Italy. ‘teo’s favorite suit maker got assassinated for serving him. He was furious. Nearly brought Grant down on both of us shouting at me for things I barely had any contact with or control over.” Julian gives Matteo a prim look as he complains about it.

Alicia snorts. “God, you sound like when my cousins get into a spat.”

“These men are clearly a drain on my life, then, Alicia.” Matteo indicates Julian with a superior look tellingly similar to Julian’s.

“Oh no no, I’m not getting in the middle of your little spat. I’m just saying, you fight like you’re related and it’s really funny.”

They squint at each other for a second and both turn toward Alicia. “What a shame.” Julian says, then turns right back to Gerard and asks “And how’s your school? The way Frank describes it, you’d think you’d be principal by now.”

Gerard rolls his eyes. “No. I’m languages chair. I kind of hate it. I miss being student-facing. Maybe when we move next I’ll just ask for the teacher’s work again. Not like the money matters.”

“You gonna come up and work in Manhattan?” Frank nudges him with a conspirator’s grin.

“No. Maybe back to Jersey. Or we move West. Or back to Italy, I suppose, if you need access to your work.”
“Chicago is a possibility as well, then. If we can’t bounce around New York for long enough.”

Gerard nods to the options, and Matteo says to Frank, “You better not be moving until Lazarra’s in a ditch, I’ll never forgive you.”

“The elder or younger?”

“Both.”

“Yeah, I won’t be. He made that shit personal with the car bombs last month in our garage.”

Gerard whips around. “You never told me about that!”

“I took an Uber home and didn’t have the car for three days? Did you not notice?”

“No. And you never said a word about your car being rigged with a damn bomb!”

“I mean, it didn’t go off. So I figured I wouldn’t worry you with it.”

Julian whispers, “Mistake number one.” To Jamia, who sniggers.

“Yeah, ‘specially with Gerard. Frank’s boutta have his stocking withheld.”

Frank flips them both off around his wine, still trying to placate his husband.

Gerard finally says, “Just don’t do this shit! I’m tired of it!” And turns back to his plate.

There’s a moment of very heavy tension, and then Antonio gently shatters it, turning to Jamia to ask her if she remembers any of the Italian they were teaching her last night. The rest of dinner is occupied with that, and Frank and Gerard’s little fight is buried under pleasantries.

Gifts are opened after dinner, egg nog comes out and eventually all of Grant’s old group heads out, warm and happy. Gerard finally asks Jamia and Alicia the question he’s burning to.

“How has it been being vampires? We’ve only seen you twice since, well- I’ve only seen you twice.”

“Oh, it was fine.” Jamia shrugs at him. “No, it’s been smooth sailing, really.”

“Really?”

“Yeah? Why, were you worried about us? I know Frank had to like, call you to find out how to do it way back when, but it was pretty simple.”

“I was very worried, yes.”

“Oh.”

Alicia sits up and shrugs as well. “Yeah. It was fine. The lifestyle adjustment isn’t bad either. It’s wack the first time you hunt. Or the fifth. Like, it’s still wack, honestly, but like, it works. And Frank taught us how to not hurt people.”

“Yeah,” Jamia nods. “But it’s cool. Check back in when we get new IDs again and needing support when we have to figure out where to move. And I still haven’t told Mom. Don’t think I will.”
Gerard looks concerned, but Frank just nods. “Yeah. She’s been in that memory home a while now, she probably won’t notice.”

“Yeah. Might even help her hang onto me.”

Gerard nods, caught up. Thinking about it, he does remember Frank telling him something about Sharon’s rather fast decline into dementia.

“We’re here if you need us, for sure. Best friends forever and all that shit.”

“It’s mostly all that shit, yeah.” Jamia grins and leans on Frank.

Frank pulls her into a hug.

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And so ends the Christmas holiday, with family gathered close and a temporary respite from the work that so heavily burdens Frank and the others. Frank and Gerard spend their anniversary in, sharing a box of crackers and half a bottle of wine. It’s all they need and all they want.

War starts in January in New York. Frank gets thinner, gets meaner in a way despite all attempts to temper it. He almost hides the changes with Gerard, it’s not perfect acting. He’s faster to snap, quicker to judge harshly. There’s a distance between them now, a sort of lack of marriage that only dissipates when they both put in the effort.

It’s war clear enough but almost a gentleman’s war. While arson, assassination, and burglary are all par for the course, civilians and spouses are left out. Breaking that sort of sacred trust would change the stakes from control of the boroughs to utter destruction and neither party is keen on taking that bet. But abroad, everyone is fair game and Lazzara and Iero allies engage in deadly proxy war with much less restraint and a much higher body count.

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By Christmas of 2050 Gerard is tired of it. Frank is run ragged, worn down to granite tenacity and his base drive to survive and thrive despite all else. As the fall wind grew a bite, Frank got sharper with it, taking any advantage and pressing tiny footholds into gaping weak points in the Lazzara’s holdings and personnel. He’s going to win, the only question now is how much the Lazzaras will be able to damage the Ieros before they’re wiped out.

Professionally, it’s a victory. Personally, it’s functionally wiped out Frank and Gerard’s relationship. With the loss of Frank’s softer edges, the common ground between them has shrunk to Frank’s old career and the one Gerard is still clinging to, books neither of them have read in decades, and shared trauma. They hang onto each other and their marriage by their fingertips, both sort of wishing it’ll go back to the way it was.

Matteo and Frank press on through the holiday season, bearing down their advantage. They support each other flawlessly now, used to each other and the way they work, and with Julian’s unquestionable control over Western Europe, they’re beginning to beat back the holdouts of Lazzara’s allies in Eastern Europe as well. But they’re not quite powerful enough that those men are polite when they eventually capitulate.

That’s how Frank finds himself with a long series of meetings scheduled over Christmas. A vastly important coalition of Estonian, Russian and Ukranian men are flying out to New York to negotiate a peace with Frank. Julian is coming out as well, and the Lazzaras have a seat at the table, should they wish to fill it.
Frank gets off a phone call with a Mr. Andrevich on December 20th, after finalizing their plans. The men will fly in in the night of December 23rd, and then Christmas Eve they’ll be in meetings all day, splitting up and hashing out small agreements where they could. The optimistic timeline says that by 7pm they’ll have opened wine in the office and reached an agreement.

Frank takes a second, glad his office door is closed, to drop his head into his hands. Gerard is going to kill him. It’s one Christmas, and this is worth it. Frank can’t afford to push this off till the new year. This war will drag on another two years if he does. They’ll just have to give up one Christmas. Hell, they’ll probably still make Christmas Mass early enough to sit. Antonio is in town with Julian, it’s not like Gerard will be sitting home alone.

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Frank can rationalize it all for himself, but he still puts off telling Gerard about it. He gets two days. He and Gerard are sprawled out on the couch, Frank bone tired and nearly asleep. Gerard is commenting on whatever he’s reading, but Frank has long lost the thread of commentary and is just making interested sounds when needed to keep listening to Gerard’s voice rise and fall.

Eventually, Gerard yawns and puts his hand in Frank’s hair. “When are you taking off for Christmas?”

Frank wakes right back up. “Christmas Day. Probably get a bit more around New Years if it goes well. Got pretty much everyone who’s anyone in Eastern Europe coming on the 23rd, meetings the 24th.”

“You have meetings on Christmas Eve?” Gerard’s tone is too carefully controlled, too flat for Frank to know how he needs to head off a fight.

Frank nods. “Couldn’t be helped. They set the dates, and there’s a little too much at stake for us to be able to push back. We’re trying to make inroads with them, they’ve already agreed to come all the way out here.”

“You could’ve.”

“I’ll be home well in time for Mass. And we won’t work on Christmas Day. I think Julian made sounds about hosting the European guys for Christmas dinner if it goes well, but who knows.” Frank sits up a little. “I know it’s not ideal, but we’ve got to finish this.”

Gerard looks down and away. “Will it? Because this year, these last five years have been a constant redefinition of what’s okay. This is consuming you. And it’s at the expense of our marriage. I don’t want to be married to a mobster. I don’t want to be married to someone who’s only home to sleep. That’s where this is heading.”

Frank nods. Gerard is right about everything, even if Frank doesn’t like to admit it. “I knew this year was gonna be shit, because of Lazzara’s kid. And it has been, I don’t think you’re wrong. But after this- I won’t be clawing for air so much.”

“But you’ll be responsible for more. It won’t stop. I think you and I both know that.”

“Then do you want to keep being married?”

“Is that a choice I get to make?” Gerard’s voice is mild, but he’s serious.

Frank sits up to face him on the couch, drawing a leg up under him, “I guess it is. Yeah.” He scrubs a hand over his face, knowing it won’t do shit for his dark circles and messy 5 o’clock shadow.
Gerard heaves a dispassionate sigh. “I’m not going to walk out. I made myself a promise, that as long as you cared about me and respected that I’m not going to be a part of your mob, I’d stay. But I doubt you’d miss me much, at this point.”

“I would.” Frank is sure of that. “I’m sure I’ve done a real shit job of showing it, and of supporting you half as much as you deserve, but I would miss you a lot.”

“You have plenty to keep you busy.”

Frank’s shoulders fall a little further, “I’m sorry I’ve put us here. If you’d like, at least the entire afternoon of the 23rd should be pretty social. Mostly just establishing common ground and affirming relationships. You’re welcome to come.”

“To what end? I can’t rush you out of that.”

“No, but if we end up hosing some Christmas dinner deal, there’ll be precedent for you being around.”

“Fine.”

“Thank you. I’m sorry for putting off telling you.”

“How long did you put that off?”

“Like two days.” Frank admits with a sigh. “I knew you’d hate it so I put off telling you.”

“Don’t do that again.”

“Yeah. I won’t. Shouldn’t’ve in the first place, but.”

Gerard’s mouth quirks unhappily at the “but”. Frank slumps a little and shrugs.

“Alright. I’ll plan to come. Guess I’ll need to grab my nicest suit?”

Frank nods. “Please do. You’ll be fine, you dress well, but we’re meeting with the type to notice quality.”

“Alright.” Gerard sits back against the couch and reaches for Frank’s hand. Frank shifts over and curls into his side. They’re quiet for a long while, Frank wondering both how much longer he has with Gerard, and if he’s too late to correct his course. Gerard wonders how much longer this can last on. With current trends, it’s starting to look dire.

The next day, Gerard gets dressed in a suit and comes in to the final meetings with Frank and all his most trusted upper lieutenants. It’s a day of going over positions, where they’ll start negotiations and where they’re comfortable ending them. In many cases it’s a bit of ‘talk to him, not to me.’ And ‘if they want this, offer that instead’ and making sure everyone is on the same page. It’s a deeply choreographed dance that makes it seem like they’re willing to give far more than they are, with some lines of negotiation approved but behind a firewall of “oh you’d have to ask my Mr. Iero or Mr. Ricci for that, that’s above my pay grade” while they let on that it’d be a yes, they just need to ask.

Gerard just absorbs as much as he can, the dance of brewing negotiations a little too familiar. Lorenzo corners him with a shoulder holster in his hand and a standard-issue pistol, same model as
Gerard still on and off practices with. “Lorenzo, no.”

Lorenzo does only the due diligence of acknowledging the refusal, “No one, and I mean no-one, not even me, is gonna be faster than you if something goes south in Frank’s face. And you’d never forgive me if something did and you didn’t have a weapon on you.”

Gerard reluctantly closes his hands around the weapons Lorenzo is shoving into his grip. “I don’t want this.”

“I know you don’t. And it’s only for a day. But this both gives you a reason to be there, and gives me a little extra peace of mind. You’re a crack shot. And way more dangerous than you give yourself credit for. You’re more than capable of handling this role for a day.”

“Lorenzo. I don’t want this. I’d rather pretend to be a secretary.” Even as Gerard says it, Lorenzo is tugging at his jacket, and Gerard is moving his arms to let him remove it.

“Even the secretaries have knives, meetings like this.” Lorenzo takes the holster out of Gerard’s hands again and slips it up his, does the buckles across Gerard’s shoulders and slides the gun home. “Now put your jacket back on. You’re one of us tomorrow.”

Gerard swings back into his suit jacket with a pinched frown.

Frank comes out of the elevator and grins at them both, “Lorenzo, are you giving him shiny toys?”

Lorenzo nods, and Gerard buttons his jacket. “Frank, a gun is not a toy.”

“Well, of course not, but I doubt it’s gonna be more than a prop in your hands, knowing your dislike of ‘em.” Frank comes up, rocks up on his toes to steal a kiss and slides his hands into Gerard’s jacket at the same time, sliding the gun out as he steps back.

Frank gives it an approving nod, checks that it’s loaded with a smooth motion, then reloads it and checks the safety. It passes muster, and Frank hands it back, grip first, with a grin.

Gerard still doesn’t crack a smile. “I’m not doing this again.”

Frank pauses, grin sliding off his face. “You can still say no to tomorrow. That option is on the table pretty much right up until we park here tomorrow morning.”

“I told you I would come, so I’ll come, but I’m not pretending I’m okay with this.”

“It would be stranger if you were unarmed. Would you rather have something else?”

Gerard shakes his head. “This is fine. But I want you to know I don’t like this.”

“I know you don’t. I’m sorry I ever had cause to ask.”

Gerard closes his eyes for a moment, the weight of the gun and holster familiar and not at the same time. “I’m sorry I ever brought you into this.”

“I’m not sorry for that.” Frank wraps his arms around his husband and holds him close. “Now I have to meet with some of my men and then I’ll be ready to head home, okay?”

“Alright.” Gerard pulls Frank into a short kiss, then lets him sweep off down the hall again, lord of his kingdom. Lorenzo sketches Gerard a salute and falls into step behind Frank, a perfect consigliere.

For a second, Gerard overlays Frank with the memory of Anthony Miranda. They match, nearly of a
height and builds similarly solid. They’ll probably die the same way too, knocked off quickly for a measure too much ambition. He turns the other way down the hall and heads for the garage to wait and smoke.

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Frank joins him half an hour later and pulls out his own pack, then settles up close to Gerard to smoke. Gerard’s hands are starting to get cold, so he starts fiddling with his keys when Frank doesn’t look like he’s smoking fast.

Frank notices and pushes himself off the wall. “Okay, okay, I’ll finish this out the window of the car, we can go.”

Gerard nods and take the lead on that, just shy of rushing home. They’re silent on the way home, and Frank can tell that Gerard isn’t fond of the holster weighing down his side, barely visible under his jackets. He doesn’t comment on that, and he certainly doesn’t say it’s kind of hot.

It’s a quiet evening, and neither of them are quite willing to break the silence. They finally go to bed, Gerard twenty minutes before Frank manages it, and both fall asleep curled up tightly into themselves barely touching.
Measure of a Man

Chapter Notes

I’d like to take a really deep breath and thank everyone here, because you have made it to the end of this work.

In less than a year I’ve written 200k, 496 pages, of a story I never thought would see coherent prose. I’ve had a lot of help (Claire, sockpuppeteer & others) and a ton of support (mad shoutout to BookMonsterEliz and cattheneko, talking with you guys chapter by chapter has been so so incredibly rewarding for me) and the hits and bookmarks and kudos that mean that I’m really putting this out here into the world. And this is the end. Time for one last hurrah.

Christmas Eve dawns with good prospects- clear and cold. Gerard settles into watching the Eastern European bodyguards watch Frank and their bosses exchange pleasantries and sit down to business.

It’s a little tense, and both groups have more than enough grievances to air, but all parties are resigned to working together. How long that will hold is another question. It lasts the morning, and the tensions between the upper echelons have simmered down to a remarkable extent. The Lazzara’s seats sit empty, and without them, Frank lays bare his positions, unafraid that any of the bosses from abroad have individual designs on New York.

It’s a technique honed by years of teaching- by offering his own personal vulnerabilities, the other bosses are similarly honest about what they want and what they think he ought to permit them. In the top rooms, the atmosphere smooths out until they’re debating distilleries over the crumbs of a catered lunch. If Matteo didn’t keep up with this, Frank would be at a loss, but Matteo is old enough to be the type of man who always has bourbon in his office. Frank can tell Gerard is a little confused and wondering slightly where the hell he’s pulling these opinions from, but that can be explained later.

Most importantly, it’s working, and both sides start to look and feel quite happy with the prospects. By four pm, far before Frank’s original optimistic 7pm estimate, they’ve moved everyone into the largest boardroom and are settling down to sign and go over the final agreements. The Lazzaras seats still stand empty, but Julian and then Matteo lead in their groups and the rest of the seats fill. There’s a few still empty from Julian’s Slovakian delegations, namely Hrushevksy and his two men, but Julian shrugs them off and says “Restroom and drinks.” In their absence everyone else starts trading folders and documents, conferring with neighbors.

It’s gotten fairly loud by the time the latecomers get back, but when they come through the doors it gets quiet again very quickly. There’s a boy with them, can’t be out of high school yet, and he’s handcuffed, escorted by their heavyset hitman, and visibly terrified. Everyone is looking between Hrushevksy, who looks far too smug, and Frank.

“Why all the silence?” Hrushevksy leans on the back of his chair and sweeps a hand behind him. “We’ve all been so agreeable today, I brought a gift to Mr. Iero. Your man Julian has long told us that you are the same as lived in Sicily, and we all knew that man to be of particular tastes. So I bring a gift of goodwill!”

So the boy is a gift. Frank blinks, taking a second to put together a response that isn’t a scream and a

The kid stammers, “Uh, I’m from Pennsylvania.”

Frank nods, looks over to Lorenzo and asks quietly, “Lorenzo, if you could please escort our unexpected guest out? We’ll sort out the rest after this meeting.”

Lorenzo rises, and the rest of the room watches silently as he gently guides the kid out. The door closing brings all eyes back to Frank. Frank can tell Gerard is nearly vibrating with some emotion in the far corner, and Frank can’t help but be worried there’s about to be an outburst. Well, if it happens outside of this room, Frank’ll even encourage it.

“Mr. Hrushevksy, my apologies. Your gift caught me rather on the wrong foot. If you would please excuse my lack of response here, my husband will take you up to my office, and we can convey the depth of our feelings? Gerard?”

Frank glances behind him, and yes, Gerard is furious, lips tight and posture rigid. Frank hopes Gerard takes his time and Frank can still get a few good hits of his own on Hrushevksy before the man is dead. Gerard jerks his head in a nod, and Hrushevksy follows Gerard out with a smug, genial smile. Apparently, he has no idea he’s about to get that smile ripped out one tooth at a time.

Andrevich and a few of the other bosses are now looking at Frank with a more cautious form of polite curiosity. “Well, gentlemen, my apologies. I did not foresee that sort of interruption. And, before difficult questions can be raised, I must apologize for a small bit of duplicity. I am not the man from Sicily. I am, in as many ways that count, his heir, but we are different men. And in our proclivities, very different.”

Quite a few of them relax, the knowledge that Frank is not a pedophile welcome. Andrevich in particular leans back, “We meet many men of ill-morales in our work, but I’m glad to know that is not a sin you share.”

Frank manages a slightly amused snort. “I am still married to a man, but he’s older than me.”

“All in all, a sin of much lesser regard. How do you intend to finish this meeting?”

“Hopefully still on good terms. However, Hruskevksy.” Frank pauses, and there’s a small round of nods. “He did kidnap an American minor with intent to traffic him into sex work. That’s no small amount of felonies, and it would drag the FBI directly to me. I’d ask your permission to punish him accordingly?”

A few of them don’t look happy with it, but Andrevich inclines his head and says, “Granted,” before anyone else can make an argument. He in turn looks at the other bosses around him and says a few things in low Slovak that placate them.

The meeting is wrapped up quickly, more delegated than had been initially planned, but the men from Europe are eager to be gone after the way the meeting started, and Frank is happier to see them go. He does manage to issue an invitation on Matteo’s behalf for Christmas dinner, but as soon as they’re gone, he’s off to his office at as close to a run as he can get away with.

Gerard is leaning against the wall outside, still furious. Frank slows as he approaches and says, “Shit,
is he already dead?”

“Of course not. I don’t do this work, remember?” Gerard steps up into Frank’s face. “You shouldn’t have asked me for this.”

Frank puts his hands up. “You looked plenty pissed, figured I’d give you the option. I don’t mind doing it myself.”

“This isn’t! Killing him won’t make me less angry with you, or with them!”

“Okay, wait a second, why are you mad at me?”

“Why? Why am I mad at you? Because I’ve told you I don’t know how many times that I don’t do this work, that I won’t do this work, that I hate killing, that I hate violence, and you ignore me every single fucking time. I’m tired of it.” Gerard pushes past Frank and heads down the hall toward the elevator.

“Gee!” Frank calls to his back, a little shocked.

“I don’t want to talk to you. Deal with your shit alone, you don’t need me.” Gerard rounds a corner and is gone. And as much as Frank wants to chase him down first, there’s a man who needs to be dead in Frank’s office, and an innocent kid waiting somewhere else in the building.

Frank still takes a minute to gather himself outside the closed office door, then strips off his jacket and leaves it over a chair in the outer room. He pushes the door open with a small amount of caution, knowing exactly how many weapons are in this office. No attack seems forthcoming, and Hruskevksy is just sitting in the guest’s chair, reading a report on cocaine price from Frank’s desk.

“Hruskevksy.”

He looks up, and sets down the report. “Mr. Iero. Your husband was very uptight.”

“He was furious with you. I’m honestly surprised you’re still breathing.”

“Why send him if he’d be upset with your proclivities?”

“Because you’re wildly incorrect about my ‘proclivities’, and my husband hates pedophiles as much as I do. I killed Grant for what he did to boys like that poor one you kidnapped, and Andrevich is pretty resigned to filling your position with someone else, after I’m done with you.”

Hruskevksy stands up. “What are you saying, Iero?”

Frank flips up a drawer in his desk and pulls out a knife. “I’m saying if you have any last words, you had better start saying them.”

Hruskevksy says something no doubt very unflattering in his native language, and pulls out a gun. Frank has exactly no compunctions about vanishing into shadow and rounding the desk with inhuman speed to disarm him. While he’s at it, it uses the knife to pin Hruskevksy’s right sleeve to his desk. Hruskevksy pales.

Frank smiles, not at all nice, and considers how he wants to do this. Usually, he’d be more than okay with just cutting a few necessary arteries, but his floor is carpet, and that’s an utter bitch to clean, and getting that much blood out would nearly require replacing the full floor as well as the ceiling below.
But while he’s here, leaning over the man close enough Hruskevksy’s panicked heartbeat is nearly deafening, he realizes he’s got another option, one that’s much cleaner.

So Frank drops his fangs, smiles wide enough Hruskevksy can see them, and purrs, “We don’t have too much in common, my predecessor and I, but neither of us were quite human.”

All Hruskevksy can manage is a short burst of Slovak, and Frank doesn’t think he’s going to put together anything in English anytime soon, so no point in waiting. He pulls Hruskevksy’s head to the side and bites.

It’s a much cleaner, neater death than the man really deserves, but dead is dead, and Frank feels pretty good about this method.

He moves the body out of the office, dumps it in the freight elevator and sends a text to one of the men tasked with getting rid of things like this, then a second one to Lorenzo, asking where he is. He’s told cafeteria, and heads that way.

Outside the cafeteria, he’s accosted by Matteo and Julian. Matteo speaks, “If you’re not planning on sending the kid home, I have no reason not to take you out right here and now.”

Frank puts his hands up. “If it’s even remotely possible, I’m sending the kid home, hopefully as untraumatized as possible. We gotta at least make a small effort to cover our asses, but we’ll manage something if the kid doesn’t want to have anything more to do with us.”

“Good.” Matteo nods.

“We’re coming in with you.” Julian adds.

Frank hesitates. “I don’t wanna overwhelm the kid.”

Matteo shrugs off his jacket and gun, handing them to one of his men. “Frank, your gun too?”

Frank nods and hands it off, not bothering with the empty holster. Thus more causal, they head in.

Lorenzo is on his phone a few seats down from where the kid is uncuffed, pushing around one of the pre-packed salads with a fork. A mug of coca sits half-drunk in front of him.

Frank takes the lead and carefully sits down across from the kid. Matteo sits by Lorenzo and tugs Julian with him. None of them take seats between the kid and the door.

“Well, uh, I’m Frank. This is Matteo and Julian, and you’ve been sitting with Lorenzo, if he hasn’t introduced himself.”

“Andrew. Are you guys, like, mafia?”

“Uh, well, yes, actually.”

“No, he’s not.” Julian cuts in. “Mafia is Italian organized crime, and those are made men. I’m mafia, Frank is American. American organized crime isn’t just Italian Catholics, and is called the mob, because it’s less pure.”

Frank is actually a little offended. “Really? You’re going to be all high and mighty about this now? We’re all fucking criminals.”
Andrew looks a little amused, then it vanishes again. “I got kidnapped by mob guys, not mafia, then? They were like, Eastern European.”

Frank turns back to Andrew. “Yes, mob. But not ours. There’s lots of different like, groups? Of mobs with different alliances. We were trying to sign some peace deals with the Czech and Slovakian mobs. And one of their bosses thought I was a pedophile and kidnapped you.”

Andrew’s eyes go wide and Lorenzo says calmly, “Frank’s not a pedophile, and I’m fairly certain that the men who kidnapped you are being very thoroughly punished.”

“Hruskevksy is dead already. Andrevich will take care of the rest.”

“Gerard really..?” Matteo looks interested.

Frank barks a laugh. “Hell no. I went home as soon as I got upstairs.”

“Oh. I was about to be very impressed.”

“I’m about to be in the fucking doghouse is what it really is. Don’t see what I was supposed to have done, let the fucker go?”

“Well, I wouldn’t’ve. And you did the same to Grant. Don’t see why he’s all together too surprised.”

“Well, that’s my husband for you.” Frank turns back to Andrew. “I’m sorry. Our problems aside, we’d like to get you home safe as soon as possible. We need to cover our asses a little bit, because the FBI won’t really care that it was some Slovakian guy that kidnapped you and the American mob got you home safe, but we’d like to send you home. How long ago were you kidnapped?”

“Last night. Was leaving work and they just grabbed me into a car. Threw my phone out the window.”

“Less than 24 hours, no official missing persons report yet.”

“Even for minors?”

“Even for minors. If we get him home before- what time did you get off work?”

“10:30. You’re really just gonna send me home?”

“Ideally. And we’d love to buy your silence on the whole reason you were kidnapped.”

“I mean, it’s pretty cool you’re letting me go, I’d be happy with just that.”

“I think we can do a little better than that.”

Matteo cuts in, “There’s a Greyhound from Philly to Port Authority that leaves at midnight. Gets in at two. He could’ve taken that and planned to meet a friend, spend the day in the city.”

“My friend Kevin is out here at school. And his parents moved, so I don’t think my Mom keeps in touch.”

“Perfect. So we’ll put you on a Greyhound back? And you can say you lost your phone in the city?”

“Yeah.” Andrew takes a sip of his coca, slowing unwinding a little bit. “I just still can’t believe you guys are actually just sending me home. The guys that grabbed me were real sure I was never gonna be seen again.”
“Well, if I were Grant, you wouldn’t be. None of us would be here, actually, we’d all be stuck in his house in Sicily.”

“But you’re all adults?”

Matteo cuts in, tone gentle. “I don’t think Grant was actually a pedophile. An abuser, certainly, and one that did prefer younger men, but for him, mid to late 20’s was quite young.”

“Oh. Then why’d they think you were?” He looks at Frank.

“Probably because if you gave some kid to Grant, regardless of the intent, you wouldn’t see that kid again. He’d probably, well, shit, he’d have somebody in his house kill them.”

Julian suddenly makes a face as though he’s realized something awful. Matteo shoots him a concerned look, and Frank looks over too. Julian looks at the two of them, a little stricken. In hushed Italian, he says, “There was one- once, I would never have thought about it- but it was right after a meeting like this one. Grant said someone else had brought them. I- I didn’t think-“

Frank’s mouth opens a little in shock and horror. Matteo looks very grim.

Andrew watches the exchange and wisely doesn’t say anything except, “Well, I’m glad you’re not Grant.”

Lorenzo dips his head and says, “So are we, every day. Frank is a much preferable boss.”

A smile ghosts across Frank’s face. “So, ‘teo, get two tickets and somebody discreet on that bus, make sure Andrew gets home safe. And in terms of apology, cash in hand?”

Julian is the one who answers, “Suspicious, especially living with parents. Debit card, anyone could open it, authorize him as user and give him the card. What bank do you use, Andrew?”

“PNC.”

“I’ll go while they’re still open. What amount?”

“15?” Frank asks.

Julian shrugs, nods and heads out.

Andrew blinks as the door closes. “Wait, fifteen thousand?”

“Yes? If you’d like a different amount, we can change that.”

“No- just. Fifteen thousand dollars is a shit-load of money.”

Frank just sort of shrugs, and Lorenzo looks over. “To be quite fair, you did get kidnapped by the mob, and another faction of said mob is buying your silence. We’re quite used to throwing greater sums at smaller problems than any you could create for us.”

Frank can tell that the kid is ticking that over wondering if he should ask for more. “A debit account is the least traceable way to hand you cash, considering you’re a minor. However, if you’d prefer a trust fund of a greater amount, we’re amenable to that as well. Name a price.”

“No, debit is fine. I’ve never been bought off by the mob before, and I kinda owe it to you guys for letting me go.”
Frank pulls out his phone and writes a quick text ‘make bal 20k plz’ before clicking it off again and saying, “Well, let’s call it twenty thousand and don’t buy anything too flashy with it for the next year or so?”

“Nothing suspicious?”

“Exactly. Unless you have a cover story for your parents in place. And are willing to tell the IRS about your new mysterious income.”

“Gotcha. Like, food out with friends and shit?”

“Sure. And hell, if you’re 18 and there’s still money on it, dump it all into a mutual fund. It’ll be a fine nest egg.”

“Okay.”

Matteo rejoins the conversation. “Bus leaves in an hour. I’ll send Pizen with him.”

“Good. You pulling him in, or was he on-duty?”

“On-call tonight. He’s scheduled for tomorrow, I’ll clear him from that.”

Frank nods. Andrew looks like he has a question, so Frank gives him his attention again. “What am I supposed to do with the escort guy, Pizen. Is he like a bodyguard?”

“Not really, unless you’d feel safer knowing who he was. We’re just sending him to make sure you connect with family after you get off the bus, and as cover in case something weird happens. You wouldn’t know him from anyone else of the bus.”

“I think I’d rather know. So I’m not bugging out at people.”

“Sure. And how about you call your parents?”

“What should I tell them?”

“That you’ve bought a bus ticket home, you’ll get in at 8:30, and that you took an impulsive jaunt up to New York to see your friend and lost your phone in the city. And that you’re safe. Probably that bit first.”

“Okay.”

Frank unlocks his phone, opens the phone app, and slides it over. “We’ll give you some privacy for your call.”

“You’re not gonna listen in?”

“I’ve got pretty good hearing.” Frank gets up and heads for the door, Matteo and Lorenzo with him. Matteo slips off to call Pizen and get him up to speed, and Lorenzo looks at Frank.

Inside, Andrew is flawlessly spinning a sheepish lie to his mother, who is in turns furious and relieved.

“How mad was Gerard?”

Frank winces. “Really mad. I think we’ll make it to dinner tomorrow, but you should be ready to give our excuses.”
“Good luck.”

“Thanks. I probably shouldn’t’ve implied he should deal with Hruskevksy, but I really thought he was mad enough to want to.”

“I think the rest of us were. How’d you end up killing him?”

“Well, I decided I didn’t wanna have to put in all new carpeting and I ended up just draining him.”

Lorenzo snorts. “See, that kind of logic amuses me, but I think you oughta be ready to lie to Gerard.”

“I can’t lie to him. He learned my tells about twenty years ago. I’m fucked. Super fucked. He’s gonna be furious. He’s been telling me for decades—hell, since Mom died, he was okay with me doing this as long as I never asked him to join. And he’s gonna take me asking him to take Hruskevksy upstairs as exactly that.”

“Shit, I’d be arguing in your favor, but it’s kinda getting into semantics, isn’t it?”

“It’s way too close. Sure, I never would have asked him if it wasn’t circumstances that made him as mad as it made me, but I can’t prove that. I did kinda shoot myself in the foot, but it was either that or I was gonna leap the table and throttle him, and getting him outta the room bought me the time to close with Andrevich.”

“Guess you picked your side, then.”

Frank sighs. “Guess I did. We’ll see if I reap the rewards, or if he’s just mad as hell for the next six months.”

Lorenzo’s face twists in sympathy, and they fall into silence.

Andrew is done with his call a minute later and comes out into the hallway, handing Frank his phone back. “I’m about to be grounded until I’m thirty, but I’m trying to see the bright side, at least I’ll be at home.”

Frank can’t help but crack a grin. “That’s the way to do it. Let’s head downstairs and hand you off to Matteo so you can get outta here and catch that bus.”

Andrew is sorted in a few minutes, and Frank has no excuse not to head home anymore. There’s a growing pit of doom in his chest, but he starts the car and is home sooner than he’d like, slotting the key into the door before he can think twice about it. Surprisingly, the door is already unlocked. Frank eases it open. “Gee?”

His first thought is for Gerard’s safety, and it’s not until he’s in the hallway that the second option rears its head. Gerard’s shoes are no longer at the door. “Gee! Gerard!” Frank sets off through the apartment at a run.

Gerard is in the bedroom, furiously zipping a duffle bag shut. His side of the closet is nearly empty, and the nightstand is suspiciously bare. Frank stops in the doorway, taking it all in. “Gee—what are you—“

“Exactly what it looks like, Frank. I told you, again and again and again what I would not do. And you— you just fucking ask for exactly that!”
Frank mouth falls open, no words planned behind it, and Gerard rages on, just below a yell and utterly incandescent with fury. “From the very start, I should’ve known better, because you want and you want and you want and you just think you can move mountains and run people over to get it and you’ve run me over one too many times. I don’t want to know you, and I don’t want to be in your path anymore.”

Gerard takes a step forward, bag over his shoulder, and Frank steps back into the hall, a little bit scared. Gerard moves past him and out without a glance backward. Through the door to their room, Frank can see Gerard’s open closet doors, gaping open and far more empty than they should be.

Frank jumps when the door slams open again, shocked out of his frozen lean against the wall. Gerard takes him in for a second, then vanishes into the living room. Frank drifts down the hall to watch him gather another sketchbook and the two framed photos of his first wedding off the mantle. He leaves his and Frank’s wedding triptych and the lump in Frank’s throat swells.

“Gerard, please. Please don’t do this.”

Gerard sets his stack of photos down on the coffee table and straightens up. “Don’t what? Don’t put an end to this? You should’ve thought about that when you asked me to kill a man today.”

Frank staggers over to the back of the couch, shaking his head.

“No to what part of it? You can’t tell me you didn’t want me to kill him, it’s what you joked about as soon as you came upstairs. Joked about.” Gerard shakes his head, twists his hands together furiously for a moment, then holds out his right to Frank.

Frank reaches for it, utterly lost by the gesture and any ability to think gone under a screaming tidal wave of shock and grief. Out of Gerard’s hand and into Frank’s fall two gold bands.

Frank stares at them, warm and heavy in his palm, and Gerard turns, scoops up his things, and the door slams open, then shut, one final time.

It feels like hours that Frank is frozen there, holding Gerard’s wedding bands in a fist that slowly closes as Frank keels over the back of the couch, throat working silently at first before the tears start to come. It’s great heaving sobs, the way Frank hasn’t cried since his Mom died, and this time there’s no Gerard to bundle him away and force tea on him.

There’s only the silence of the ransacked apartment to watch the wrecked sobs of Frank bent over the couch, grappling with the scope of what he’s just lost.

At nine, his phone chirps and Frank moves from his slump to his jacket, filled with an impossible, irrational hope. It’s a text from Matteo that says, “Andrew met parents, Pizen heading to airport.”

Frank manages to send back “Great, thanks.” And slides down to sit on the kitchen floor, still holding Gerard’s rings hard enough to leave imprints in his palm. He knows somewhere deep down that this is final and that he has no right to wear his own right now, but he can’t bring himself to take them off. It already hurts too much to be holding Gerard’s. His phone chirps again, and Frank barely reads Matteo’s question of ‘L said Gerard was going to be very mad, all okay at home?’ Before he’s hurling his phone across the room. It bounces into the couch and Frank doesn’t even get the satisfaction of shattering it.

The sudden burn of anger is enough to push him off the kitchen floor and back into the master bedroom. He knows he still has- somewhere in his nightstand- a necklace of his mothers, with a long
chain. He finds it and slips the bird-shaped charm off of it, then slips the rings onto it and fastens it around his neck. The rings aren’t even cold where they rest under his collarbone, but the weight is enough to stop Frank cold for another moment, squeezing his eyes shut and holding back tears.

The maw of the closets is next, and he pushes the doors closed and turns off the lights, grabbing the blanket from the foot of the bed. His aimless wander ends in his study, the only part of the house not hollowed out by Gerard’s leaving. The armchair in there isn’t comfortable, and Hruskevsky’s blood keeps sleep far away, but Frank reaches a numb nothingness staring at the far wall.

The church bells from Midnight Mass are the next to stir him, and while he can’t stop the silent tears, he can manage a silent prayer for Gerard’s health and safety, wherever he goes. Gerard deserves both in far greater amounts than Frank ever dealt in.

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Gerard drives north. Right now, the muffled silence of snow and the vast spaces between people sound very appealing. And putting an international border, however open, between him and Frank is probably for the best.

He does stop, at some rural church near a national forest, for midnight mass. It wouldn’t have occurred to him unless the lights hadn’t prompted him to look at the dashboard clock.

The churchgoers are surprised to see a stranger, but they’re polite enough about it, and Gerard is left in peace to hear the Christmas story and pray the old prayers with them. He accepts a hot chocolate and declines an offer of a guest room for the night and gets back in the car.

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Frank speaks to no-one Christmas day. He gets several more concerned texts as morning bleeds into afternoon, but Lorenzo must have told them he might be absent, so no-one comes knocking. As the afternoon wears on, the apartment only gets more stifling, so Frank drags himself into the shower and up the city to Matteo’s.

He’s managed to pull together most of his usual persona on the way there, but the rest of the vampires know Frank a little too well to believe it. Julian shoots Lorenzo a sharp look, and Lorenzo pulls Frank aside. “How’s Gerard?”

Frank’s smile is decidedly fractured, and his only answer is to fish under his collar, grab the chain and draw out Gerard’s rings.

Lorenzo doesn’t need words to put it together. His face crumples a little, but he manages to get it under control when Frank looks liable to completely fall apart.

Instead, he drops a hand on Frank’s shoulder and says, “Spend the night here.”

Frank nods tightly back. Lorenzo squeezes his shoulder gently, watches Frank blink back tears and visibly pull himself together again before they turn and rejoin the party.

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It’s Lorenzo who tells Julian and Matteo, and who texts Antonio. The four of them know without having to speak about it that it’ll be Antonio who will take Gerard’s side and keep their friendship close, while the men working with Frank will see that he doesn’t shatter.
Gerard is the one who tells Jamia. He calls on the 27th, smoking a hideously expensive cigarette at a rest station somewhere north of Lake Superior.

“Hey J. Merry late Christmas.”

“Merry late Christmas! You guys didn’t call!”

“Yeah. Well, um, we’re not really married anymore. And that happened on Christmas Eve, so. I’m not surprised Frank didn’t manage a call. But um, I wanted to let you know.”

“Shit, Gee, what happened?”

“I walked out. There was- it was mob stuff. He’s chosen his side, and it wasn’t with me.”

Theres a heavy thump as Jamia sits down. “I’m so sorry. I hope- I hope you’re happier- I hope you’ve made the right choice for you. And I hope that even though we met through Frank, I don’t want you to become a stranger again, okay? You’re a great friend of mine, and you’re part of Alicia and I’s vampire family. We don’t wanna lose you.”

“I’ll try not to totally vanish. But I already left New York, so.”

“So nothing, you’re calling us now. Stay in touch. And if you need anything, our guest room is yours. First dibs, even.”

“Thanks. I’m sorry I had to be the one to tell you.”

“Well, Frank’s stupid sometimes. I’ll give him a call after this and make sure he’s not being really stupid.”

“I think I’d appreciate that.”

“It’s no problem. Can I tell him you talked to me, or would you like to keep that quiet?”

“I don’t care. I’m just…” Gerard makes a vague gesture, searching for the right words. “I was tired of it. It wasn’t easy the way it used to be.”

“Yeah. He’s not always the easiest to know, is he?”

“No. It got to be too much.” Gerard stubs out his cigarette. “Well, have a happy New Year, and tell Alicia the same?”

“I will. Don’t change your number on us, because I’ll call you if you don’t call us.”

“I know you will. Bye, J.”

“Talk to you soon, Gee.” Jamia doesn’t let him go with anything so final as goodbye.

It takes Frank a month to find a new apartment, a quarter of the size. It takes six months before he stops wearing his rings.

Gerard drives until he’s at the western coast of Canada, and stops at a roadside pottery shop because the designs on the bowls are both subtle and familiar. A woman with dark hair in two pigtails walks
Gerard shrugs and offers a hand. “I’m Gerard. Your glazes are beautiful.”

“Lindsey. Thanks, I make them in house.”

Gerard squints. “Lindsey Ballato?”


Gerard never thought they would meet again, but life is funny like that sometimes, that when he needed a friend the most he found an old one. She offers her spare room and he tells her everything over the course of months spent regaining his center and helping out at the quiet roadside store. It’s as comfortable start to a new life as he could wish for.

—

Frank uses the Pax Romana in New York to affect a level of on the ground control not seen since the days of the first Coalition. It makes him a legend, one written in blood as much as whispers. And he goes home to a half-furnished apartment and hates the silence, well, that’s his cross to bear.

—

Maybe neither of them have the life they always dreamed of, but they’re both going to have to live it anyway.